STAGING DISTRIBUTION:
A CINEMATIC ANALYSIS OF RETAIL REGIMES

Adèle FOUCHÉ
VALLOREM, Tours University
IAE Tours Val de Loire
50 Avenue Jean Portalis
BP 0607
37200 Tours (France)
Email: adele.fouche@univ-tours.fr

Gilles PACHÉ
CERGAM, Aix-Marseille University
IUT d'Aix-Marseille
Départements TC Aix & TC Marseille
413 Avenue Gaston Berger
13625 Aix-en-Provence Cedex (France)
Email: gilles.pache@univ-amu.fr

Acknowledgments

The authors warmly thank two anonymous reviewers of the 29th International Conference Étienne Thil (Nantes, October 2026) for their comments and suggestions which helped improve an earlier version of this paper.

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Abstract

Retail servicescape structures experience, organizes access to goods, and generates desire as well as social hierarchies. Drawing on the analysis of six emblematic films, this paper employs cinema as an interpretive lens to reveal the symbolic, normative, and sensory dimensions of managing commercial spaces. The original concept of retail regimes highlights three distinct figures: the spectacle regime, the control regime, and the desire regime. This approach integrates insights from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), foundational research on experiential marketing, and sociological analysis applied to the cinematic realm, illuminating how commercial devices co-produce the symbolic value of retail and the social norms that govern it. By examining these commercial devices as cultural and performative elements, the paper opens stimulating avenues for research into the co-construction of consumer experiences and the forms of mediation present across diverse retail servicescape.

Keywords

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), experiential marketing, retail devices, retail regimes, servicescape, social norms

MISE EN SCENE DE LA DISTRIBUTION :
UNE ANALYSE CINEMATOGRAPHIQUE DES REGIMES DE VENTE AU DETAIL

Résumé

Les environnements de vente au détail structurent l'expérience, organisent l'accès aux biens et produisent désir et hiérarchies sociales. À travers l'analyse de six films emblématiques, ce papier mobilise le cinéma comme prisme interprétatif pour révéler les dimensions symboliques, normatives et sensorielles de la gestion des espaces commerciaux. Le concept original de régimes de vente au détail permet de mettre en évidence trois figures, le régime du spectacle, le régime du contrôle et le régime du désir. Cette approche combine les apports de la Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), les fondamentaux du marketing expérientiel et l'analyse sociologique appliquée à l'univers cinématographique, pour mettre en lumière la façon dont les dispositifs commerciaux co-produisent la valeur symbolique de la vente au détail et les normes sociales qui les encadrent. En explorant ces dispositifs commerciaux en tant qu'éléments culturels et performatifs, le papier ouvre des perspectives de recherche stimulantes en vue d'examiner la co-construction des expériences de consommation et les formes de médiation présentes dans différents espaces commerciaux.

Mots-clés

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), marketing expérientiel, dispositifs commerciaux, régimes de vente au détail, environnement de vente au détail, normes sociales

Executive Summary

The study of retail activity has long been constrained by a predominantly functionalist lens, emphasizing supply chain optimization and operational efficiency. Both for practitioners and consumers, the retail outlet is not merely a transactional node—it is a lived environment, saturated with symbolic meaning and affective resonance. This paper advances an alternative perspective by mobilizing Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to conceptualize retail servicescape as cultural and sensory *dispositifs* that actively shape consumer behavior. To render these mechanisms visible, we analyze six films—*The Big Store* (1941), *Playtime* (1967), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Clerks* (1994), *Supermarket Woman* (1996), and *The Founder* (2016)—using cinema as a magnifying lens through which to decode what we term retail regimes. This analytical framework identifies three foundational logics that structure everyday managerial practice:

- The first dimension, the *regime of spectacle*, frames the retail environment as an immersive infrastructure. In films such as *The Big Store* and *Playtime*, the store emerges as a theatrical stage upon which consumption is choreographed. Product abundance and the orchestration of customer flows function not only to increase sales but to produce a carefully designed visual and sensory experience. For executives, this regime underscores that merchandising and spatial design are not merely technical levers; they are strategic instruments of meaning-making. The customer, in this view, is not simply a buyer but a participant in a curated experiential narrative. Purchasing is enabled—and legitimized—through atmosphere, staging, and aesthetic coherence.
- The second dimension, the *regime of control*, reveals the backstage infrastructure of retail, exemplified by the franchising system depicted in *The Founder*. The store operates here as an organizational technology in which actions, interactions, and processes are rigorously standardized. Such systematization reduces consumer uncertainty: upon entering a franchised outlet, customers encounter a predictable and reassuring environment. However, this regime also produces subtle power structures, organizing access, behavior, and roles within the retail servicescape. For executives, mastery of control mechanisms ensures consistency in brand delivery at scale. Yet it simultaneously imposes a significant burden of compliance and discipline on frontline employees—an operational tension that requires careful leadership.
- The third dimension, the *regime of desire*, highlights that product attractiveness is never intrinsic but systematically constructed at the store. As illustrated in *Supermarket Woman*, desire emerges from highly calibrated material and visual arrangements: the staging of freshness, the structuring of assortments, and the strategic deployment of scarcity cues. These mechanisms actively shape consumer preferences and perceived value. For executives, this regime reframes merchandising as a form of behavioral engineering. By fine-tuning product presentation, retailers do not merely respond to demand—they actively produce it. The retail environment thus becomes a site of calculated temptation.

Taken together, the three retail regimes invite executives to adopt a more reflexive and strategically integrated approach to retail management. Beyond their apparent aesthetic or operational dimensions, retail environments exert profound influence on purchasing behavior, customer loyalty, and brand perception. This framework enables managers to diagnose the dominant symbolic logic of their networks: Are they driven by immersive experience (spectacle), operational efficiency (control), or value construction (desire)? Ultimately, the retail outlet can be understood as a "cultural diamond"—a dense nexus where economic, symbolic, and social value converge. Every design decision, however granular, contributes to the production of meaning. Such perspective also foregrounds the ethical implications of retail management: in shaping environments of consumption, retailers participate in the construction of cultural norms and consumer subjectivities. As such, retail strategy is not only a matter of performance, but also of responsibility.

Introduction

In an iconic sequence from *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the protagonist navigates a vertically stratified marketplace saturated with holographic commodities, neon signage, and continuous consumer flows (Gelly & Roche, 2023), where objects and luminous displays are integrated into a dense visual choreography that transforms purchasing and product circulation into a collective performance. In this setting, retail systems appear simultaneously spectacular and normative, revealing the extent to which commercial environments operate as structured socio-material orders rather than neutral sites of exchange. Far from functioning solely as transactional infrastructures, retail environments operate as cultural, sensory, and symbolic dispositifs that shape affective experience, structure access to goods, and actively generate desire. Understanding retail management through this lens requires moving beyond functionalist logics centered on efficiency and logistical optimization. Consumption practices are instead mediated by intersecting social norms, interactional dynamics, and technological arrangements that jointly configure perception, hierarchy, and the symbolic valuation of goods. Within this perspective, film constitutes a particularly powerful analytical site for rendering visible the often-invisible mechanisms through which contemporary consumption is organized, as sensory ethnographic approaches to cinema suggest that retail spaces are not merely represented but experientially reconfigured as regimes of mediated perception and affective circulation (Borecký, 2016). Drawing on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and experiential marketing scholarship (Cova, 2021), this study bridges material and immaterial dimensions of retailing to examine how commercial environments shape consumer perception and engagement.

The analytical framework builds on the concept of *retail regimes*, defined as symbolic, social, and institutional configurations that simultaneously structure experience, desire, and access within commercial spaces. This conceptualization reframes retail environments as experiential *dispositifs* rather than mere transactional infrastructures. Three regimes are distinguished: the spectacle regime, which captures sensory immersion produced through spatial fluidity, visual saturation, and staged abundance; the control regime, which refers to spatial, organizational, and normative mechanisms that regulate flows, behavior, and access to resources; and the desire regime, which emphasizes how scenographic design, visibility architectures, and mediated exposure intensify product appeal and perceived value. These interpretations extend foundational work demonstrating that spatial materiality shapes cognition and behavior (Bitner, 1992), that atmospheric conditions function as cognitive and affective drivers (Turley & Milliman, 2000), and that retail experience integrates sensory, social, and symbolic registers (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Retail regimes thus provide an integrative framework for analyzing how commercial systems simultaneously organize abundance, regulation, and desire across heterogeneous retail formats. The notion of "regime" is mobilized in direct reference to Michel Foucault's conceptualization of *regime of practices* (Foucault, 2020 [1975], 2010 [2004]), understood as historically situated configurations of discursive formations, material *dispositifs*, and governing rationalities that determine what becomes visible, sayable, and governable within a given domain. Importantly, the framework developed here does not aim to restate well-documented properties of retail environments—such as their experiential or symbolic qualities—but rather to identify the underlying logics of mediation through which retail *dispositifs* simultaneously structure visibility, regulate conduct, and produce desire. In doing so, it foregrounds the generative role of spatial arrangements, technological infrastructures, and managerial scripts in stabilizing patterned consumption experiences across contexts. In this sense, the three regimes are not additive empirical dimensions but analytically distinct configurations grounded in differentiated principles governing the relationships among spaces, objects, and actors

1. Theoretical Framework

Understanding contemporary retail practices requires a theoretical framework that moves beyond utilitarian accounts of distribution and captures how markets are structured through experience, norms, and cultural meaning. While classical marketing scholarship has treated distribution as a technical mechanism for optimizing flows, costs, and availability, more recent work recognizes its social and symbolic constitution. However, even research on experiential marketing and retail atmospherics, despite moving beyond functionalist assumptions, often continues to treat experience, affect, and symbolism as attributes of the point of sale rather than as structuring logics of market mediation itself. This paper advances a shift in analytical focus: from how retail environments influence consumers to how they organize distinct regimes governing the circulation of objects, attention, and practice. In this view, consumption is not simply transactional but embedded in environments that actively configure perception, desire, and expectation. Building on CCT and experiential marketing research, the framework developed here explains how spatial design, media infrastructures, and technological *dispositifs* jointly structure hierarchies of visibility and value. Cinema further operates as an analytical device for revealing the otherwise invisible logics of distribution, making explicit how meaning, power, and market order are co-produced within retail systems.

1.1. Retail Beyond Functionalism

Historically, distribution marketing research has been grounded in a functionalist paradigm that privileges the optimization of flows, cost reduction, and logistical efficiency (Alvesson, 1994; Shaw & Jones, 2005; Watson IV et al., 2015; Eckhardt et al., 2018). Within such a perspective, distribution is conceptualized as a neutral infrastructure enabling market exchange, where product availability and the seamlessness of customer journeys serve as primary indicators of performance. As early as the 1970s, Tauber (1972) challenged this narrow utilitarianism by emphasizing that shopping also reflects hedonic motivations, as consumers actively seek sensory stimulation, pleasure, and psychological gratification, thereby transforming purchasing into a multidimensional experiential process. Elements such as merchandising, scenography, shelf layout, lighting, and sound jointly shape attention, desire, and perceived value, demonstrating that logistical coordination is inseparable from symbolic and affective structuring. Subsequent research reinforces the idea that the integration of functional efficiency and experiential value enhances consumer evaluations of retail encounters (Brakus et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Imschloss & Schwemmle, 2024), underscoring limits of purely functionalist accounts in capturing distribution as a co-constructed process in which technical and experiential dimensions jointly shape behavior, interpretation, and expectation across socio-cultural contexts.

Beyond operational efficiency, retail systems generate implicit hierarchies and social norms that structure interactions among consumers, employees, and products. Toutefois, la critique du fonctionnalisme demeure souvent enfermée dans une opposition binaire entre efficacité logistique et expérience consommateur, sans interroger pleinement les formes de structuration normative et symbolique qui organisent simultanément la visibilité, la désirabilité et l'accessibilité des biens dans les espaces marchands. Strategic placement of shelves, spatial segmentation, and regulation of availability collectively frame purchasing behavior, guide choices, and reveal power dynamics that remain subtle yet systematic (Eckhardt et al., 2018). Beyond physical layout, temporal orchestration of shopping journeys and algorithmic curation of digital interfaces further differentiate access and attention. Physical and digital platforms do not merely deliver goods; they actively organize experiences, structure consumption pathways, and configure regimes of desire in which spatial, sensory, and interactional cues signal status, legitimacy, and belonging. Collectively,

retail environments become structured socio-material systems in which meaning, value, and behavior are co-produced through situated consumption practices.

Processes of standardization, rationalization, and control can be explicitly linked to Ritzer's (2020 [1993]) theory of McDonaldization, which identifies efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control as core logics of contemporary consumption systems. Rather than operating solely at the organizational level, such principles extend into the experiential fabric of consumption, shaping how retail environments are perceived, anticipated, and navigated by consumers. Architectural repetition, scripted service encounters, and the industrialization of interaction formats reinforce these logics. Experiential marketing research further highlights how sensory storytelling, gamification, and personalized journeys amplify hedonic engagement, transforming retail into a deeply affective and immersive encounter (Brakus et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2015). Even perceived consumer freedom becomes structured through merchandising strategies, recommendation systems, and visual architectures that pre-orient attention and action. Distribution thus operates as a constitutive infrastructure of meaning-making, producing cultural norms, behavioral expectations, and patterned forms of social differentiation that extend well beyond functional logistics toward an integrated socio-cultural understanding of retail management.

Several studies in retailing extend critique of functionalist approaches by conceptualizing retail environments as *socio-material and experiential assemblages* rather than mere distribution infrastructures. Literature on retail atmospheres emphasizes that sales spaces should be understood as dynamic configurations in which sensory, social, and material dimensions are co-produced (Spence et al., 2014; Steadman et al., 2021). Consumer value no longer depends solely on operational performance but also on the capacity of environments to structure immersive, embodied, and meaning-laden experiences unfolding across multiple temporal and spatial layers (Vilnai-Yavetz et al., 2021; Willems et al., 2021). Research in this domain further highlights the active role of consumers in co-constructing atmospheric experiences, transforming retail spaces into interpretive and relational devices that continuously evolve through interaction (Joy et al., 2023). Such body of work provides then a robust empirical-theoretical foundation for conceptualizing retail environments as configurations structured by differentiated principles of mediation, circulation, and experiential orchestration, extending contemporary understanding of retail organization, consumer engagement, and culturally embedded market dynamics.

1.2. Cultural Structuring of Retail

Retail systems embody implicit norms and hierarchies, contributing to the naturalization of economic and cultural values that extend well beyond purely functional objectives (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Eckhardt et al., 2018). While foundational work by Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) profoundly reshaped consumer research by reconceptualizing consumption as a hedonic, symbolic, and multisensory experience, this tradition has primarily emphasized the lived and subjective dimension of consumption, focusing on experience as it is individually felt and interpreted. Building on this legacy, consumer motivations are now widely understood as extending beyond utilitarian calculation, encompassing hedonic, social, and symbolic dimensions that include escapism, recognition, and affective engagement (Tauber, 1972). From this perspective, retail systems operate as semiotic infrastructures in which product inclusion and exclusion, spatial hierarchies, and mediated visibility jointly shape the desirability and cultural valuation of goods. Silhouette-Dercourt et al. (2014) further show that consumers actively decode these environments through identity work, appropriating retail spaces as symbolic resources in the construction and negotiation of selfhood. Far from neutral, retail devices embed value-laden design choices that structure how experiences are produced, interpreted, and stabilized. Distribution thus emerges as a central institutional and cultural

mechanism through which both the economic and symbolic value of goods is co-constructed via the interplay of actors, material arrangements, and normative orders (Hungara & Nobre, 2021; Fitchett & Cronin, 2022).

CCT further foregrounds the symbolic and normative dimensions of retail devices, which actively co-produce cultural market regimes (Rokka, 2021; Waqas et al., 2021). Stores—whether physical or digital—function as *dispositifs* of visibility that organize not only access to goods but also their mediated representation and cultural intelligibility (Belk, 1988; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Arnould et al., 2019). The production of culture perspective, rooted in the sociology of culture, reinforces this view by emphasizing that goods never circulate autonomously: their diffusion is structured by institutional arrangements, organizational logics, and networked systems that actively shape availability and legitimacy (Peterson & Berger, 1975; Appadurai, 1988; Peterson & Anand, 2004). Applied to retail management, this perspective highlights how even logistical and technological infrastructures participate in the construction of symbolic meaning. The *cultural diamond* framework, central to CCT,[1] captures this dynamic interplay between cultural production, institutional mediation, audience interpretation, and meaning-making processes (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Fuat Firat & Dholakia, 2017). Within this configuration, spatial design and customer journey orchestration enable consumers to co-create meaning, reinforcing the hedonic and symbolic value of goods. Implicit hierarchies between products, spaces, and forms of visibility thereby become legible, demonstrating that retail systems simultaneously structure economic circulation and cultural experience while contributing to the ongoing production and reproduction of social norms (Waqas et al., 2021; Fitchett & Cronin, 2022).

1.3. Cinematic Mediation of Retail

Cinema provides a powerful lens for analyzing retail systems, rendering visible symbolic and cultural dimensions that remain largely implicit within everyday commercial environments. The use of film in this paper is not intended as a simple illustrative device, but as an analytical strategy aimed at uncovering the underlying logics of distribution that are frequently naturalized in contemporary retail settings and therefore difficult to access through conventional empirical approaches. Films can actively construct, circulate, and legitimize social, political, and ideological meanings that expose the normative orders and power asymmetries structuring market economies (Allen & Smith, 1997; Branigan & Buckland, 2014). Within sociology of cinema, this perspective supports the treatment of films as social constructs that do not merely reflect reality but organize it through situated representational forms, thereby revealing the institutional arrangements and cultural frameworks in which they are embedded (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, 2020; Bujgoi, 2024; Al-Maliki, 2025). This interpretive orientation enables a finer-grained understanding of how cinematic narratives make visible processes of marketization, symbolic ordering, and the normalization of consumption infrastructures across diverse socio-economic contexts.

Apparatus theory further deepens this analytical stance by arguing that cinematic form—through mechanisms such as framing, editing, camera movement, and sound design—operates as a vehicle for the transmission of implicit ideological structures that shape perception and meaning-making (Baudry & Williams, 1974; Metz, 1990; Sirůček, 2025). From this perspective, representations of commercial spaces, retail interactions, or collective consumption are never neutral depictions but active constructions that organize visibility, hierarchy, and access within the narrative world. Cinematic techniques thus contribute to the

[1] The cultural diamond connects four central elements within a consumption universe: (1) the *cultural universe*, represented by the consumed artifact (e.g., a retail format); (2) the *producer*, who creates and shapes the cultural universe; (3) the *consumer*, who engages with and interprets it; and (4) the *social context*, encompassing the institutions, norms, values, and social relationships that structure and influence the cultural universe.

naturalization of particular distributions of value and legitimacy, while simultaneously shaping how audiences cognitively and affectively engage with those representations. By structuring attention and interpretive salience, cinematic form conditions the intelligibility of economic arrangements and stabilizes the symbolic repertoires through which market relations are rendered meaningful. Recent developments in film studies further emphasize that such representational systems are deeply intertwined with broader transformations in cultural production, circulation, and reception, offering a critical entry point for examining evolving configurations of distribution, consumption infrastructures, and mediated economic practices (Al-Maliki, 2025; Chen, 2025). Such processes also shape collective understandings of economic life, embedding market arrangements within broader systems of social meaning.

Beyond aesthetics and narrative, cinema constructs social imaginaries surrounding market institutions and their underlying logic, portraying tensions—such as abundance, scarcity, control, and inclusion—within narratives that shape perceptions of retail management (Sadjadi, 2018). Films increasingly operate as cultural bridges, integrating diasporic identities, hybrid narratives, and global social values, while remaining firmly grounded in contemporary economic realities (Al-Maliki, 2025; Moghimi & Sadighi, 2025). Chen (2025) observes that cinema functions as a vector of cultural and media exchange, disseminating narratives about access, mobility, and the circulation of cultural goods. Through such representations, cinema enables observation of how retail mechanisms shape expectations, norms, and narratives of desire or deprivation across heterogeneous socio-economic contexts. The analytical prism offered by film thus enhances understanding of distribution as an institution by integrating narrative, ideology, and social reception, while providing a distinctive framework for exploring the CCT cultural diamond, particularly its relational articulation between production systems, interpretive practices, institutional mediation, and evolving regimes of cultural legitimacy.

2. Methodology

The study mobilizes cinematic works as analytical material for examining the symbolic, experiential, and institutional dimensions of retail management. Situated within interpretive traditions in the social sciences, films are approached not as illustrative artefacts but as meaning-producing cultural texts through which socio-economic realities are rendered intelligible, problematized, and culturally stabilized (Denzin, 1997; Rose, 2023). Corpus construction followed a theoretical sampling logic that privileges conceptual generativity over empirical representativeness (Flick, 2022). This selection strategy is further grounded in an abductive logic, whereby analytical categories are not defined a priori but progressively emerge through iterative comparison of commercial configurations represented across the films. Rather than seeking statistical coverage or representational completeness, the corpus is designed to maximize variation in retail imaginaries and to enable the identification of recurrent structuring logics across heterogeneous contexts. This approach positions cinema as a privileged site for accessing culturally mediated representations of distribution systems, where market practices are simultaneously enacted, aestheticized, and problematized.

Six films were selected because their narratives foreground retail servicescapes, in the sense defined by Bitner (1992): *The Big Store* (1941), *Playtime* (1967), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Clerks* (1994), *Supermarket Woman* (1996), and *The Founder* (2016).[2] The chronological ordering reflects an analytical strategy aimed at tracing transformations in

[2] Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework conceptualizes the physical environment as a structured set of ambient, design, and social factors that jointly shape consumer and employee responses, influencing cognition, affect, and behavior within service encounters.

cultural imaginaries of retail management across distinct phases of consumer capitalism[3]. The selected works span heterogeneous retail configurations, including department stores, hypermodern commercial environments, shopping malls, convenience stores, supermarkets, and franchise systems, thereby enabling an examination of retail management as a historically situated and culturally mediated phenomenon. This spatio-temporal diversity supports both comparative contrast and pattern recognition, while preserving sensitivity to institutional variation across retail forms. Each film can thus be read as articulating a specific configuration of retail mediation that organizes visibility, access, circulation, and social interaction. Rather than treating these representations as isolated narratives, the corpus is approached as a comparative field in which recurring organizational principles of retail environments can be systematically identified and analytically reconstructed. Table 1 provides a structured overview of the corpus, detailing the selected films, their historical positioning, and their relevance for the analysis of retail regimes across different configurations of consumer capitalism.

Table 1. Films Analyzed for Retail Management Representations

Film	Director	Retail format	General plot	Relevance for distribution analysis
The Big Store (1941)	Charles Reisner	Department store	A burlesque comedy unfolding within a department store where commercial operations intersect with absurd situations	Illustrates early "spectacularization" of retail, visibility of commercial organization, and retail as theatrical apparatus
Playtime (1967)	Jacques Tati	Modern commercial environment	A wandering narrative through a hypermodern urban environment characterized by standardization and transparency	Highlights aesthetics of abundance, logistical invisibility, and the naturalization of market circulation
Dawn of the Dead (1978)	George A. Romero	Shopping mall	Survivors of an apocalypse take refuge in a shopping mall saturated with consumer goods	Depicts immersive abundance, shopping mall as a consumptive *dispositif*, and implicit critique of consumer culture
Clerks (1994)	Kevin Smith	Convenience store	A chronicle of the mundane daily routines of retail employees navigating ordinary commercial interactions	Reveals normalization of retail practices, banalization of consumption, and micro-level distribution dynamics
Supermarket Woman (1996)	Jûzô Itami	Supermarket	Competitive struggles and strategic maneuvers within a Japanese supermarket context	Explicitly addresses merchandising, assortment strategies, pricing logics, and desire production mechanisms
The Founder (2016)	John Lee Hancock	Franchised retail system	The transformation of McDonald's company into a standardized business model	Highlights procedural control and format replication as an organizational technology

Source: The Authors.

[3] Consumer capitalism refers to a form of capitalism in which economic reproduction relies less on the satisfaction of pre-existing needs than on the continuous production of desire. Building on Campbell (2018 [1987]), this dynamic is grounded in a "romantic ethic" of consumption centered on imagination, anticipation, and daydreaming, whereby pleasure derives as much from the projection of consumption as from its actual acquisition.

The analytical procedure involved two successive viewings of each film, conducted via digital streaming platforms, enabling progressive familiarization with narrative structures, spatial configurations, and interactional dynamics within the represented retail environments. During these viewings, systematic observational notes were produced across interrelated analytical dimensions, including spatial organization, mechanisms of access and product visibility, circulation flows, conditions of abundance and scarcity, and situated micro-practices such as gestures, routines, and interactions between employees and consumers. Particular attention was also devoted to the temporal structuring of scenes, including pacing, sequencing of commercial encounters, and transitions between consumption spaces, in order to capture how retail logics unfold cinematically across narrative progression. Building on visual methodologies that conceptualize film as a structured cultural artifact embedded within broader systems of meaning (Rose, 2023), the analysis adopted an iterative and interpretive approach rather than exhaustive textual decoding, focusing instead on recurrent configurations of commercial representation. Complementary engagement with scholarly film interpretations further supported the contextualization of observations within established critical readings of the selected works.

The identification of the three retail regimes—spectacle, control, and desire—emerged through an abductive and iterative coding process. Initial analysis proceeded inductively through the identification of discrete units of action and recurrent configurations across the film corpus. These units were subsequently compared across cases to surface higher-order structural regularities that transcended individual narratives. In a final abductive step, these emergent patterns were reinterpreted through the conceptual lenses of CCT and servicescape scholarship, enabling the progressive stabilization of the three regimes as distinct analytical categories. Importantly, these regimes did not preexist the analysis as fixed theoretical constructs; rather, they emerged through iterative comparison as interpretive devices for rendering intelligible the recurring structuring logics of retail environments across the selected films. Methodological rigor is grounded in interpretive criteria of validity—coherence, internal consistency, and theoretical fruitfulness—rather than procedural replicability (Denzin, 1997; Flick, 2022), thereby positioning cinema as a site in which retail imaginaries are not merely represented but actively produced, negotiated, and stabilized.

3. Retail Regimes in Film

Retail servicescape performs functions that go well beyond the optimization of product flows; they structure meanings, guide behaviors, and generate hierarchies that shape the ways in which consumers perceive, interpret, and evaluate goods (Antéblian et al., 2018). Through spatial layout, sensory devices, and symbolic staging, the retail environment functions as an active element of the consumer experience rather than as a mere functional support. Distribution participates in the construction of the experience, influencing attentional, emotional, and cognitive dynamics that organize commercial interactions, a phenomenon clearly captured by the six selected films. Concurrently, contemporary research in consumer studies underscores the role of cultural background in structuring market practices, emphasizing that the consumer experience is embedded within broader symbolic frameworks that extend beyond the transaction itself (Schmitt et al., 2022). These perspectives justify an interpretation of retail management that foregrounds its symbolic, normative, and affective dimensions. Within this framework, the mechanisms identified across the selected works are categorized into three retail regimes—spectacle, control, and desire—which respectively emphasize sensory immersion, social regulation, and symbolic valorization (see Table 2).

Table 2. Retail Regimes in Film Analysis

Regime	Key features	Functions of retail spaces	Symbolic and cultural implications
Distribution as spectacle	• Abundance • Hypervisibility • Fluidity	Retail environments staged as immersive, visually saturated spaces; merchandising and layout create a dramatic experience	Naturalizes consumption; creates aesthetic pleasure; emphasizes availability as a normalized, almost theatrical condition
Distribution as control	• Hierarchies • Allocation • Regulation	Organization of access, management of flows, spatial and social structuring of consumers and staff	Makes power visible; enforces social norms; structures inclusion/exclusion; reveals implicit ideologies of control in retail management
Distribution as desire	• Scarcity • Anticipation • Mediated access	Strategic product placement, visual cues, merchandising techniques, interaction with consumer behavior	Transforms availability into symbolic value; generates tension between abundance and lack; shapes consumer expectations, desires, and perceived worth

Source: The Authors.

3.1. Spectacle Regime

The spectacle regime captures the ways in which retail environments produce immersive experiences through abundance, circulation, visibility, and perceptual stimulation. In *The Big Store*, the department store operates as a spectacular machine, where visual exuberance, ceaseless movement, and the theatricalization of interactions transform the retail space into an entertainment device. Architecture, objects, and bodies participate in a continuous choreography, rendering the act of purchasing performative. Szendy (2016) highlights that this performance relies on a "*fetishism*" and a striated mobility he terms "*elevatoriality*," in which repetitive gestures and interactions create possibilities for perceptual suspension, demonstrating that the profusion of goods is inseparable from the choreography of bodies. The spectacular, therefore, emerges not simply from the accumulation of merchandise, but from the simultaneous movement of space, objects, and individuals. In *Playtime*, this logic is intensified through a modernist aesthetic: transparency of surfaces, repetition of structures, and visual saturation dissolve conventional spatial markers and redirect attention toward perceptual flows. Retail becomes a diffuse, immersive experience in which fluidity, repetition, and multiplication replace stability, illustrating that the spectacular constitutes a mode of organizing the retail experience while simultaneously structuring attention and trajectories.

3.2. Control Regime

The control regime encompasses mechanisms through which retail environments organize, guide, and stabilize behavior via organizational, interactional, and procedural devices. In *The Founder*, control manifests systemically through the standardization and reproducibility inherent in the franchise format. Regulation is exercised less through spatial constraints than through the formalization of procedures, codification of actions, and stabilization of interaction sequences. The retail system thus functions as an organizational technology aimed at predictability, consistency, and replication of experience, simultaneously transforming labor, service relations, and consumer perception, while reducing uncertainty, variability, and situational autonomy. The film demonstrates how Ray Kroc imposes his vision through contractual and operational mechanisms, centralizing control of franchises while maintaining the appearance of collaborative expansion (Hazera, 2017). Conversely, *Clerks* examines control

at a micro-social level, depicting a slacker culture in which behavioral norms operate through the repetition of routines and the banalization of transactional scripts (Malecka, 2015). Interactions, temporalities, and behaviors appear strongly structured by implicit norms of small-scale commerce. Together, these films reveal that market control arises both from organizational standardization and from repeated interactional practices, producing ordered, predictable, and stabilized behaviors.

3.3. Desire Regime

The desire regime addresses mechanisms by which retail environments construct the attractiveness of goods, combining visibility, organization, and symbolic mediation. In *Dawn of the Dead*, the shopping mall becomes a site where desire persists independently of utilitarian purpose, set against a backdrop of societal collapse following a zombie attack. Abundance, accumulation, and aimless wandering underscore the capacity of merchandise to structure attention and behavior, revealing a commercial desire autonomous from functional necessity (Yeaw, 2025). *Supermarket Woman* provides a complementary perspective, illustrating how desire is actively produced through merchandising devices, the staging of freshness, and the visual organization of assortments, thereby highlighting the constructed, calculated, and performative nature of commercial attractiveness. The retail environment functions as a mechanism for the symbolic qualification of goods, guiding preferences and value judgments. Both films emphasize that consumer desire does not emerge solely from individual impulse or simple supply-response dynamics, but from material and perceptual arrangements that stabilize hierarchies of value and naturalize certain forms of attractiveness. Within this regime, retail spaces operate as infrastructures for producing desire, simultaneously organizing fascination and symbolic engagement.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper reconceptualizes distribution as an experiential institution, thereby extending scholarship on retailing, consumption, and market mediation. Its central contribution lies in a shift in analytical focus: retail environments are not merely experiential or symbolic spaces but institutionalized systems of mediation governed by distinct regimes that simultaneously organize visibility, regulate conduct, and cultivate desire. The analysis of six films demonstrates that these retail regimes exceed functionalist understandings of distribution by structuring access to goods, directing consumer trajectories, and generating layered aesthetic and symbolic economies of experience—even in highly stylized narrative settings, from zombie-infested shopping malls to the absurd theatricality of the Marx Brothers' universe. Across cases, the three regimes reveal differentiated logics through which material arrangements, social hierarchies, and processes of valuation become mutually constitutive. Distribution thus emerges as a mediating infrastructure linking market logics and social practice, actively shaping regimes of perception, expectation, and value. In doing so, this perspective moves beyond dominant operational conceptions of distribution and opens new perspectives for examining the normative imaginaries embedded in retail systems, including digital infrastructures, algorithmic merchandising, and the cultural consequences of increasingly automated consumption environments.

Drawing on a cinematic methodology, this study advances theoretical understanding of the symbolic, cultural, and institutional dimensions of retail management. By conceptualizing retailing as a structured field of meaning, it positions cinema alongside other cultural forms—including literary works such as Michel Houellebecq's *The Map and the Territory* (2010) and Annie Ernaux's *Look at the Lights, My Love* (2014)—that interrogate the cultural logics of consumer society. Within this perspective, films operate as epistemic devices that render visible the staging, circulation, and spatial ordering of retail servicescapes. The tripartite

model developed here offers a heuristic for understanding how theatricalization, flow management, and mechanisms of valorization jointly shape perceptual orientation and experiential engagement. It further provides a lens through which to analyze market fluidity, the orchestration of abundance and scarcity, and the production of implicit hierarchies embedded in consumer journeys. More broadly, the framework extends CCT by demonstrating that retail *dispositifs* do not merely host consumption but actively participate in the production of symbolic value. The findings therefore establish a foundation for investigation into the ways material configurations and experiential strategies mediate processes of cultural meaning-making.

The managerial implications are equally significant. The notion of symbolic retail regimes suggests that retail environments can be designed not only to facilitate transactions but also to resonate with consumers' cultural schemas and affective expectations. Spectacles of abundance, structured systems of access, and the strategic cultivation of desire are not cinematic exaggerations; they are analytically identifiable mechanisms that shape purchasing behavior, brand evaluation, and loyalty formation. Retail strategy may therefore benefit from a more integrated consideration of merchandising logics, spatial design, and architectures of availability, each of which contributes to the creation of symbolic value. At the same time, this perspective encourages critical reflection on the ethical and social implications of contemporary retail systems, particularly with regard to inequalities of access and the governance of consumer attention. Conceptualizing distribution as a cultural institution thus offers a dual contribution: it enriches theoretical understanding of market organization while informing more reflexive and socially attentive retail practices—a tension that cinema has illuminated for nearly a century.

Several limitations, however, point toward promising directions for future research avenues. The cinematic corpus was not intended to be exhaustive but rather to assemble theoretically revealing cases capable of illuminating contrasting configurations of retail regimes. Other films drawn from different historical periods, non-Western cultural contexts, or alternative forms of market exchange might enrich, challenge, or refine the typology advanced here. Contemporary transformations associated with platform economies, digital commerce, and algorithmic recommendation systems are particularly fertile terrain for extending the analysis. Films such as Ken Loach's *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), for instance, foreground emerging forms of labor precarity and market mediation that may reconfigure the dynamics captured by the three regimes. Moreover, although cinema provides a privileged vantage point from which to examine commercial imaginaries, it remains a distinctive mode of cultural representation shaped by narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic conventions that cannot be equated directly with everyday distribution practices. The regimes identified here should therefore be understood as *analytical ideal types* designed to illuminate mechanisms of commercial mediation rather than as an exhaustive taxonomy of distribution forms. Above all, they invite further inquiry into the diverse cultural, material, and digital arrangements through which contemporary market experiences are organized, valued, and made meaningful.

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