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The Meanings and Messages of Las Vegas: The Present of our Future

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Las Vegas is studied as an arguably prototype postmodern space to develop some understanding of (post)modern consumption. Analyses indicate that while Las Vegas has several characteristics that may help a deeper understanding of the modern and of conditions that signal transformations toward the postmodern, it is far from being a post-modern space. The hegemony of the market and the insistence of the commercial hinder the development of the postmodern. However, insights into the nature of Las Vegas as *excess*, the change in the status of *motion* and *speed* (which are now ends in themselves rather than means to arrive at a destination), and the consumer inclinations for *immersion* into themes observed in Las Vegas provide explanations that will help a better understanding of contemporary cultural trends.

Is there anything to learn from Las Vegas? It was, after all, considered to be not a "real" place, but a city of "sin," not to live in, but to escape to in order to satisfy the dark side of human desires. In the middle of a desert, contradicting all the natural environment, it was built as a place to visit, and then to leave. The image of Las Vegas was, then, one of gambling, entertainment, mobs, glitter, hollow dreams. It had, overall, an image of the sleazy side of American culture. It represented pure entertainment and folly, the underside of the puritan and good life in America, a place where people went to let go and immerse themselves in total gratification of their "irrational" desires and pleasure. Las Vegas was the place where people did what they would not or could not do elsewhere; let go of their inhibitions and put down their guards, and abandon themselves in folly.

In a book first published in 1972, Venturi, Brown and Izenour (1977) thought that Las Vegas was representing a transformed interest, that, in being the "letting off steam" part of the culture of America, it presented to view aspects of this culture that were hidden elsewhere. Today, not many people think of Las Vegas as an aberration. In early 1994, *Time Magazine* called Las Vegas the "New All-American City." Baudrillard (1988), among other philosophers and sociologists of postmodernism, considers Las Vegas as a prototype of something to come. There is an interesting increase in representations of Las Vegas in movies, television programs and literature. It appears in the news more and more often—what happens in Las Vegas makes news!

Las Vegas also has other qualities of distinction. While the rest of the United States suffered economic decline and stagflation during the 1970s and 1980s, Las Vegas kept flourishing. It is, still, one of the fastest growing urban areas. Unlike other fastest growing urban centers, such as Miami and Phoenix, however, its growth is not largely from retirement communities. Its growth comes from its having the largest number of people moving there to find employment. It has the highest growth in employment, with each new hotel room built creating five to ten new jobs. The quality of jobs created, in terms of stability and benefits is questionable, but they do count as employment. Las Vegas, according to the astronauts who have circled the Earth, is also the brightest spot on the dark side of the Earth.

Something seems to be special about Las Vegas, and there may still be more to learn from it. Las Vegas is not an easy place to come to, or come to terms with, however. Despite the fact that it hosts a very representative cross-section of the population of the United States as tourists, and many tourists from around the world, it still carries with it the image of a gambling town, although much has changed and still is changing. This paper will investigate some of these changes and their implications for our lives and culture.

ENCOUNTERING LAS VEGAS

Of the three major “gambling” cities in the United States, Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Reno, I first experienced Atlantic City. This was where my then brother-in-law’s father had lost his millions and tasted bankruptcy. His family and lawyers took the hotel casino to court. The management, they claimed, had lured him. Recognizing his tendency to enjoy the limelight and the attention of women as the big-roller, the management was blamed to have provided a free suite in the hotel, as well as, it was intimated, companionship of women. You can imagine, therefore, my image of the place. It was one of lure, allure, and seduction—of practically everything that was indecent, crass, and commercial. This was the place where, rich and poor, people flocked to be fleeced, used, and broken. It was where all the excessive acts of the modern, capitalist dreams were played and played-out.

Of course, Atlantic City had, then, just the gambling hotels and a boardwalk with the regular amusement park and shops. Reno, when I visited the city in the summer of 1990, was quite similar, in the sense that it consisted mainly of the gambling hotels with the typical shows—I remember going to a stand-up comedy show there, for example—and the wedding chapels. Somehow, I presume because of my initial very negative image of gambling cities, Reno seemed surprisingly cute. I thought it was not presumptuous, as I had thought of Atlantic City. Furthermore, between the time that I was in Atlantic City and in Reno, I had become acquainted with literature on *postmodern culture*, and Reno, it seemed to me at the time, was my first, direct encounter with some of this culture’s elements. I remember taking photographs of the banner across the road entering the city: “The biggest little town in the

world!" This was a good example of the juxtapositioning of opposites in creating playful images to build fun experiences. I also remember taking many photographs of the wedding chapels, which, in their signs, at once declared the sanctity and depth of marriage and promoted the possibility of achieving it through the speedy, five-minute ceremony. "Hey" these signs indicated, "you can get there fast, cheap, easy and with fanfare!" The sanctity of the marriage intimated was well juxtaposed with the profanity of the commercial and the superficial. All in all, this was a city that did not take itself seriously and entertained with playfulness, it seemed.

I arrived in Las Vegas that same summer, about a week after Reno. I did not like it. The Strip seemed dirty and cold, and the downtown was seedy. When one stepped out of the hotels onto the Strip, it did not present a friendly environment. During the day, there were few people walking, and the cars sped by on the road. Between the hotels it was quite empty with only a few shopping areas where the stores reminded one of those on the boardwalk in Atlantic City—selling cheap, low quality touristic trinkets, T-shirts, sun glasses, and the like, along with drinks and low quality food. There were many magazines strewn around on the sidewalks with photographs of nude or half-nude women, and names and telephone numbers of escort services. One ran across quite a number of homeless people. In front of one of the many construction sites the workers were demonstrating against the ownership and management of the hotel next door that, apparently, was expanding with the new construction. The workers were complaining about the fact that the management did not allow unionization or collective bargaining, keeping the wages low and benefits non-existent.

At night, the neon lights and an increased number of people walking around transformed the Strip somewhat, but the homeless war veterans begging next to or in front of signs that promised lucky winnings, high gambling payoffs, and "loose" machines presented ugly contradictions. My first impression upon encountering the Strip did correspond to the sleazy and distasteful images of Las Vegas.

The atmosphere inside the hotels generally reinforced these images. A view of people at the gambling tables and machines reminded one of a factory—especially with the moving sidewalks carrying people into the Mirage and Caesar's Palace resembling the conveyor belts in production lines—where the production was one of "processing" people. The waiters, especially the women carrying drinks to patrons at the gambling areas with their Playboy-bunny-like outfits—push-up bras, and low cut and high cut lines—gave the more conscious visitors some level of nausea about the crass and regressive notions of business that was being run. At first glance, the dominant impression was one of high commercialism, glitter, decadence, and the spectacle.

In the summer of 1990, the only hotel that presented entertainment and experience to pedestrians on the Strip was the Mirage. Then recently built, the volcano in the front of the hotel that erupted every twenty minutes drew huge crowds each time. As it began to rumble, then sprout fire that slowly moved down the sides of the "mountain,"

finally coming down to the “sea” and sizzling, child, young and old, all observers in the crowd seemed to become enthralled, “ooh”ing and “aah”ing throughout the duration of this spectacle. I was equally enthralled with the fact that such crowds of adults could get so excited by this “unreal” and contrived spectacle.

Overall, my initial encounter with Las Vegas was disappointing. I was disappointed with the people who seemed to accept this place uncritically, seemingly not observing the contradictions and the underside of the glitter, and I was disappointed with what seemed to be just a greed for money on the part of the businesses.

I left Las Vegas without hesitation on that trip, but later as I reflected on the joy of the patrons and the tourists, and as I read more about the differing perspectives on Las Vegas, some of which represented it as a (cultural) phenomenon, I decided to return as a researcher to understand it better. After all, I was living only five-and-a-half hours of driving distance away from it. When you cannot get funding to do research at destinations you feel you need to explore, it helps to be able to drive to them.

RETURNING TO LAS VEGAS

Since the summer of 1990, I have returned to Las Vegas five times, four of which were research trips. In these trips I made systematic observations to record the changes taking place in Las Vegas, specifically, the Strip. I observed people’s behaviors as well as the organization of spaces and the themes that were presented by the different hotels. Systematic observations of what people wore and where they congregated were also made. Many of these observations were recorded through photography and videotaping, but mostly I have kept written records. Also, I had brief conversations with people visiting Las Vegas and the Strip hotels in order to find out their experiences in, and feelings and thoughts about Las Vegas. I wanted to know why they came to this city, but more importantly, their emotional and mental reactions to the things they encountered in Las Vegas. All of the conversations I had were during or, mostly, immediately after an encounter with one of Las Vegas’ spectacles, such as the volcano at the Mirage, the battle of the two ships at the Treasure Island, the rides at the Luxor, and the animated fountain at the Forum in the Caesar’s Palace. The following interpretations and analytical inferences are based on these observations and conversations, but also on the readings of the literature on postmodernism and contemporary culture.

CLUES TO UNDERSTANDING LAS VEGAS

The question needs to be asked: Why is Las Vegas successful? Of course, in asking this question there is already the assumption that what Las Vegas represents is “success.” The messages we get from the mainstream media clearly indicate that it is successful, and this rais-

es the issue of how success is defined. The definition, according to the ideology most represented in mainstream media, is simple: economically it is lively and growing. It is the new All-American City! But, it is also sleazy, untamed, illegitimate in many ways, and decadent—given its historically predominant images. Furthermore, it is depleting the water resources and disturbing the natural balance of the region it is in. In general, Las Vegas seems to be a hazard, creating its own demise as well as of the region around it. Why, then, has it become such an intriguing and popular place to visit and study for so many?

It might be said that Las Vegas was always intriguing and attracted the curious attention since it became a gambling center of unprecedented scale after the Second World War. It fast became the renegade town of modern America and drew much attention to itself through showy marketing strategies of its “business” leaders. They brought in the stars and celebrities, and the high rollers, with ostentatious offers and offerings. Clearly, the gambling casinos, the hotels, and the stage shows provided fulfillment of the senses at levels rarely experienced before, and it was accessible to many—except the non-white—who could not otherwise afford the opulence. The kind of lifestyle that was earlier possible for only the very rich could now be experienced, even if for short periods of time, by those not so rich. Furthermore, in a culture where screen idols and television celebrities had become everyone’s closest “friends,” the Las Vegas experience meant that these “friends” could be seen, heard, and even touched, in person. Thus, Las Vegas had much to offer many people, rich and middle class. The most important experience, of course, might have been the tasting of the “forbidden.”

As much as Las Vegas had earned the sleazy image, it was, originally, alluring to many because it represented the forbidden pleasures, therefore, the intrigue. For the patrons who had money to spend, everything was available. Las Vegas represented the dark and shady side of American capitalism: those who ran the businesses went after profits through any and all means, legal or illegal, and the patrons went after material satisfaction and dreams in abandon, without restraint or embarrassment, since being in Las Vegas was exactly for this purpose, and all who were there were in it together. This was the side of modern capitalism everyone hated to admit or recognize. Yet, in Las Vegas you could go after the acceptable and revered modern capitalist goals—material wealth and satisfaction, the good life—through not-so-acceptable means. The Las Vegas dreams played both sides of the coin—the known, determined, acceptable goals, and the unknown, uncharted activities. In many ways, Las Vegas was the excess of modernity, and the hotels, their glitter and lavishness verified this image. In Las Vegas everything was done in/to excess.

Yet, Las Vegas has become different today. After all, gambling is now found everywhere in the United States, whether on Native American reservations, from Arizona to Rhode Island, or legalized through different forms in Louisiana and elsewhere. Mobs moving into “legal” endeavors can also be found around the country. The charm or the intrigue that Las Vegas represented due to its being different because

of its “forbidden”ness is no longer tenable. The “excess” has regenerated and diffused itself. Today, Las Vegas represents a different excess, and it is the seduction of this new form of excess that draws so many there still.

I shall return to the discussion of the new form of excess in Las Vegas momentarily. The importance of excess may require, however, a brief treatment. In the book, *Visions of Excess*, where some of his writings are collected, specifically in his article “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille (1985) examines the meanings, necessity, and importance of excess in modern capitalist economy. The “expenditure” as he calls it, that part of human activity that is not “production” or “produced,” therefore, not determined by the formal and organized economy, is quite a determinant of what happens in the formal economy and, furthermore, in the culture and society as a whole. Baudrillard (1993a) picks up on this theme through the use of the term seduction. The seductive and enchanting, therefore, sought part of life—not the economy—is that part that is not under control, or the part that is undetermined. In Baudrillard’s scheme, production and the formal economy have increasingly become part of the symbolic, the simulation, thereby irreversible and oversignified. In the growing domination of the simulation, Baudrillard sees the end, the death, of production and of political economy. What is life and enchanting, therefore, is seduction; that which is reversible, unknown, and out of control. In his later writings, Baudrillard (1993b) celebrates the death of political economy and the potential of that which is uncontrolled, or the indeterminable, that both enchants life and gives expression to the fulfilling experiences or moments of life. That which is outside of production, the seductive, is also that part that contains the secrets and, therefore, in a way, the untold about what is produced or determined. Since not all is or can be determined, production tends and tries to hide, suppress, veil out of view, many of its elements that it cannot accordingly signify. These surface in the excess, revealing, in a sense, the complete nature of that which is produced.

For modern capitalism, Las Vegas served this purpose. It was the excrement of that which was produced, the part that could not be controlled or completely determined. It was seduction, and as such, it had many of the characteristics that determined the (re)construction of things to come. Las Vegas has simulated the capitalist hype. It was created by modern capitalism but as its excess, to challenge the determined, to parody the “social” but with disdain. Las Vegas is the pastiche and, as such, it is the best candidate for the prototypical post-modern space. That is why today Las Vegas is the “All-American City.” It contained, and continues to contain today, all the conditions that modernity feverishly produced or took to unprecedented levels, but could not control the signification of, therefore, rejecting and trying to suppress them. In Las Vegas these conditions have flourished and, with the cultural erosion of modernity, have become sought and dominant.

Another clue to understanding Las Vegas is in the book by Venturi, Brown and Izenour (1977), *Learning From Las Vegas*. As early as

1972, they had realized a major difference in the architecture of the modern city, reaching its peak for the time in Las Vegas. The architectural transformation was and is represented by the Las Vegas Strip. Venturi, Brown and Izenour compared this new structuration of Las Vegas—a prototype postmodern city—around the “strip” to the organization of life around the “piazza”s of Rome—an architectural prototype for the modern city as it has originally evolved. Several major developments have taken place, specifically in the historical evolution of the modern city in North America, since the modeling of the city after Rome. Consider, for example, the evolution of the city from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles. New York City was originally constructed based on a pedestrian and horse and cart mode of movement. It was, therefore, an urban “downtown” city, friendly to such movement and relatively compact, organized around “neighborhood”s. Chicago, on the other hand, is a product of the railroad, and Los Angeles is the product of the automobile, each city reflecting the mode of movement in its architecture. As we move from New York to Los Angeles, original distances grow, density spreads out, and the urban to suburban growth is visible. The original downtowns of the three cities take on somewhat different forms, from a residential and compact downtown in New York, to a commerce based compact downtown in Chicago, to a relatively diffused, partitioned, commerce based downtown reflecting the urban “sprawl” in Los Angeles. Los Angeles downtown was not organized so much around central squares (or piazzas), but around strands (or strips) that competed with each other. This evolution expressed not only the suburbanization based on the modes of movement or transportation, but also the related growing significance of motion or flow in modern society.

Motion or flow became a central part of life in modern society. A society that had its eyes turned unto the future, instead of the past as it was in premodern society, had to be on the move; towards the grand future dreamed of and promised in the modern project. This motion was the means towards an end: the better human life, where scientific technologies would provide for all the material needs and more—an affluence without limits, a life under control and in the service of human happiness and material wealth. The motion occurred in order to “arrive” at a destination, a grand goal for human society.

In the modern city, the movement along the streets and the avenues culminated with the arrival at the grand squares. Many times, as in the case of Paris where many avenues converge upon L'Arc de Triomphe circle, the streets led to points, specifically plazas or squares where the city life was to congregate. Such city architecture is a reflection of the modern concept of movement with a purpose, toward a goal. The goal is the point of arrival, an equilibrium, a steady-state that allows the common gathering of thought and reflection, a platform for social congress. The purpose of the motion, then, is to arrive there. Life takes place in these points of congregation, and the aim is to achieve these states.

Speed has increasingly become important in modern society for the purpose of arriving faster. The evolution of the modern city from New

York to Los Angeles, and finally to Las Vegas, reflects a reversal of the whole notion of this modern system of the city. There is a reversal between the means and the end, motion and arrival. The Strip in Las Vegas, where the idea of the strip in other modern cities reaches its peak, is the reflection of the deconstruction of the system of the modern city. In the Las Vegas Strip, motion, itself, becomes the goal—as movement, not arrival at any point, and speed become the ends in the late modern and postmodern culture.

Venturi, Brown and Izenour alluded to this reversal in different ways in their book *Learning from Las Vegas*. «The image of the commercial strip is chaos» (1977: 20) they proclaim, at the beginning of a passage full of imagery that reflects the experience of continual movement on the Strip. Later on they mention that the Las Vegas Strip is to drive (1977: 34), and express that «[a] simple shot of the Strip is less spectacular, its enormous spaces must be seen as moving sequences» (1977: 35). This system of continual movement, for the sake of movement, is also reflected in other prototype postmodern spaces of our time. At Disney World or at Universal Studios, for example, the idea is to “move” the crowds instead of have them congregate. Here is a revolution, a radical reversal of roles, purpose and meanings of the moments of human life. The piazzas, and later the squares of the modern city represented a connecting, centralizing and capturing of the public, in order for public affairs to be commonly considered and reflected upon. The public motion or movement was for coming together and enjoying the common good and the common achievement. The Strip in Las Vegas is the structuring of city life according to a completely reversed order of priorities and purpose. The Strip does not capture or connect the public, the crowds, but moves them; it allows the flow and the speed. On the Strip, the points of interest, the hotels, are for momentary rest and momentary experience, a fleeting gaze and immersion into experiences to be sampled on the way, in motion. These stop-overs are for individual experiences, or with few friends, not to connect with others, congregate, reflect, or have communal discourse. These momentary experiences energize the motion. While in the modern organization of the city the plazas characterized containment of the public, representing the lull in the motion as the important/essential moment, the Strip declares the triumph of the motion/flow as the enduring moment of postmodern life.

With these characteristics, it is not surprising that Las Vegas would be the prototype city of the present. While it contains many of the postmodern conditions, however, it is currently far from being a truly postmodern space.

LAS VEGAS AND THE POSTMODERN

The reason why many discuss the possibility that Las Vegas is a postmodern city may be because it is closest to our conceptions of the postmodern, or because it is the furthest we know from the modern. It does, indeed, seem to possess characteristics that resemble what

many consider to be the postmodern conditions. For one, Las Vegas seems to be the space for the spectacle and the hyperreal. The dominance of the hype in this city's life cannot be missed. Yet, what makes Las Vegas hyperreal is that its hype and the simulations it presents are increasingly becoming represented in the rest of our cities, thus becoming part of our everyday reality. Thematization that finds its sharpest specimens in the Las Vegas Strip hotels, such as the Luxor, New York New York, and Caesar's Palace, is spreading across our cities, in our shopping centers, city centers, and elsewhere. Increasingly we witness that the original spectacularized simulations of familiar themes in Las Vegas are simulated in other parts of the country and in everyday lives, as we walk down the shopping sections of the Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California, as we visit the wharf areas in Baltimore or Toledo, or as we enjoy a day at almost any new shopping center.

Fragmentation is also prevalent in Las Vegas, in the ability of the consumer to immerse oneself, temporarily, into the many enclaves of exotic experiences the hotels have provided. Each offers a theme separated from the others on the Strip, thus allowing no interference from other themes and, thereby, a complete, uninterrupted experience of itself. The consumer can remain immersed into the thematic experience as long as s/he wants, then move to another enclave of a different thematic experience, returning to the ones s/he likes as often as s/he wants.

Thematization in Las Vegas is not radically different than what one can find in many other cities. Consider, for example, New Orleans, Louisiana, where the theme is a carnivalesque combination of jazz and French cultures, or Miami Beach, Florida, with its Art Deco themes. The radical difference of Las Vegas is in its break with the idea that a city ought to have a single theme that characterizes it, a theme that gives it its unique and singularly recognizable identity. Las Vegas (re)presents, as an art historian expressed on a recent program on Las Vegas (*Going Places*, 1997), all or many cultures of the world. Furthermore, in Las Vegas this is done with the audacity that it can (re)present them in more exciting and experiential ways, in more spectacular and seductive forms. Las Vegas, therefore, presents not a singular whole, but a fragmented one. The Las Vegas mentality is one of upstaging or freedom from representation that is loyal or faithful to the original. Instead, in Las Vegas there is the idea that, if thanks to new technologies, one can do more impressive simulations than a simple reproduction of what is copied or imagined. This is the mentality of having the experiences of the past and the future, as well as of the present, now, here, all in the present, and in their most seductive forms. One of the architects of the idea of the Luxor Hotel expresses this mentality well: «In designing the architectural motif and configuration of this pre-Egyptian civilization, our idea was that everything you've ever seen in Egypt is a poor facsimile of what this high technology civilization developed.» (*The Making of Luxor*, 1994).

The audacity of Las Vegas simulation, even when and if disliked, results in its replication elsewhere, at different scales, and enters our daily lives as the reality of contemporary society. As the case is simi-

larly with Disney World and its World Showcase section, the simulations of Las Vegas are powerful in becoming the norm, the real; they are hyperreal. The excess that (re)presents the secrets of high modernity, its seduction because it is so much the undetermined character of modern production, is, therefore, "realer than real."

LAS VEGAS AND THE CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER

Las Vegas is one of the world's biggest tourist destinations—and tourism is now the largest industry in the world—leading along with France, Italy, and Disney World. In 1995, twenty-nine million tourists visited Las Vegas from around the world. Why do they come? What is the allure?

Already, the allure of Las Vegas for modern consumers has been discussed. The intrigue, the fascination with the forbidden, the hidden, and, of course, the promise of great fortunes through gambling constituted the draw for the modern consumer. A future of great material affluence is also the promise of the modern project, and this same promise, while based on chance, is the promise of Las Vegas. Although in the rhetoric of the modern world outside of Las Vegas the grand future required persistence in work and sacrifice, in Las Vegas one can go after this dream with abandon and without bars as long as one is ready to play the luck and risk game. Of course, the possibility of reaching this dream was and is well advertised in mainstream media whenever someone hit(s) the "jackpot."

Until recently, until Las Vegas began to change from being basically a gambling town towards a family vacation destination (as well), this promise of riches through gambling has been the primary attraction for many, while for some it was the combination of gambling and the spectacles—the shows and the celebrities, the neon lights, and the like—and, in general, the fascination of the forbidden and the (semi)illicit. Why is Las Vegas so seductive now, since it has become less and less a provider of the illicit, changing its image of sleaze, becoming the "All American City," and as the rest of the country begins to resemble it? Today, there is a wider variety of consumers who come to Las Vegas; in effect, all walks of life and all nationalities, ethnicities, etc., are represented in Las Vegas today. A growing proportion of visitors is not interested in gambling or other "shady" offerings. Instead they are there to experience the "attractions," the thematizations. This side of Las Vegas is becoming alluring even to the gamblers. Currently, the gambling and thematization seem to have found a happy "partnership."

Observing the consumers of Las Vegas seems to reveal several intriguing transformations in the consumer mentality. For the modern mind, the most surprising may be the growing blurring of what is fantasy and what is real, or the artificial and the actual, for the consumers. This blurring is not in the sense that a distinction cannot be made between, for example, a natural volcano and the volcano built in front of the Mirage Hotel, but in terms of the experiential value of the encounters. There are, for some consumers, greater difficulties in sep-

arating the real and the artificial. This is evidenced, for example, when some people who run into soap opera actors accuse the actors for having committed the deeds they did on television and even attack them. The blurring of the real and the virtual was also evident, for example, when Vice President Dan Quayle took on a television situation comedy character, an expecting single mother, Murphy Brown, as a target in exploring family values and the television show built this controversy into its following episodes, thereby creating an eventually actual dialogue between the Vice President and the virtual television character. When the fictional baby was born on the television program, both the Vice President and the First Lady Barbara Bush sent presents to it and the mother, as did many other viewers of the show. In May 1996, Kermit the Frog, a puppet character on mostly children's television programs, received an honorary doctorate from Long Island University's Southampton College for his work on environmental issues and presented the commencement address. Earlier, he had already spoken at Harvard and Oxford Universities.

Yet, more than an inability to separate the actual from the virtual, that is, rather than being a pathological state, these episodes may point to the fact that there is a growing acceptance that the "fictional" or the fantasy is integral to the experience of the real more than ever acknowledged by modernist discourse. In many instances, the fantasy constructs the real experiences of the social, as in the case of certain television programs—*Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*—that were modeled by many families in their everyday lives, or in the case of many characters in movies being taken as role models in constructing identities by the youth. That is, the fantasy, the fictional is represented and (re)constructed as the real, becoming the real.

Consider, for example, the reactions to the "reality" of the thematized experiences in Las Vegas. At the Luxor Hotel's ride into the tomb within the pyramid, one can hear many comments to the effect that the condition and the variety of the artifacts from pharaoh's tombs are much better here (the Luxor) than in any pyramid in Egypt, or some to the effect that in Egypt you observe remains whereas here you get a sense of how things were. This was a sentiment voiced to me by an elder woman who had recently visited Cairo. «I am just as excited here as I was there,» she told me. «There it is exciting because you realize they built these huge things so long ago. Here I feel more like I am in the midst of things.»

Such expression is one of many that indicate a growing sensibility in consumers that the "reality" of the experience is less a source of the intensity and meaning of it than it must have been at the height of modernity. When inquired about the fact that the volcano in front of the Mirage Hotel is not "real," the respondents often expressed that this was «just a different experience.» One said, «I was in Hawaii and the excitement there was also grand.» Such expressions, heard again and again in Las Vegas, tend to show the diminishing discrimination between the real and the fantasy in contemporary consumer culture in terms of the significance or quality of the experience they provide. That is, one is not necessarily considered, it seems, to be better, more

important, or more exciting than the other. Rather, each is considered different, and the intensity of the experience seems to be more a function of its spectacularity and textuality, or its ability to evoke meaning, than its reality. I found these sentiments to be true for different nationalities I encountered in Las Vegas, although the North Americans seemed to be generally more enthusiastic. Given what we know of the culture of modernity, these sentiments must be relatively new for modern consumers.

The separation between fantasy and reality is, of course, a distinction that was reinforced by modern scientific thought. This is understandable, because in modernity, in order for the promised grand future to be achieved, there had to be a discrimination made between the actual material possibilities and the relatively unrealizable dreams. The original intent of the distinction between fantasy and reality seems to have been lost, however, in the re-signification of the concepts with the evolution of modern society. The real has come to be often understood as that which is independent of human agency, as "out there" only to be discovered, but not determined. It is interesting, for example, that in modernist discourse—within the social science disciplines as well as in popular culture—our urban areas, such as New York and Los Angeles, are considered as part of human reality, when Disneyland or Universal Studios grounds are considered as "fantasy" lands. A closer look at the construction of these two types of spaces, however, simply discloses that, in fact, both are humanly constructed, despite the fact that in one case there is greater control of a singular organizational authority (e.g., Disney), and in the other the authority is somewhat more diffuse, having to legitimize itself through dominant political processes (e.g., Los Angeles). For the lay individual consumer, neither is more or less fantastic than the other, except for the orientation s/he has towards them. The difference is, therefore, mostly in the modern individual's feeling and thinking that when s/he enters Universal Studios s/he is there to enjoy the fantasy, and when s/he visits New York s/he is there to discover the real world.

Las Vegas challenges this modern distinction, as does postmodernism, and one can observe that for a substantial proportion of visitors to Las Vegas the separation between fantasy and reality that used to be so clear in modern rationality is waning. This may partially be due to the fact that Las Vegas is, after all, a city and not an amusement park. People live and work there, their real lives are conducted there. That is, normal daily lives occur in Las Vegas as well as all the tourism. But, partially, I think, this growing sense that, specifically for the social, there is not that great a distinction, if any, between reality and fantasy is an outcome of the contemporary experiences with the media, with contemporary social spaces (such as Las Vegas as well as the thematized sections of many of our cities), and the like. Also, a very important factor seems to be the general cultural skepticism about modern discourse. There is no historical data to illustrate that this kind of consumer sensibility expressed by the substantive proportion of the consumers of Las Vegas is a growing trend, but it would be a realistic assumption, knowing the history of public discourse, and of values and

beliefs in our culture, that a few years ago this same sentiment would be voiced by a much smaller proportion.

Thus, Las Vegas gives us a glimpse into the future of a transforming culture and transforming consumers. We can observe the modern consumers in Las Vegas as well as the postmodern consumers (see **Figure 1**). The modern consumer comes to Las Vegas to gamble in order to realize the modern dream of material fortune. The modern consumer seeks, through this fortune, to have ownership or possession of material goods, to appropriate them in order to devour their values. The impulse of the modern consumer is to buy—as they can be observed purchasing the risks at the gambling machines and tables, and the memorabilia—in order to appropriate value and to use. This consumer is seeking a promise of a grand future—that is unlikely to be realized as in the case of the modern project for the large majority of the world's population—and dreaming of a wealthy and, therefore, happy future. The postmodern consumers, on the other hand, are seeking to find meaning in varied experiences. The allure of the thematized environments in Las Vegas is their promise of such experience. The business or, specifically, the marketing acumen of the owners and managers of the new Strip hotels, such as Steve Wynn, has been their recognition of this growing quest on the part of the contemporary consumers for immersion into varied experiences. The postmodern consumers, who are growing in numbers and who establish the trends in contemporary consumption, seek varied and alternative/alternating experiences in trying to extract meanings of life in the present, and they wish to sample and try different experiences because they have lost their faith in or commitment to the possibility of a singular, best life alternative.

Figure 1. The Modern and the Postmodern in Las Vegas

Modern consumer		"Las Vegas" as a Case
Seeks	Ownership/Possession Appropriation of value in order to devour	"Gambler"
Impulse	To buy To use	Seeking a promise that is unlikely to be realized
Questions	Do I or don't I buy this? Is it reasonable? Can it bring me material wealth?	Dreaming of a happy/wealthy future
Contemporary Consumer		"Tourist"
	(Post)modern	Seeking to immerse in thematized environments
Postmodern consumer		"Customizer/Constructor"
Seeks	To construct meaning and experience	
Impulse	To explore meaning To immerse	
Questions	Am I finding meaning in this? Is it enjoyable? Does it (allow me to) construct a life experience I would like to return to?	Seeking to construct experience/meaning

LAS VEGAS AND THE COMMERCIAL

Yet, in Las Vegas, the quest of the postmodern consumer is not completely satisfied. While the marketers of the Las Vegas experiences have been ingenious in recognizing the trend in consumer desires and, thereby, have constructed a successful enterprise, their vision has been largely impaired by their commercial interests. This is the failure of Las Vegas that is most likely to lead to its demise. The hegemony of market ideology in the construction of spaces and offerings for contemporary consumers limits the ability of the consumers in realizing their quest for meaning by directing the experiences toward the commercial and the pre-packaged. This market mentality causes the marketers to continue to think of consumers as customers who need to buy finished products, rather than as producers of meaning in experiential moments. At the same time that the meaning of consumption may be going through a transformation, the impulse for commercial exchange on the part of the marketing organizations tends to impose a condition of purchase on the accessibility of the consumption experience. The consumer, who is seeking the experience, finds oneself having to purchase it, in many cases in pre-packaged forms. The market makes having the experience contingent upon making (a) purchase(s). For the postmodern consumer, this imposition by the market system produces many paradoxes. These are present in Las Vegas, as they are elsewhere.

Consider, for example, the professionals who work and live in urban areas and feel detached from their essential or authentic selves due to the clutter of the social environments in their lives, and seek to find themselves through experiences with(in) nature. They take a rafting trip down the Colorado River, or join a scuba-diving tour, or go into extreme sports, such as skydiving, and the like. Today, for many, such experiences require buying packages; an eight day trip down the Colorado provided by a rafting company, a scuba-diving trip to Cozumel, Mexico, a week at a skydiving ranch in Arizona, etc. The companies that provide these packages do, indeed, package them into a series of commercial transactions. Furthermore, many of these trips and experiences are pre-planned in order to provide the utmost thrill and the most exciting encounters. On a rafting package, for example, the tour guides follow a planned scenario as the rafts run through rapids. Places and times are chosen to create "spontaneous" encounters with nature and among the group members. Stories of adventure are told and games are led by the guides to enhance the rafting experience. Many who join these packaged experiences, however, do end up feeling that they indeed had the encounter with nature and that they came closer to, if not completely succeeded in, finding their "true" selves. The paradox here, especially when considered within the confines of modern discourse, is that these are people living "real" lives in "real" places fifty weeks out of the year with feelings of loss of self, and find it during the two weeks where almost every experience they have is pre-determined by a commercial interest. For many, the Las Vegas experience is not much different.

The commercialized experiences of Las Vegas are “sanitized” experiences. You can walk the streets of New York without the fear of muggers. With this sanitization comes safety, but also the loss of mystique, the intrigue, and the rush of the “lurking” encounters. We learn that the play of this tension is an important part of the contemporary consumer experience. Sanitization increases the willingness of the average consumer to participate due to safety, but the absence of the mystique reduces excitement and breeds boredom, requiring (ir)regular reconfigurations that foster excitement or surprise in the thematized experiences. This is another reason why the contemporary consumers may be seeking escape from the pre-packaged, marketized forms of experiences to ones that they can interactively construct without commercialized mediation.

STILL LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

In the 1970s, Venturi, Brown and Izenour observed a challenge to modern architecture in Las Vegas, and their observation seems to have been correct. At the time, major hotels that today give the Las Vegas Strip its direction, the thematized enclaves, did not even exist. Yet, Venturi, Brown and Izenour and their research team recognized that the representational and universalist principles of modern architecture were not followed but transcended in Las Vegas, not only in the case of individual buildings, in their being dominated by sign and symbol, but in terms of the whole architecture of the Strip. While modern architecture emphasized the functional, the universal, and the representational, Las Vegas had adopted the symbolic, the particular, and the *presentational*. Almost thirty years after the Venturi, Brown and Izenour venture into Las Vegas, Las Vegas seems to have completely left behind any pretense of representing reality, instead presenting the possibility(ies). Despite the commercial shortcomings of Las Vegas, this is an audacious defiance of the modernist moralizing—in spite of its catering to the voracious materialistic dreams and hidden desires of modernity. For the modernist, therefore, Las Vegas represents a rather embarrassing and uncontrollable, in-your-face mirror of modernity’s own nature.

For the postmodernist, Las Vegas is not a likeable place either, except for the satisfaction that it presents, what many would consider, the underside of modernity and its victorious capitalist system: «See what you are and what you create!» Yet, one has to recognize that consumers go there, and, as already discussed, not necessarily to gamble. More than six months before the hotel and its gambling casinos opened for business, in May 1996, four-hundred-thousand «visitors [had] already trooped through the preview center at New York New York [Hotel’s] construction site» (Goldberg, 1996) apparently asking management «Where are the muggers?» and expressing sentiments such as «I’d be likelier to go to this [than to New York City],» and «It’s easier to fly here than to get off the freeway [in New York City].» Again, these are expressions of the acceptance of the type of experience Las

Vegas hotels can provide, not a rejection of other experiences, for these same visitors simultaneously express their desire to visit New York City itself. Bauman's (1997) concept of ambivalence may also apply here. The visitor to Las Vegas is not simply enthralled with the experience, its commercialization is often repulsive. This ambivalence, however, is not limited to Las Vegas, the consumer feels it in all her/his experiences—even in visiting the national parks where nature is preserved but the relationship of the human to nature is now always "touristic."

I would not want to argue, for it is probably not arguable, that all consumers of Las Vegas know what they want, or that they are very much aware or analytical about the reasons that draw them to Las Vegas. Many may be criticized, if that is the perspective one takes, for "going with the flow," and spending money and enjoying what Las Vegas offers in terms of entertainment too much. Are they hedonists who do not care or worry about "serious" affairs? Why are they here?

While there are many repeat visitors to Las Vegas, these visitors also have other experiences. They go on nature trails, visit museums, travel to other locations around the world and see historical and natural sites, etc. They also come to Las Vegas. They do get excited about what they encounter there and enjoy the thrills and the glitter. They do wonder about the gambling, they know there is a minimal chance of winning if they gamble, they do have some reservations about some of the excess. We cannot write off all of the visitors of Las Vegas as lost souls who are just conned into a dream world, who are less than adequate in thinking for themselves. As mentioned earlier, consumers from all walks of life and from all over the world show up in Las Vegas. The gambler from middle America, as well as the older Indian woman in her sari, finds something in this city, and we need to understand what it is. That is, if we do not judge the desires and the actions of contemporary consumers solely from a privileged position, a position of presumed superior intellect and awareness, what Las Vegas presents may contribute much to our understanding.

I wish to reiterate that in Las Vegas we encounter the most vivid examples of contemporary paradoxes we live: a growing consumer sensibility to seek meaning in the experiences of the present, and a market culture that insists on converting the desire for experience into a packaged commercial purchase; a consumer culture that encourages the exploration of potentials, and a market system that struggles to take advantage of this adventurous consumer spirit by reproducing the modern forms of marketing; a cultural renewal that intends to produce new and audacious symbolic forms and meaning, and a market mentality that tries to commodify expression; a consumer who desires to be empowered to construct multiple meaningful experiences, and the modern marketing impulse to communalize and streamline the offerings. In effect, the market, which is the medium of the economy that had become the locomotive of modern life, stands as the major obstacle against the empowerment of the consumer and the (re)generation of consumption, not as an opposition to production, but as production of meaning in/and human life. Las Vegas presents the seduction of this

possibility and promise through its success in attracting so many contemporary consumers, and the failures of the promise when the hegemony of the market continues.

CONCLUSION

Las Vegas, thus, enables us to have insights about the potentials of the postmodern as well as the shortcomings of the contemporary. The market success of this "New All-American City" results in its being copied elsewhere. We can have the truly spectacular Key West in Orlando, Florida, and pilgrim's America in Williamsburg, as well as Chinatown and Little Italy in multiple cities. This phenomenon of the simulation increasingly constituting the realities of our everyday lives does not remain within the United States. We have the Red Square of Moscow in Tijuana, Mexico, life in a South African village for the tourist in Lesedi, South Africa, the authentic cremation ceremony staged in Bali, Indonesia, and Americana in all major cities of the world represented in and through the shopping centers constructed. The "unique" experiences that cultures can offer for the touristic immersion and gaze pop up all around the globe with the eye on the money. Practically every city that is a major tourist destination in the world now has an area where the city is presented as "it really is/was."

Many of the contemporary presentations relate to cultures, or to regions of the world that have culturally become of interest to the public. The reason seems to be their conduciveness to constituting the highest textuality and texture, thereby increasing the sensation of immersion for the consumer/tourist. Cultures or regions (such as the rain forest) provide the multidimensionality and the complexity, which enable the richer texture and text in the simulation. This explains the preferences for the themes in Las Vegas. The themes (re)present Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt, Medieval England, the tropics, and the like. The contemporary consumer/tourist evidently prefers the immersed experience that allows the utilization of the senses as well as reason. This is a change from the modern consumer who trusted the relatively detached, "objective" gaze in consumption—at least in rhetoric. For the modern consumer, consumption constituted a necessary replenishment of energies to prepare oneself for the activities of higher purpose in life: production, creation of values, and ideas that produced material values. With the contemporary consumer of Las Vegas, on the other hand, one observes a different approach to consumption: it is the production of life experiences and, through them, production of meanings that make the present moments of life significant.

Furthermore, the contemporary consumer feels freer than her/his modern counterpart to seek variety, now that the intolerance against acting one's restlessness due to her/his ambivalence is relaxed. Also, the confidence that any *single* experience, or more generally, any *single* way of life can be trusted to be the "best" or the final goal is lost.

Instead, as many express in Las Vegas, the consumers find both positive and negative elements in all experiences. This quality of experiences provides both the impulse to sample many, and the possibility of richness of meaning production in each. A growing population of consumers no longer trusts, therefore, that any single experience is one they would desire to remain (with)in forever. Yet, among the many sampled experiences the consumers do develop preferences that make them wish to return to some with excitement. In Las Vegas, some keep returning to the Forum at Caesar's Palace and to the volcano at the Mirage. Others return to the Wizard of Oz at the MGM Grand and to Luxor. The ones returned to are the ones they find most meaningful—whether the meaning be constructed in terms of entertainment value or in terms of linkages to earlier (childhood, etc.) experiences.

It is ironic that this new approach to consumption and the quest for different experiences and meanings results in the production of spaces like Las Vegas, spaces that audaciously present simulations that transcend what they simulate, thereby, constructing new cultures, at the same time that the marketization of simulations causes traditional cultures, which cannot translate their qualities into marketable commodities, to become extinct. As the Safari experience is simulated at the Fossil Rim park in Texas with all its most exciting elements (such as galloping herds of giraffes, zebras, etc.) and amenities that one lacks at the "real" Safari, the traditional way of life in the Kalahari dies. As we experience Ancient Egypt at the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas, ancient tribes become extinct in the Andes. Unless we transcend the market as the means for constituting experiences with meaning, we shall continue to lose our ability to experience cultures that are not conducive to marketization.

Finally, the omnipresent paradoxical nature of contemporary experience is highly apparent in Las Vegas. As the market simulations of the thematic experiences increasingly become part of the sphere of modern production, thus, increasingly determined and fixed in their significations, their divorce from representation that faithfully replicates the original renders them emptied of content. That is, the form is simulated, but with the audacity to present or suggest the potential rather than repeat the content of the past and the known. The simulation links to the familiar through the reminders in the form (such as the pyramid shape and the recognizable sphinx at the Luxor Hotel), not through the ingredients of content—the purposes and meanings of the pyramids in Egypt and the pyramid in Las Vegas are thoroughly different. Under the hegemony of the market, all that the provider of the experiential offering really cares about is the commercial gain, not the determination of the specific content. As such, the market empties the contents of the forms that it simulates, thus allowing the content to be different as it is "filled in" by each consumer. That is, potentially, each consumer can construct one's own meanings for the experience as wished, without any predetermined obligation to any history or context. This tends to be a desirable outcome for the consumers who no longer seem to need fixed anchors in constructing identities or meanings and who

wish to minimize the social production of meaning and maximize the excess—the part that enchants life.

Yet, we are increasingly recognizing that the modernist separation between form and content is questionable, and that excess cannot exist without production—that is, for there to be excess, something must exist from which there may be excess. Consequently, in the current struggle to get from the contemporary to the postmodern, a major process of contention is to free the consumer from a singularly market based, commercial interest in order to multiply the presence of forms and contents—inseparable from each other, constituting “coFnOtReMnt”—arising from all interests. Thus, the potential for multiple “coFnOtReMnt”s that allow excess to enhance the life on Earth and empower the consumer may be maximized.

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