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# Cinematic Re-Presentations of Las Vegas: Reality, Fiction and Compulsive Consumption

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As a macro-spectacle, Las Vegas represents a singular display of the problems which arise in attempting to distinguish meaningfully between “reality” and “fiction”. In this article we provide an example of a discursive method to explore the interplay between “social relations” and “images” as critical facets of the realities and fictions which constitute the “Las Vegas Spectacle”. Social relations are examined using the systematic application of critical discourse analysis and the specific images analyzed are Las Vegas films. An intrinsic feature of the various representations of Vegas is the notion of “compulsive consumption”. The implications of the “Vegas phenomena” (i.e., the centrality of spectacle, consumption, and the collapse of fiction and reality) for the study of organizations and processes of organizing are also discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even within the literature, we find that many of the factual accounts of Las Vegas are written in a quasi-fictional genre (see for example Pearl, 1973; Puzo, 1977; Moehring, 1989; Hess, 1993; Martinez, 1999). And, as Potter observes: «there is no neat separation between the tropes of fact and fiction» (1996: 173). However, such an apparently abstracted, bookish observation seems utterly inadequate to meet the analytic challenges posed in any attempt to understand the phantasmic brilliance that is Las Vegas. As a material social construction, it epitomizes what Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens (1999: 87) refer to as the «production of fantasy environments» while, as a social experience—at least for visitors (which we were<sup>1</sup>)—it offers a limitless, timeless playground for the pursuit of all appetites and the opportunity to fulfill all dreams.

But where does fiction begin and reality end? For us, the experience of Las Vegas confounds any attempt to distinguish between the conventional modernist tenets of “fiction” and “reality”. In keeping with other “false binary oppositions” (Gergen, 1999), the analytic delineation of these two constructs is no longer tenable: each has to be seen as a mutually implicated aspect of the other. In this respect, as an elaborate macro-spectacle, Las Vegas emerges as a perplexing concoction of artifacts, illusions and allusions. However, as Debord (1970: 4) reminds us, the spectacle is not merely «a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images». Our

**1.** This article is a revised version of “Re-Configuring Fiction and Reality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Cinematic Re-Presentations of Las Vegas”, a paper delivered at the 12th *International Academy of Business Disciplines Conference*, Las Vegas, 2000.

interest lies in exploring the interplay between social relations and images as intrinsic facets of both the spectacle and the experience of Las Vegas. Social relations are examined using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; 1995) and the specific images which are subjected to discursive scrutiny are cinematic re-presentations of Las Vegas.

There are four main parts to our argument. First, the methodological approach is outlined and the constitution of the sample of films is explained. Second, aspects of plot, characterization and text are analyzed and we identify a meta-narrative of excess (comprised of compulsion, addiction and escapism) which emerges from the images explored. Third, the interface between fiction and reality within the context of the “real” Las Vegas and “fictional” cinematic representations is considered. In the final section, we draw together the earlier themes of reality, fiction and excess. More generally, we speculate about a possible connection between Las Vegas, as a macro-spectacle of compulsive consumption, and the prospects for society as a whole and, more specifically, for organizations.

## THE METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Prior to writing this piece, our previous experience and social understanding of Las Vegas had been primarily shaped by cinematic representations of Las Vegas. We reasoned that—in common with any other form of social experience or social representation—such imagery constitutes one basis of operative social knowledge. As such, it predisposed us to think not only in terms of the power of cinematic imagery in shaping our conception of the reality of Las Vegas but also about the relationship between (any) reality and the re-presentations which prefigure our social constructions of (any) reality. Once we disentangled ourselves from the interminable circularity of this part of the process, it generated further questions about the reality (and, of course, the fiction) of such imagery. Rather than attempt to disentangle the fiction and the reality within our received images of Las Vegas—something which, in our view would, in any case, have been an entirely futile exercise—we decided to take our received images and treat them as the reality to be explored. Eventually, the research question we posed was: if social reality is socially constructed (Gergen, 1999), then to what extent may we take self-conscious social constructions, such as cinematic re-presentations, as legitimate social scientific data?<sup>2</sup>

There were three main criteria for including films as part of the sample to be analyzed. First, only films which could be described as “mainstream” insofar as they enjoyed significant box office success were selected. Second, inclusion also relied upon Las Vegas featuring in a significant proportion of the film—in all cases, Las Vegas was the primary location. Finally, Las Vegas as a setting had to be central, rather than incidental, to the plot, i.e., not just any big city or holiday resort could serve as a plausible backdrop to the story. In all, five films which

**2.** Subsequently, the analytic legitimacy of this view was reinforced. Once we had experienced Las Vegas—where, for at least some of the time, we felt as if we inhabited a film set—we were very forcibly reminded of the extent to which we are conventionally unreflective about the fundamentally socially constructed character of our “natural” environments (Schama, 1995). The conference was held in a casino, the Riviera Hotel—which was also the setting for one of the films we included in our sample (*Casino*)—and, in between sessions, we wandered among the materialized fictional realities of the culture of excess we were seeking to understand. Our world could easily have been construed as a “cinematic representation”.

fulfilled all of the criteria were identified: 1/ *Viva Las Vegas* (1963), directed by George Sidney and starring Elvis Presley and Ann-Margret; 2/ *Honeymoon in Vegas* (1992), directed by Andrew Bergman and starring James Caan, Nicholas Cage and Sarah Jessica Parker; 3/ *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), directed by Mike Figgis and starring Nicholas Cage and Elisabeth Shue; 4/ *Casino* (1995), directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Robert De Niro, Sharon Stone and Joe Pesci; 5/ *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1999), directed by Terry Gilliam and starring Johnny Depp and Benicio Del Toro<sup>3</sup>.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed to enable a deeper and more socially contextualized analysis of cinematic dialogue to be achieved than is possible via micro-linguistic techniques such as conversation analysis (Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant, 1997; Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick, 1998). As Fairclough (1992: 4) points out, CDA attends to discourse as «being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice». As such CDA «crucially mediates the connection between language and social context, and facilitates more satisfactory bridging of the gap between texts and contexts» (Fairclough, 1995: 189). In our case, the social practices of the entertainment industry engender the discursive production of marketable films through the construction of the filmic texts. At every stage, the social actors involved utilize a panoply of discursive resources to constitute marketable images of the “reality” they seek to portray. More specifically, the social context of Las Vegas was deemed an essential bedrock of imagery/reality in order to construct a convincing story/reality. And, as we will attempt to illustrate, the real story (and, perhaps, the real star) in all five films is the story—or the sumptuous identity—of Las Vegas itself.

## TOWARDS A CORE THEME: EXCESS

While alternative readings are always possible, for us, the overarching image which typified our films was *excess*—excessive speed; drinking; gambling; violence; greed; expectation, drug-taking and loss<sup>4</sup>. Thematically, *excess* appears to be fairly consistently expressed in the central plots and unfolding narratives of the films through three mutually implicated constructs: compulsion, addiction and escapism. The specific forms these constructs take varies from film to film. They ranged from the compulsion to drive racing cars (in *Viva Las Vegas*) and to gamble (in *Casino*) through to the abuse of alcohol (in *Leaving Las Vegas*) and drugs (in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) to an obsessive pursuit of a woman’s image (in *Honeymoon in Las Vegas*).

If we look at specific passages of dialogue the framing of compulsion and/or addiction becomes apparent. For example, in *Viva Las Vegas*, an exchange between Lucky (a racing car driver played by Elvis) and Rusty (his girlfriend played by Ann-Margaret) reveals an unwavering desire to race cars. The following dialogue is preceded by Rusty referring to the death of another racing car driver and indicating her concern about the danger he courts:

**3.** We are very conscious both of the highly selective nature of our sample and of the extent to which it is possible to read cinematic representations in an alternative way. Our selection is ahistorical; the first two films are relatively light compared to the latter three which explore darker themes; we felt it essential to include *Viva Las Vegas* since, iconographically, Elvis Presley became so closely identified with Las Vegas; and to include *Casino* (based on the book by Nicholas Pileggi [1995]) since it portrays the real-life story of Frank Rosenthal who managed four casinos in Las Vegas in the 1970s (Rosenthal, 2001). *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (based, of course, on the book of the same name by Hunter S. Thompson [1972]) provides the most critical account of Las Vegas. All the films were watched independently; we made and compared notes; and, iteratively, eventually arrived at the present account of their meanings.

**4.** Arguably, all filmic representation involves excess. However, we would argue that excess enjoys a particular meaning or resonance when located in Las Vegas.

Rusty: Honey, I just don't understand this part of you. I really don't.

Lucky: What do you mean this part of me? Rusty it is me—try to understand it is me.

Rusty: Then you've got to understand me. When I get married I want a little white house with a tree in the front yard. A real kind of tree with green leaves...

Lucky: Oh that... When I get into the money we can have a 100 trees and a big white house and a four car garage and everything—because by then I'll be the champ.

Rusty: I don't want you to be champ. Look don't you think I know that every single cent you can get your hands on you're going to gamble away because it is that motor you want... the grand prix... any race? Any fool would know that you won't change... not for anybody... not for anybody.

In *Leaving Las Vegas* a comparable conversation develops between Sera ( a prostitute played by Elisabeth Shue) and Ben (an alcoholic played by Nicholas Cage). Having asked Ben to move in with her and received a cool response, Sera probes further:

Sera: Don't you like me Ben?

Ben: Oh Sera... What you don't understand is... is no... see... no.

Sera: What?

Ben: You can never, never ask me to stop drinking... You understand...

Sera: I do... I really do.

Although separated by more than three decades the underlying plot and character development of these two films is remarkably similar. Lucky subordinates love in order to race cars and Rusty is forced to accept it and makes do. Ben privileges drinking over love and Sera is forced to accept it. Moreover, in both instances the respective escapist need for speed and alcohol is couched as an incontrovertible part of the characters' identity (i.e., truly compulsive and addictive in nature).

An alternative form of compulsion arises in *Honeymoon in Vegas*. A professional gambler, named Tommy Corman (played by James Caan), becomes infatuated with a woman called Betsy (played by Sarah Jessica Parker) who reminds him of his dead wife. She is visiting Las Vegas to get married to Jack—her long-term boyfriend (played by Nicholas Cage). Tommy is so obsessed with Betsy that he is prepared to lie, cheat, manipulate and bribe his way into her affections. Initially, he tricks Jack into playing poker with him and uses the resultant gambling debt (i.e., \$64,000) as leverage. Tommy explains to Jack: "I want your girlfriend for the weekend". Jack is forced to agree in order to wipe out the debt. Although the film is ostensibly presented in a comedic genre, it takes a discernibly more serious turn during the final scenes when the full extent of Tommy's compulsive obsession becomes apparent. To begin with, Tommy tries to buy Betsy's affections: "Look I'll give you half a million dollars if you marry me today... Cash!" Betsy—who is both surprised and offended—refuses this offer. So, Tommy increases his offer: "Alright, make it a million dollars". When she still refuses, he grabs her by the throat

and, in a rather gangster-like manner, makes a thinly veiled threat of violence: "You made a promise and no one breaks their promise to Tommy Corman".

Ostensibly, *Casino* depicts the underbelly of Las Vegas—the reality (albeit in the style of gangster chic). It is based on real events from the 1970s and portrays the apparent rise and fall of organized crime's control of Las Vegas. Nonetheless, it provides a convincing and powerful insight into the sophisticated organizational processes which facilitate the text production and text consumption (Fairclough, 1995; Keenoy, Oswick, and Grant, 1997) of the gambling spectacle. At one level, it can be read as an intertextual critique (Bakhtin, 1986) of the management of excess for it articulates the interplay of the surface glitz associated with compulsion and addiction against a rigid and totally unforgiving set of organizational controls and surveillance mechanisms.

Greed touches (and, at least for the filmic public, destroys) everyone involved. The characters are both promoters and victims of excesses they manage. As Sam "Ace" Rothstein, the casino manager (played by Robert De Niro) observes when explaining how the system is organized so "we're the only winners":

"Running a casino is like robbing a bank with no cops around. For guys like me, Las Vegas washes away your sins. It's like a morality car wash."

Rothstein, a control freak, trusts no one and is consumed by over-possessiveness and his inability to control the excesses of his wife, Ginger McKenna, a hustler (played by Sharon Stone) and his childhood friend, Nicky Santoro, the gangster enforcer (played by Joe Pesci).

"Ginger's mission in life was money."

In one scene she sits with her daughter, shows her a case of jewelry worth \$1 million and explains:

"Daddy gave me this to show he loves me."

Her addiction to money is compounded by addictions to alcohol and drugs while Santoro's compulsive and increasingly public violence undermines the public acceptability of the gambling spectacle. Of course, Rothstein had good reason to trust no one.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*—based on the original Hunter S. Thompson (1972) book of the same title—the compulsion to take drugs is transparently depicted in the portrayal of the main characters, a journalist and his friendly attorney, as they take an extended trip to and through the vivid imagery of Las Vegas—variously brilliant and monstrous (reflecting, perhaps, Thompson's sub-title, "a savage journey to the heart of the American Dream"). Through the voice-over narrative which accompanies the film, Raoul Duke (the journalist played by Johnny Depp) informs us that:

«The trunk of the car looked like a mobile police narcotics lab. We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers... and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls.» (film narrative, originally taken from Thompson, 1972: 4).

Excess is the norm. As Thompson observes:  
«Not that we needed all that for the trip, but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can.»  
(Thompson, 1972: 4).

## **REALIZING FICTION OR FICTIONALIZING REALITY?**

In each of the films, Las Vegas acts as a safe haven; a context in which excesses such as gambling, drinking, drug taking and violence are not considered abnormal. In short, Las Vegas appears to represent an escape from conventional reality to a fictional world of unlimited freedom, choice and possibility.

There is a deep irony here. For all our characters (and, perhaps, for many people), their immersion in a seemingly fictitious world offers the freedom to be authentic, to be oneself. Put simply, the fictional context can facilitate “real being”. There are vestiges of this “who I really am” perspective within the portrayal of the addicted characters (i.e., compulsive consumers) in the Vegas films. In particular, the characters played by Elvis Presley, Nicholas Cage and Joe Pesci offer three excellent illustrations. First, during *Viva Las Vegas* and in response to Rusty’s comment expressing concern about Lucky’s enduring need to race cars (“Honey, I just don’t understand this part of you. I really don’t.”), Lucky (i.e., Elvis) retorts with: “What do you mean this part of me? Rusty it is me—try to understand, it is me”. Second, at one point in *Leaving Las Vegas*, Sera asks: “You’re drinking to kill yourself?” Ben (i.e., Nicholas Cage) replies with: “You could say I’m killing myself to drink”. Finally, in one voice-over from *Casino*, Joe Pesci’s character, justifying one of his numerous excesses, explains that everyone else had forgotten that they came to Las Vegas “to rob and steal” for, as he clearly implies, this is an entirely normal activity.

To further complicate the modernist dichotomization of fiction and reality, escapism through addictive substances also conspires to blur the traditional boundaries between the two domains. For example, an over-indulgence of alcohol and narcotics can induce a hallucinogenic state in which fiction becomes reality and reality becomes fiction within a setting (i.e., Las Vegas) which is in itself simultaneously fictitious and real. This hallucinatory crossover between fiction and reality is graphically illustrated in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* when Raoul Duke imagines that all guests in the hotel bar are transformed into large hideous reptiles or when Dr Gonzo (his sidekick attorney played by Benicio Del Toro) turns into a horned beast. Similarly, if we try to disentangle reality and fiction in terms of Las Vegas as a context we run into difficulties. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Honeymoon in Vegas* where the interaction between characters occurs against a rather surreal Elvis backdrop. There is an Elvis soundtrack and, more significantly, the narrative is decorated with the appearance of several Indian Elvises, a Japanese Elvis, an African-American Elvis, a child Elvis, and a chapter of light adorned sky-diving Elvises. As a finale, the

last scene in the film shows a close up of Nicholas Cage and Sarah Jessica Parker getting married. As the camera slowly pans out we see the wedding is attended exclusively by Elvices. Only in Las Vegas could such a set of circumstances simultaneously be so plausible (i.e., real) and yet remain highly implausible (i.e., fictitious).

However, even without the perceptual enhancers, filmic and otherwise, persistent difficulties remain with the fiction-reality dichotomy. Frank Rosenthal—the model for Rothstein in *Casino*—writing on his web page (he now runs an online tipster business) claims that «while all books are flawed (...) most of the information published [Pileggi's book—*Casino*] is right on target». Of the film, he concludes that Martin Scorsese «was on target with the visual representation of Las Vegas during that era, many scenes from the movie version do capture a relative degree of accuracy, while others should be categorized under dramatic license» and that «while some of the timelines are askew, and events portrayed in the film were written for “The Big Screen”, the film *Casino* gives it's audience a fact based snapshot of events and people behind the scenes...» (Rosenthal, 2001). So, perhaps, we should read the movie *Casino* not as fiction but as merely a theatricalised version of reality? Whatever doubts one may harbour about Rosenthal's account—he might have an interest in sustaining the Warholian immortality bequeathed to him by Scorsese—the myriad accounts of the period sustain the basic narrative as, at least, a skeletal truth.

But what kind of truth is this? The truth of the scriptwriters? The truth of the history writers? The truth of ex-gangsters? The truth of the academic interpreters? All will defend their accounts as plausible. In exploring the apparently fictionalized filmic varieties of Las Vegas we have also exposed some of the apparent realities informing that imagery. But it does not seem possible to really penetrate the “spectacle of [text] production” (Boje, 1999) or the “theater of [text] consumption” (Firat and Dholakia, 1998) which is Las Vegas. The best we can do is point to the complex interplay between reality and fiction which appear as mutually implicated elements of each other. This apparent ambiguity is the very essence of “Las Vegas-ness”. Through juxtaposing of the realness of fiction (i.e., Vegas films) with the fictions of reality (i.e., the actual city) Las Vegas emerges as the quintessential spectacle: a place where Baudrillard's (1983) hyperrealities are not merely socially constructed but normalized. The real and the unreal have collapsed into each other.

At the end of *Casino* Rothstein, in voiceover, bemoans the loss of the “good old days” and explains that all the old casinos have been torn down, that the big corporations have moved in, cleaned up the place and built sumptuous new themed hotels—a walk down the Strip takes you past, among other places, Egypt, Paris and Venice each fully-equipped with stylized cultural accoutrements. Designer clothes have been supplemented by designed experiences. And he concludes: “Today, it looks like Disneyland.”

Of course, in his time, it was a real place. And who is to say he's mistaken? And who is to say it is not “real” now?

But everything is process and his reference to Disneyland takes us straight to Boje's (1995) Tamara metaphor through which he identified the analytical impossibility of sustaining any monological account of social reality. As we have also sought to demonstrate, privileging all accounts as fictional opens up space for an escape from monological reality.

## **LAS VEGAS, ORGANIZING AND COMPULSIVE CONSUMPTION**

Of course, what is at stake here is what we construct as "reality". In a passing reference in *America*, Baudrillard (1988) describes Las Vegas as a hologram. On the only other occasion where he talks about Las Vegas it is portrayed using the metaphor of a mirage in the desert. The use of hologram and mirage as descriptors is intriguing: both phenomena share an appearance of realness (i.e., in a material sense), but neither is what it seems (i.e., there is no concrete entitiness). These images, like Las Vegas itself, start to tentatively capture something of the fragile and precarious nature of distinguishing between reality and fiction.

Ultimately, any firm distinction between notions of reality and fiction cannot be sustained. This is not only true of Las Vegas, it applies more generally. As Baudrillard (1986: 29-30) puts it:

«America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. (...) things seem to be made of a more unreal substance; they seem to turn and move in a void as if by a special lighting effect, a fine membrane you pass through without noticing it. This is obviously true of the desert. It is also the case with Las Vegas and advertising, and even the activities of the people, public relations, and everyday electronics all stand out with the plasticity and simplicity of a beam of light. The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is held together by a thread of light, a laser beam, scanning out American reality before our eyes.»

It is significant that Baudrillard brackets «Las Vegas», «advertising» and «public relations» together within the same sentence. The implication is that all share the same «special lighting effect» (i.e., unrealness). Viewed in this way, the whole-part relationship of the hologram perhaps represents the way in which Las Vegas, consumption and American-ness are intertwined and mutually implicated phenomena. This seems to resonate with Debord's (1970: 6) depiction of the spectacle:

«The spectacle grasped in its totality is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as

advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption».

From this we might conclude that Las Vegas, as the definitive spectacle of consumption, is “the heart of the unrealism of the real society”. To take this one step further, the constructs of compulsion, addiction and escapism are not confined to Las Vegas they are also central tenets of advertising in the capitalist system. Insofar as the task of advertisers—as the foot soldiers of global capitalism—is to create a need, the ultimate, albeit often unspoken, objective becomes creating a very strong need (i.e., dependency). In this regard the spectacle is indeed the present model of socially dominant life and is it consistent with the emergence of the new means of consumption (Ritzer, 1998) which are bound up with fiction, fantasy and myth (Williams, 1982; Baudrillard, 1998).

The intention here is not to claim that the pursuit of compulsive consumption is the exclusive, or even necessarily the dominant, capitalist endeavour. As Calas (1999: 684) points out: «Capitalism appears to be undergoing several simultaneous economic transformations» and, as a consequence, «we should not try to find the one true depiction of contemporary capitalist change» (Sternberg, 1993: 1019).

Sternberg (1993) identifies eight “new ages” of capitalism. For him, these ages are concurrent and non-competing phenomena. One of the ages he describes is the “postmodern economy of images”, which based upon a collapse between images and the objects they represent. Successful organizations in this economy attain wealth by targeting consumer desires and fears and becoming «the shapers of signification» (Calas, 1999: 685). This particular new age of capitalism is clearly very closely aligned with compulsive consumption and the collapse of images and objects replicates the collapse of fiction and reality. Moreover, Las Vegas provides an exemplar of how organizations can create compelling desire (i.e., compulsion) and become the shapers of signification.

While it may not be the only prevailing mode of capitalism, compulsive consumption is nevertheless, in our view, a highly significant one. Arguably, the dramatic growth in the population and the popularity of Las Vegas in recent years perhaps bears testimony to the way in which it has come to signal the direction in which capitalist society as a whole is going. Indeed, Las Vegas is the fastest growing metropolitan region in the U.S. (Gottdiener et al., 1999). In the future we might expect contemporary organizations to increasingly move towards becoming “Vegas-like” sites of spectacle and theater.

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