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Death in Vegas: Seduction, Kitsch, and Sacrifice

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This paper considers the connections between pleasure and death, and the erotic force of desire which bridges them, using the work of Jean Baudrillard and Georges Bataille among others. It begins with a consideration of why people risk or desire their own annihilation, raising the issue of why Las Vegas is a place, symbolically, to which people go to die, functioning this way in particular in feature films, two of which are analysed here. The paper argues that in the valorization of the fake which becomes more real than the real, cities like Las Vegas kill the real, and are thus not sites of real pleasure or fulfilment but are mausoleums where the real is sold short. Participants in the Vegas experience participate in a spurious sense of self. The paper discusses the processes of seduction through which this is achieved, and argues that death is always present in Las Vegas because of the kitsch nature of the place, a quality of death-in-life, or living death. In the end, the only way to break through to the real is through sacrifice, a tragic endeavour involving the loss of the spurious sense of self but which may involve the loss of self altogether by risking death. Two films are analysed—one from the US and one from the UK—to illustrate how this redemptive sacrificial process may function.

«The end doesn't mean there's nothing any more. The problem, there as elsewhere, is what comes after the end. (...) For everything is achieved, there is nothing to be found at the end any more; everything is already here—that is to say, beyond the end» (Baudrillard, 1998: 102; 115)

«He swears every now and then to begin a better life. But when night comes with its own counsel, its own compromises and prospects—when night comes with its own power of a body that needs and demands, he returns, lost, to the same fatal pleasure. (Cavafy, *He Swears*, cited in Moore [1996: 63])

FATAL PLEASURES

Fatal pleasure. Cavafy, of course is talking about the promiscuous gay's compulsion to unprotected sex, an addiction which has recently resurfaced into popular attention through comments made in and through media as internationally respected as the BBC—including the existence of "sero-transformation" parties where HIV negative gays go to become sero-positive—as a means of outing it as a topic for dis-

cussion. When Miller (1993) suggested in his biography that Michel Foucault may have not only sought unprotected sex in the bath-houses of San Francisco but may have knowingly infected others there was considerable resistance to his assertions—but not only may Miller have not been far from the truth, but Foucault's partners may themselves have been willing and desirous of taking the risk. Admittedly, knowledge of AIDS in 1983 was limited and naivety was widespread, but given the trajectory which the disease has since taken and the continuing comments of Moore and Cavafy on contemporary gay behaviour, there is perhaps evidence to suggest that those men who saw safe sex, however idiosyncratically, as an issue of sovereignty, and risk as a question of free will, might not have behaved much differently.

The connection of homosexuality and death is not a new one—homosexuals do not procreate through their sexual activity and in a very literal sense then the rectum where their seed is poured has popularly been regarded as a grave (Bersani, 1988). AIDS brought death and homosexuality closer both literally and symbolically. But the dimension that links the two, as Cavafy notes, of desire, was skirted around. The extensive consideration of death undertaken by Foucault throughout his works, from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to *The History of Sexuality*, as one might expect from a serious scholar of Bataille and Nietzsche, was largely ignored until it offered itself as evidence in support of the tendentious image of him «fucking others to death, or, better still, being fucked to death himself» (Dollimore, 1998: 310; see also Miller 1993: 294). But as Foucault (1984) notes, sexuality itself had been conceived in relation to death since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Is the desire to risk death in pursuit of pleasure really the pursuit of death with pleasure merely as a means? Does AIDS lead us to focus on a contemporary gay problem, a historical homosexual problem, or a fundamental paradox of being human? And if pleasure is indeed a means, and the problem is indeed fundamentally human, are our contemporary pleasure palaces really mausoleums? Is the question of individual identity always in tension with the pursuit of knowledge, which always involves the surrendering of that identity to another, or an Other, such that to know is to die a little in the jouissance or petite mort of insight? Is this tension practically resolved by faking its resolution, by faking identity, by glamourizing the means sufficiently to construct it as the end? These are the issues—essentially ones of self-identity—which this paper seeks to confront. It will do so by considering Las Vegas in two senses—first as a city of seduction, a monument to kitsch, and hence the home of a living death; and secondly as a city of sacrifice and redemption, which functions symbolically for a much wider population than those who have ever been there, as represented in two recent films, one British and one American. Finally, in an age in which spectacular consumption and identity have become almost synonymous, the paper considers some of the implications of the concepts of seduction and sacrifice for understanding contemporary management processes.

FAKING IDENTITY

Of course, readers of Shakespeare, Hegel, Freud and Foucault may already have their own, and different, responses to these questions. Concerned to expose the anxieties of the present in the work of the past, Dollimore (1998) took on the monumental task of delineating the themes of eros and thanatos as a central topos of Western literature and thought. Dollimore's brilliant odyssey concludes that:

«the Western struggle for individual self-realization necessitates a negation of self. But self-disidentification, even as it can become the ground of freedom, also makes us more vulnerable than ever to those apprehensions of loss endemic to our culture and which can render the experience of desire as also an experience of grieving» (Dollimore 1998: 327).

In other words, the dissolution of boundaries between self and other may become melancholic as we mourn for the loss of individual identity—to say, for example, “I can't live without you” to another becomes affirmative of love and simultaneously a source of sorrow and resentment. Indeed such an awareness may become self defeating, inverted into unfaithfulness or promiscuity. Boundaries too may be mourned, because their artificial construction and organized erection was what gave us the lost sense of identity in the first place¹. Foucault studied the construction of these boundaries through discourse at the societal level over time; Baudrillard is more interested in observing how, under conditions of postmodernity, these boundaries dissolve or implode as museums become theme parks and day to day family life may become global entertainment². Ritzer (1999: 21) has recently moved on from his radical Weberian critique of the McDonaldization of society (1991) via changes in the means of production to a more Baudrillardian consideration of its Las Vegasification, or Las Vegasizing, through consumption (1999: 110). Here the simulation of reality sanitizes and dramatizes the real, creating the hyperreal to the point of making the somewhat messier and more imperfect real unappetising:

«the real fake reaches its apogee in places like Las Vegas (...) The outrageously fake fake has developed its own indigenous style and life style to become a real place (...) This is the real, real fake at the highest, loudest and most authentically inauthentic level of illusion and invention.» (Huxtable, 1997 cited in Ritzer, 1999: 115).

Indeed, consumers may complain about the «artificiality» of real rocks (Ritzer, 1999: 115) let alone their inaccessibility—Death Valley isn't air-conditioned. The fake then, draws us toward it—technically improved, conveniently located, climate controlled, theatrically lit with maps and accompanying notes on how to use it—we are seduced by its spectacular but easy charm. Alongside seduction, following Baudrillard, Ritzer notes implosion as the other main process of re-enchantment, with specific reference to widening the bandwidths of consumption so that the consumption event can cover many different types of purchase. The boundaries between traditionally separated consumption channels—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, etc.—become collapsed into the product-offering. Of course, the traditional

1. Foucault argues that desire is constructed discursively—that discourse establishes the terms of subjectivity and therefore identifies what the subject is lacking in order to complete its identity. Thus he argues against the so-called “repressive hypothesis” of Freud and the post-Freudians who see desire as natural (but still founded on an ontological lack grounded in the perception of otherness, and hence inadequacy and anxiety) but repressed. For Foucault, these desires are artificial—repression is part of the process of establishing difference between good and bad desires, acceptable and unacceptable ones in the process of construction, even to the point of creating that which is condemned. Other writers, such as Bataille, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Deleuze, take a position which falls short of discursivity, retaining some of the vitalism of Bergson and Nietzsche, yet tries to avoid essentialism or naïve affirmation.

2. The recent Channel 4 TV series in the UK, *Big Brother*, combined fly-on-the-wall documentary with the game show with spectacular success. Ten strangers were placed in a house completely isolated from the outside world by security walls, every room under constant TV surveillance, given certain tasks to complete each week in order to earn the money to buy groceries and luxuries, which they ordered from “Big Brother.” Each week the viewing public voted out one of the cast—from a short-list at first prepared by the inmates—until the winner won £70,000. The winner received 7 million votes—just 51% of the vote.

distinctions may be, in fact, modern distinctions—but however they are layered, they are collapsed into one another. The more radical dimension of implosion is, as we have noted, the loss of an ability to distinguish between the real and the fake—yet to remain seduced, compelled, even addicted to the object's attraction even though we may be uncertain what it is. Perception becomes a gamble.

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Where Foucault emphasised the processes of making formative distinctions, inclusions and exclusions, and their relation to the construction of individual subjectivity through the way subjects were positioned within these discursive distinctions, Baudrillard's emphasis is different. Yet there remains, despite implosion, a differentiation, an exclusion, which is both prior and final, past and future and haunts all of our human constructions of meaning. Reflecting on Foucault's delineation over several works of the ways in which societies order themselves, centring the interests of some and excluding the interests of others, Baudrillard (1993: 195)³ notes:

«there is an exclusion which precedes all the others, one more radical than that of the mad, children, "inferior" races, an exclusion which precedes them all and which serves as their model and which is at the very basis of the "rationality" of our culture: it is that of the dead and death.»

Baudrillard is echoing Bataille here—death is exclusive, and exclusion is deathly. But if death is exclusive, why do people go to Las Vegas—the kingdom of implosion—to die? Why, amongst the masses of pleasure-seekers, towering monuments of multi-media and glittering halls of entertainment, amongst the abundance of heat and light, do they seek and find the cold and darkness of the tomb? Why, despite its huge energy bills and spectacular leveraging of pleasure-filled and life-affirming events, is Las Vegas such a compelling image of life and death?

«I would like and I hope I'll die of an overdose (laughter) of pleasure of any kind. Because I think it's really difficult and I always have this feeling that I do not feel the pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it's related to death (...) the kind of pleasure I would consider as the real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it. I would die.» (Foucault, in a 1982 interview, quoted in Dollimore, 1998: 305).

So one answer is to die of pleasure. A pleasure so total, so extreme that it consumes us, consumes life, completely. A complete surrender of self to annihilating ecstasy. The ultimate end of self-disidentification, the ultimate pleasure, is death.

Doesn't Las Vegas offer the state-of-the-art in hedonism? The last word in every pleasure you can think of? But with no-expense-spared luxury on offer, from the highest of technologically created environments to world-class art collections of old masters, ruin may even yet be a roll of the dice away, death just around the corner, down the alley,

3. Foucault had a lifetime interest bordering on obsession with marginality, marginal activity and marginal groups, which Best and Kellner (1991) note.

the drying-out clinic, the desert beyond... So is it the fascination of the risk of death that makes Las Vegas so sexy?⁴

«[A]nguish, which lays us open to annihilation and death, is always linked to eroticism; our sexual activity finally rivets us to the distressing image of death, and the knowledge of death deepens the abyss of eroticism. The curse of decay constantly recoils on sexuality, which it tends to eroticize: in sexual anguish there is a sadness of death, an apprehension of death which (...) we will never be able to shake off» (Bataille, 1991: 84).

The very moment of sexual fulfilment, the "little death" of orgasm reminds us of its temporality and our own mortality. If we wish to escape such uncomfortable reminders, we can always resort to passive nihilism, where we cease to struggle for being and becoming in order simply to accept existing. Passive nihilism links the global millions of armchairs stationed in front of their TV sets to death on a mass scale. We don't have to wait for our death to come. It is already here and with us, the death in life of passive nihilism, the living death of kitsch. Strangely, kitsch is a term which is never explicitly mentioned in Ritzer's book, despite a short discussion of high and low culture, which perhaps indicates its insidious nature (Ritzer, 1999).

KITSCH

Kitsch is culture's line of least resistance. Where the original works of art and architecture cited by the Las Vegas cityscape (and some, as in the Bellagio's art gallery, now even exhibited within it) sought new ways of expressing the inexpressible, kitsch has as its objective precisely the opposite—new ways of expressing that which has already been expressed so many times that it is instantly recognisable. Where the avant-garde is demanding, kitsch is reassuring (Calinescu, 1987; Linstead, forthcoming). The brilliant insight that led to the coining of the term amongst south German artisans in the 19th century still animates it in Las Vegas today—people will buy that which reassures them. As Kundera (1988: 135) notes:

«Kitsch is something more than simply a work in poor taste. There is a kitsch attitude. Kitsch behaviour. The kitsch-man's (Kitschmensch) need for kitsch: it is the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one's own reflection.»

Kitsch involves the easy satisfaction of expectations, the harmonic fusion of the image with reality itself, the elision of tensions without placing demands on the consumers of the sign. It takes the disturbing (imagine for example how the pyramids were constructed and for what purposes) and makes it comforting (the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas). Kitsch turns both thought and feeling into formula, therefore into "products" for consumption, to help ingrain and recycle existing modes of thought, about both the human and natural worlds. This contributes towards stabilizing particular institutional structures, most particularly those of the various forms of late capitalism, including gangster capitalism, which was one reason why Las Vegas grew in the way it did (Mont-

4. Martinez (1999) offers a fascinating odyssey through contemporary Las Vegas which captures this experiential tension brilliantly.

gomery, 1991; Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens, 1999). The emotion of kitsch is easy sentiment; the sort of thing everyone can share, not because they share the experience that kitsch signifies but because they can recognise that for which it is a sign, which is always a collective experience. Kitsch emotion is living but dead—emotion with its vitality sapped, a programmed response that appears natural. On the one hand they are moved by the pathos or grandeur of what they see; on the other they are moved by the visible fact of their being moved along with others, their humanity being accordingly reaffirmed.

For Baudrillard, Las Vegas deserves its crown as it is the great cities which are the temples of kitsch:

«[I]f the cemetery no longer exists, it's because modern cities have assumed their function: they are dead cities and cities of the dead. And if the great metropolis is the accomplished form of all culture, then simply ours is a dead culture.» (Baudrillard, 1993: 195-196).

If we are enduring a living death, city-bound and glued to our TV screens in the endless consumption of kitsch, how can we become alive again? How can our vegetating passive nihilism become active, and how can we reclaim our subjectivity?

Man «attains human self-consciousness, conceptual and discursive consciousness in general by the risk of life being accepted without any necessity, by the fact that he goes to his death without being forced to it» (Kojève, 1980: 254).

We must risk death. Risk symbolic death through loss of property, status, esteem or career, or even risk actual death. If death is literally almost upon us, the risk is lessened. So why not stake everything on one last roll of the dice if what we will gain is a moment of identity, of self-knowledge and self-possession, of sovereignty; to know real life no matter how briefly? So we come, in our millions, to the glittering desert door that is Las Vegas. To risk something, to gamble our money, our sexuality, our libido on some kind of gain, some kind of self-enhancement through the sacrifice of self-effacement. But it doesn't work quite as we thought, precisely because Las Vegas is the quintessential city of kitsch, and sacrifice on that altar remains, simply, loss—we have been seduced and abandoned. Yet, just as there is no absolute escape from kitsch, so there is always the potential for kitsch to connect with something else, something more redemptive. We may not find what we came for, but we may find something more valuable.

In order to explore these ideas further I will in what follows consider two films with central characters who come to Vegas to die, or to bid farewell to active life—Nick Hurran's *Girls' Night*, a British buddy movie with Brenda Blethyn, Julie Walters and Kris Kristofferson, and Mike Figgis' *Leaving Las Vegas* with Nicholas Cage in his Oscar winning role opposite Elisabeth Shue.

GIRLS' NIGHT

This movie tells the story of two sisters-in-law, who both work in the same team assembling electronic parts in a Japanese-owned factory

in Rawtenstall in Lancashire, Northern England. Jackie (Julie Walters) is the wild one, who talks back to the foreman, is serially unfaithful to her husband, and who makes love standing up in the office of the manager of the local bingo hall while his girlfriend is calling the numbers. Dawn is gentle, quiet, kind and happily married to Steve (George Costigan) and wouldn't think of having an affair. She has two teenage children and her life revolves around her family. Every Friday the girls from work have "girls' night" out at the local bingo club, sharing their fantasies of what they would do if they won, and Dawn quietly mentions she has always fancied going to Las Vegas. Las Vegas is on the one hand the dream, the escape, and on the other, the reality of the glitzy world of gambling of which their little Friday night is just a pale imitation. So four worlds are set up—the home (which is unpleasant for Jackie, happy if impoverished for Dawn); work (which Jackie finds stifling but into which Dawn fits undemandingly); the escape route of the Bingo hall (however temporary); and the fantasy world of Las Vegas. Once set in play, however, Las Vegas the city plays only a small part in the film, but it functions continuously throughout as an organising metaphor.

One night Dawn wins the National Prize of £100,000. She immediately assumes that she will share it with Jackie, as Jackie once shared a win of £500 with her, although Jackie was not in the room at the time as she was having her liaison with the manager, Paul (James Gaddas). Indeed as a result of her win Jackie leaves her husband and moves into Paul's flat, despite his reluctance to host her, and after a row she is thrown out after a few days. The following week, Dawn, who has been having problems fitting her electronic parts since the film's beginning, collapses at work and is rushed to hospital. She discovers she has a brain tumour but refuses to tell anyone until the radiation therapy and chemo-therapy affect her so badly that she is unable to work. Jackie confronts the doctors to discover that not only is Dawn terminally ill, she has taken herself off her medication and her treatment. She is resigned to die.

Without telling Dawn, or her family, Jackie spends part of her winnings on a holiday in Las Vegas, and whisks Dawn away, only telling her family by phone from the Riviera Hotel. Dawn has a win on a slot machine, and a charming cowboy, Cody (Kris Kristofferson) lends her his hat in order to hold the coins she has won. Explaining to her that they are in town for the rodeo, he says that they live on a ranch in the valley. As this is Las Vegas, he says, the rodeo and cowboys never leave. Along with his friend, who is to Jackie's disappointment gay, they go for a ride in the hills, and with Jackie's encouragement Dawn goes out that night with Cody for a date. She returns having had a wonderful time, saying she wouldn't have missed it for the world, but rather than be unfaithful to her husband, she asks Jackie if they can go home, telling her that it is Jackie the cowboy is attracted to anyway.

The "real" Las Vegas—the desert and the hills—is gently set against the "fake" Las Vegas, the illusory city of their dreams. What they came for—for Dawn perhaps a last thrill before dying, for Jackie the chance to lose herself in pleasure and turn away from reality—they don't achieve.

Dawn didn't really want to participate in the Vegas experience anyway, but all her life has been a contented spectator, and her visit at least allows her to know herself and realise how strong the love between herself and her family is—how extraordinary the mundane can be. Jackie, strangely, realises how destructive her pursuit of pleasure has been, for herself and others, and begins to find something of value in the dry desert landscape. Indeed the dryness of the desert and the dryness of northern humour are juxtaposed deftly by the director.

They return home and Dawn is taken ill even before they land. She does not survive long. Jackie nurses her and supports her brother Steve, Dawn's husband. At the funeral, she makes a moving oration and later discovers Steve and the children crying in Dawn's room. They have found presents which Dawn had chosen and brought back for them from Las Vegas but about which she had been too ill to tell them. Jackie's contains Cody's hat, which they had never returned. Jackie takes the hint from beyond the grave, and the film ends as it begins—with an expectant and hopeful scene of her getting off the bus at the ranch.

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

Leaving Las Vegas is a very different film, and does its work in a very different way, although it too is about one particular relationship. Ben Sanderson (Nicholas Cage) works in the film industry, and though once well-liked, his wife, his friends and his job disappear because of his drinking and the demands he makes on them, such as interrupting colleagues whilst at dinner in order to borrow money. He tries to appear normal, for a while, but his front is transparent. His secretary interrupts him whilst apparently on a call which he is trying to make sound important, except for the fact that he is talking into the phone upside-down, and it's obvious that no-one is calling him. He has lost his sense of limits, but has become physically dependent on alcohol. An addict, his drinking is not negotiable, as he is only confident to play his social "role" when he is drinking (although inevitably he overplays it as a result of the drinking), so he takes his settlement, realises all his assets and determines to go to Las Vegas to drink himself to death. There he meets, and buys the time of, Sera (Elisabeth Shue), a prostitute who is on the run from an abusive pimp with drug debts, who is eventually found and murdered by those he defrauded, which leaves her with an apartment and no ties. Ben is impotent because of his drinking, and perhaps because of this a relationship between them is able to form. The relationship has its unspoken tensions, however, as gradually she comes to hate his drinking, as it is killing someone she loves and reminding her that she is powerless to save him; he in turn resents her going out to work, although he is unable himself to satisfy her physically.

Both of them are locked into a self they feel powerless to change—Ben because of his narcissism is typical of addicts, and accordingly the relationship holds back from completeness because they can have no future, nothing to look forward to, nothing to wish for the other. Sera

works, and her need is to have someone or something to work for, because of the abusive relationships she has suffered in the past. Sera gets the worst of the bargain, in that she gets what she does not want but settles for it, because she is unable to be fully what Ben would want if circumstances were different. But Ben's self-centredness is unassailable, and until his need to drink is satisfied he is unapproachable. When he is drunk, he is completely unreliable. Both are physically assaulted as a result of doing what they do, but nevertheless continue to do it. There are times in the film in which each tries to change the other, in a rather half-hearted way—Sera asks Ben to see a doctor, Ben is sarcastic about her going out to work, and neither succeeds. Sera asks Ben to respond to her goodwill and generosity by doing just one thing for her, which is to be there for her. Yet inevitably he can't even do that, as the addict always lets down those who demand anything other than their loyalty to the source of their addiction. Eventually the impotent Ben, after a successful night's gambling whilst Sera is working, ends up in bed with another hooker and Sera finds them together—and, perhaps seeing a reflection of herself in front of her, as well as her disappointment—throws him out. Shortly after she is gang-raped and beaten, which is another literal station of her passion, her painful journey to redemption. Finally she gets a call from Ben who is now dying. She rushes to take care of him, because now at last he needs her, but he doesn't want help, just for her to be there and watch him die. He takes a final swig from the bottle. The tensions of a dying body produce a serendipitous erection, and they are able to have sex—a coupling which is a final ironic expression of tenderness rather than of eroticism. She lays quietly on top of him, and some time later he dies, with a simple expiration of breath.

TWO DEATHS, TWO SACRIFICES

Two deaths. The first is the emotional and intellectual death of living in the false world of the shimmering Las Vegas, as represented by contrast with the ranch and the desert and the hills. The kitsch, living death which Dawn sees through and Jackie ultimately lives through, the death that is the model for a million Rawtenstalls and every place where people comfort themselves that one day, with just a little win, everything will change, whilst living an even bigger lie. The death we all die, willingly, by refusing to face the fake for what it is. Seeing through these manufactured desires, a simpler and more human desire emerges—a reaffirmation of human hopes, rather than human illusions. There is risk in this world—Jackie takes the risk of returning to Las Vegas, but it is not the risk of the gambling tables. It is the risk of trusting another human being, something which came naturally to Dawn, and which she has never been able to do. The allegorical double journey to Las Vegas is one inside Jackie, one through which she finally finds a self that she can like. The price of this knowledge is Dawn's death, her passage beyond life bestowing on her insight and wisdom which she is able to share with Jackie.

We might discern quasi-religious themes here in connection with what Derrida (1995: 49) calls the «gift of death (...) infinite love (the Good as goodness that infinitely forgets itself), sin and salvation, repentance and sacrifice». Dawn is selfless; Jackie is the sinner who repents; Dawn is the sacrifice; Jackie at least seems on the road to salvation. And no-one suggests that this is fair—the kids have no mother, Steve has no wife after a life of struggle to get on their feet, Dawn is dead. The imagery of the film provides a counterpart to that which Derrida refers to, in the philosophies of Levinas, Ricœur, Hegel, Kant and even Heidegger, as the «non-dogmatic doublet of dogma (...) the possibility of religion without religion» (1995: 49).

The second death is the death of Ben. This is the death of the darker side of kitsch, of the addict who can no longer bear to see himself reflected back uncomfortably, and feeling inadequate to change chooses the distorting mirror, though he knows it will lead to destruction, rather than change. This body seeks a numbing kind of pleasure, a pleasure that though incomplete and artificial will take the body out of itself until there are no more questions that can't be answered, and the stares and the turned heads fade into the background. Ben can't see through this state—he knows the only way to get through it is to die, and be released. Yet he is allowed a moment of release in life at the very moment of his death, when he is actually capable with his last breath to have sex with Sera, with someone who loves him—a love which actually kills him, or at least merges with the moment of his death. Death, and pleasure, desire and self-knowledge merge at that moment.

Ben's death is not a solitary one, and as such it can be seen as sacrificial, although there is nothing selfless about Ben's pursuit of self-annihilation, just as Sera's need of him is not selfless, although it is more generous. Both are sinners in this situation, although there is an implied innocence about Sera's particular vice—when Ben jokingly suggests he should ask one of her tricks what it is like to fuck her, she replies that they wouldn't know, suggesting that she is elsewhere than located in her sin. Indeed, the gift that she brings, her main means of communication and self-validation, sex, is denied to her with Ben. Sera then is a sacrificial figure just as is Ben—she is sacrificed to her work in order that he might begin to connect with what he is missing, Ben's sacrifice, his journey to death being visible and open to her until just before the end when she pulls back from the pain of it, enables her to see through the life she leads and like Jackie, begin to discern something of worth in herself that can be reached without the desperate need of another person, no matter how exploitative they may be. Ben's journey to death is also Sera's journey within herself⁵. Finally, they are reconciled in a moment of connection and insight, an understated moment of pleasure and pain, physically unspectacular and primarily genital, yet spiritually a moment of truth for each of them. Ben has bought something for Sera, something muted but redemptive that will enable her to live on, a moment in which they are able to acknowledge that however strangely and selfishly they both loved each other.

5. In both films the journeys to or within Vegas are toward new beginnings, and the journey is the vehicle for leaving behind the old self. Both Jackie and Sera are changed profoundly by the experience of another's death.

ENDINGS

«Just in case you thought there was no distinction between representation and reality, there is death. Just in case you thought experience and the representation of experience melted into one another, death provides a structural principle separating the two. See the difference, death asks, see the way language and vision differ from the actual, the irrevocable, the real?» (Barreca, 1993: 174).

Barreca perhaps points up the limits of vision and representation in a way which reminds us of the haunting reality that is death. Humanity, for Bataille, is distinguished from animals in that humans foresee and anticipate their own deaths, forestall or prepare for them, perhaps with the hubris of an Ozymandias, always with anxiety. They may choose to seek their own deaths, nobly or shamefully, or they may so withdraw from the risk of death that is life that they die experientially and spiritually. For Bataille, what makes us human is how we spend the excess of talent, intelligence and spirit which we have inherited over and above our animalistic basics. In terms of the organism, and in terms of those sorts of capitalistic and homogeneous societies that seek to regulate naturally sovereign subjects to fit into them in predictable, measurable ways, these things are excessive. A truly human economy would be an economy of excess.

It is not difficult to see how Bataille has influenced Baudrillard in particular, but also Foucault and Derrida. Even Habermas regarded him as lurking dangerously at the heart of postmodernism. Bataille's anti-rationalist re-readings of Nietzsche, Hegel (via Kojève), Durkheim and even the Marquis de Sade produced a body of work in which death and the erotic shape desire, violence and sacrifice drive change. How might Bataille view the sacrificial deaths of our protagonists, given his often quite literal view of human sacrifice?

Dawn would be the antithesis of Bataille's concept of the human, in that she contentedly fits in to whatever is on offer, struggling to be a normal member of a heterogeneous society. Jackie clearly wants more, but has no idea how to find it or achieve it, nor of her own abilities or worthiness for something different, and so pursues the different down the only path she can see open to her. Her promiscuity, however, is not leading to the self-discovery of her own humanity that Bataille would hope, stolen and compromised as it is. Dawn's illness is not of her choosing, but it is her choice to cease the radiation and the chemo-therapy, and to stay off sedatives for as long as possible so that she might be fully engaged as far as possible in the life which is left to her. That is a move with which Bataille would have had sympathy. In the spirit which Bataille considers characteristic of the human sacrifice, in that the sacrificial person, to whose death others bear witness, acquires mystical significance and symbolic power before the event, and wins knowledge and insight for those who remain by being sacrificed, Dawn would find a place. Her mystical power is signified early—the first indication of her illness comes in the first sequence of the film, and from that point she becomes "lucky".

What Bataille would be unsympathetic to would be Dawn's celebration of the mundane, despite her finding something of extraordinary power within it. For Bataille, we should be fighting against the ordinary in order to wrest those moments of insight from it, in order to be fully alive, although he does argue that there are degrees of this possible, and that poets and artists should be at the most extreme end of the spectrum, confronting the unspeakable and risking madness and annihilation. Dawn's sacrifice, however does push Jackie into making the break and heading West, although it may be a different kind of mundanity that she is seeking. Dawn's death nevertheless gives us sufficient insight into kitsch that we might see the subtle tension between the humanising effects of *realising* the extraordinary *in* the mundane, and the kitsch dehumanisation of *rendering* the extraordinary mundane.

Ben's death might seem to be the perfect Bataillean ending—to pursue the excess of drinking to the point of extinction. But Bataille would see the excessive drinking of Ben for what it was—a manic defence, a buffer against reality, and indeed would recognise the element of loathing within it (Bataille, cited in Habermas 1987: 147). Ben's body has become so dependent on drink that he has lost all sovereignty over it, despite the fact that it is killing him. Yet this selfish yet self-loathing pursuit—typical of the narcissistic passage of addicts—does buy some insight for Sera. Both Ben and Sera are trapped in both a vision and a reality of the everyday that is destroying them. Las Vegas only accelerates this excess repression into overdrive, the drive toward death—whether Ben's literal death or the gradual death of Sera's personality which has left her on the brink of suicide. Yet particularly resonant with Bataille's view of the erotic as the field of tension between life and death is the role that sex plays in their relationship—the ever-present exterior, the denied part, the possibility, and ultimately the anti-climactic fulfilment.

Baudrillard (1998: 117) argues that signs no longer signify any more, that they are «just there to fill up the empty space of language, which has become the random site of all promiscuities.» The signs in Ben and Sera's Las Vegas don't seem to signify much either, as even their own language functions around silence and denial. Yet Baudrillard, and in this I see him having something in common with Lyotard and Derrida in particular, arguably with Foucault, argues for attention and recognition, especially in art, to be given to the irreducible, the inexpressible in relations. Specifically, with relevance here, he argues for that which in the object is irreducible to the subject (which doesn't fit in with the subject's view of it, that remains heterogeneous); that which in the subject is irreducible to itself (i.e., unknowable about the subject by the subject, through conventional formulae and concepts); that which in exchange is irreducible to equivalence; that which in the social is irreducible to the social itself (the inspiration, the motivation, the desire, the accursed share that is necessary to make it work); that which in history is irreducible to history (the event—i.e., reality can never be captured and fixed by historical explanation); that which in sexuality is irreducible to sex (which Baudrillard [1998: 113] calls «seduction»)⁶. In relation to *Leaving Las Vegas* we can see that neither Ben nor Sera fits in with their view of each other, and despite their attempts to engage in a dialectic

6. The points in order could be seen successively as anti-humanist; anti-cognitivist (in the sense of rejecting the cogito); both anti-marxist and anti-capitalist in the sense of classical economic reductionism; vitalistic in the sense of Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze; anti-historicist, in Lyotard's sense; and anti-essentialist—but Baudrillard also rejects totally discursive formulations of sexuality in his conceptualisation of seduction, emphasising the look, the body, the chemistry, etc. In *Leaving Las Vegas* this unspoken element of attraction is both important and elusive, as the attraction of Ben and Sera to each other is convincingly portrayed yet hard to explain, even by the characters to themselves. In all these formulations I read Baudrillard as consistently trying to find a category for the inexpressible element of each, rather than setting up oppositional categories.

they both realise, as Sera says, that they don't have much time and have to accept each other as they are. Secondly, neither of them is capable of understanding themselves fully, and their problems are at least partly a result of the explanations and compensations they make. Thirdly, what they offer each other cannot be balanced in any meaningful way—something passes between them in a two way process, but trade-offs are futile. The question of what makes the social work really seems to be the reason why they are both dysfunctional: that part of the accursed share beyond the functional which they possess is driven elsewhere, in Sera into an underground and abject occupation, in Ben towards addiction and death. The inadequacy of explanation in terms of the event is raised explicitly in terms of the victimhood of the characters—Dawn's singling out for cancer and the irony of her good luck; Sera's gang-rape; and even Ben's uncharacteristically being drawn into a bar-fight because he cannot resist the seduction of the "script" he follows when playing his role of "drunk." The irreducible element of sexuality, whether or not seduction is quite the right term for it here, but certainly that which is beyond physical attraction and biological drives and the act itself, is present in the erotic throughout the film. When they finally couple, it is appropriate that their almost serendipitous connection should be silent and even mysterious, for as Bataille (1987: 275-276) says:

«The supreme questioning is that to which the answer is the supreme moment of eroticism—that of eroticism's silence (...) The supreme moment is indeed a silent one, and in that moment our consciousness fails us.»

So absolute pleasure and absolute knowledge—absolute pleasure being that which is so pleasurable that living on is impossible, absolute knowledge, ironically, being that knowledge which contains knowledge of its own death—come together in death, reach fruition in silence. Ben and Dawn, in their different ways, reach a point of revelation through their passage to death such that living on for either would be impossible—for Dawn because her sacrifice must be the ultimate gift of love, the tragic but natural conclusion to a selfless life, martyrdom without religion. Ben dies because the knowledge he must gain with his death has to entail the extinction of what he was. He must cash in his chips and start again, but with a revelation of where that new path might lead, if there was one. For each of them, at that moment Las Vegas is far away—thousands of miles for Dawn, shut out by heavy curtains with only a shaft of natural illumination breaking through for Ben⁷. And the Las Vegas of simulation and seduction is always far away from these hard won moments of silence, extinction and possibility. Short of that moment of fulfilment, we have only a living death which is its own end—Death in Vegas.

7. Very conventionally, indeed iconically in the semiotics of film, seedy motel rooms in run-down red-light districts would be denoted by a flashing blue neon light outside. Figgis clearly does not want conventional interpretations to be drawn from this scene.

EPILOGUE: PLATO'S TOMB, OR DEATH AND THE MANAGER

We have made a rather extensive exploration of the ideas of death, seduction, kitsch and sacrifice because, in a modern culture of con-

sumption, they are important for the understanding of the organized production of identity. The concept of kitsch is particularly important here, because powerful motivations are frequently transformed into pale imitations in order for them to be managed and understood.

Organizations, as Sievers (1994) has convincingly argued, are at least in part organized collective defences against mortality. Schwartz (1990) notes that narcissistic organizations can offer to perform the ontological function for their members by creating a sense of meaning through collective identification, which serves to distract them from the individual anxieties of being. Here we see the tensions between individual identity and collective identity, the latter of which requires the death of all or part of the former, even if temporarily, being obscured behind the performativity of the presentation of the organization. For these organizations the object has to appear reducible to the subject, as Baudrillard argued, and individual subjects have to be reducible to and knowable by themselves. Additionally the social or organizational dimension of work must be entirely understandable in terms of social or organizational prescriptions, rather than dependent on ineffable qualities like inspiration or desire, unless those qualities can be commodified and expressed in terms of equivalences. Human desire becomes organizational motivation. Individual performance measures sit alongside corporate culture initiatives which are regarded as being mutually supportive. Self-actualization is possible through socially organized activity, an assumption warranted by simplistic motivation theories such as Maslow's. Management development programmes are internally marketed within large organizations with as much salescraft as commercial programmes. Corporate culture initiatives are theatrically launched and re-energised with a degree of spectacle which borrows heavily from the entertainment industry. Members of many corporations, large and small, with strong corporate cultures, are encouraged to adopt passive nihilism as a response, to "have fun," to perform the company script with enthusiastic identification in whatever form it is packaged and repackaged. Managers are charged both with presenting the culture to the workers and with meeting the efficiency needs of the company, managing control systems which are often hybrids of seduction and surveillance. Indeed where surveillance is self-surveillance and self-discipline, the processes of seduction are at work most effectively and most subtly.

Organizations, then, rely on processes of seduction to sustain corporate culture, and managers are called upon to sustain belief in this kitsch version of organizational reality in others. They manage the process of organizational members producing their own organizations, and their own identities within them, through the processes of consumption. Yet the identities available are ones which suppress and render abject the sort of tensions between individual and collective which are potentially creative, which in their resolution and exploration allow for creativity, risk and insight, but may also lead to death and destruction. The processes of elaboration which are obvious in the hyper-real of Las Vegas are discernible in other organizations,

where the acceleration and valorization of certain human qualities over others produces a superficial if often intense and dazzling substitute for real experience through the “reality” of organizational culture.

This dehumanizes and deadens organizations. They become places where we pass the time, but don't learn much about how to be human. Sacrifices are made—we sacrifice part of our being in order to fit in, individuals are often sacrificed to market forces or competitive pressures, yet none of this allows us to glimpse anything of the sacred (in Bataille's terms), anything real and valuable beyond. Where Plato believed that the images flickering on the walls of his cave would allow us to infer the ineffable forms beyond, the organizational images exchanged refer only to themselves in an endless circulation of signs which simplify, sentimentalise and sanitise complex human experience. Organizations have dark sides; they are inhabited by death as much as life—the tension between life and death is where living needs to take place. Kitsch organizations, and kitsch organization theory, banish the unacceptable from their view and leave us with a world of deadened senses, a dehumanized death-in-life.

To return to the questions which began this paper, we can now argue that the problem of the pursuit of pleasure to the point of death is a fundamental paradox of being human, and further that at a deep level, this pursuit is the pursuit of death with pleasure primarily as its means—but a crucial means. Accordingly, not only are our contemporary pleasure palaces in this sense mausoleums, but so are many of our contemporary organizations in their efforts to attract and contain us within them. Knowledge, then, certainly stops short of anything that would expose the unacceptable in organizations, because anything that offers potentially to increase individual sovereignty (i.e., personal knowledge) threatens to expose the flimsy grounds on which the collective identity has been constructed. This tension is therefore practically resolved by faking its resolution, by faking identity, by glamourizing the organizational means sufficiently to construct it as the end in itself—precisely the sort of individual dynamics explored in the films we discussed earlier. Organizations therefore demand sacrifices from individuals but these sacrifices are wasted in that they are employed to sustain the fake, not to develop understanding of the “real”. Indeed, organizations, being defences against mortality, are set against the kind of sacrifice that exposes their darker side, and yet which offers the possibility of insight beyond the technical inventiveness of the hyperreal.

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