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Oasis/Mirage: Fantasies of Nature in Las Vegas*

I had the great fortune of arriving in Las Vegas at dawn in an airplane. It was light enough to see the city and part of the desert, but it was still dark enough so that they hadn't turned the signs off for the day. I never saw such a sight in my life. It looked like an entire city was lurching across the desert. It was an incredible movement! I rented a car and started driving and I saw an extraordinary thing: the horizon, the skyline, was not made of trees and it was not made of buildings. It was all signs.

Tom Wolfe (in Stern 1979:11)

The towns of the desert end abruptly; they have no surround. And they have about them something of the mirage, which may vanish at any instant. You have only to see Las Vegas, sublime Las Vegas, rise in its entirety from the desert at nightfall bathed in phosphorescent lights, and return to the desert when the sun rises, after exhausting its intense, superficial energy all night long, still more intense in the first light of dawn, to understand the secret of the desert and the signs to be found there: a spellbinding discontinuity, an all-enveloping, intermittent radiation.

Jean Baudrillard (1989:127)

Almost everyone notes that there is no “time” in Las Vegas, no night and no day and no past and no future; neither is there any logical sense of where one is. One is standing on a highway in the midst of a vast hostile desert looking at an 80-foot sign that blinks STARDUST or CAESAR'S PALACE. Yes, but what does that explain? This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what happens there has no connection with “real” life... Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder.

Joan Didion (1961:171-2)

I am struck by the way in which Tom Wolfe, Jean Baudrillard and Joan Didion all marvel at the *unnaturalness* of Las Vegas, an unnaturalness each writer registers through descriptions of the city's symbolic excess: the "extraordinary horizon" of signs rather than trees; the "geographic implausibility" of the signs' neon blinking "in the midst of a vast, hostile desert"; the "spellbinding discontinuity" of their phosphorescent energy. These accounts of Las Vegas' dazzlingly improbable relation to its surrounding landscape are my starting point for an exploration of how fantasies about nature—particularly about the desert, water, flora and fauna—structure and mediate the physical and symbolic forms of the city.

In the following pages I trace these fantasies from Frontier mythology to Hoover Dam, the erection of Las Vegas' first neon signs to the casino implosions of the 1990's, the western motif of early establishments to the exotic architecture and themes of current properties. A consideration of these diverse moments suggests that Las Vegas' reality is constituted by the surplus of a desert fantasy, a fantasy that depends upon the idea of nature as an encircling wilderness of geological and animal elements at once dangerous and endangered, threatening to take over civilization and themselves on the brink of extinction. I argue that this particular fantasy of nature, which one might consider a hermeneutic key to the city, functions as the criterion and operating principle for the symbolic order of Las Vegas.

The specter of an encroaching yet vulnerable nature sustains an ambivalent discourse of repression and domestication: At the same time that elements of nature are held at bay and denied entrance to Las Vegas, they are also staked out, marked by signs, and tamed within city walls.[1] The anxious project of local hotel-casinos—one that never completely succeeds—is to simultaneously exclude and contain, exoticize and

[1] In a sense Las Vegas' aim to control nature is repeated in visitors' attempts to conquer chance inside its casinos. To examine how these attempts unfold, as well as how casinos seek to both incite and tame human instinct—an aspect of nature—is a tempting analytic route considering the city's status as gambling capital of the world. Although this is a route I have taken in other work (Schull, work in progress), here I will restrict my considerations to the way in which Las Vegas addresses nature in its narrower sense (desert, water, flora and fauna).

domesticate, annihilate and preserve, erase and designate, outlaw and regulate nature.[2] Mirroring the fantasy of nature as alternately excessive and insufficient, Las Vegas presents itself as both plentiful oasis and precarious mirage. On the one hand, against the contingencies of nature the city cultivates the sort of symbolic excess that astounded the authors cited at the start of this essay, promising an oasis where the fulfillment of every desire is possible. On the other hand, the city advertises itself as a place of risk and illusion, a mirage that frustrates desire. While at first glance mirages and oases seem antithetical, a closer look at Las Vegas hints that the city is staged through an uncanny convergence of the two.

Frontier: The Permutations of Wilderness

"The entire history of Nevada," a citizen remarked, "is one of plant life, animal life and human life adapting to very difficult conditions" (in McPhee 1980:215). At the 1935 inauguration of Hoover Dam, interior secretary Harold Ikes declared: "Pridefully, man claims his conquest of nature" (Leslie 2000:41). Conquest, in this case, meant bringing water to the desert. The belief in the link between water and civilization has always been a significant aspect of North America's relationship to its unexplored wilderness. Some early explorers, colonists, and settlers in the New World were convinced that beyond the frontier lay virgin, fertile land, while others doubted that the deserted, "vacant continent" beyond the frontier could sustain life—or at least a civilized life—without sufficient water (Smith 1950:176-177). The former believed wilderness to be a place where life flourishes—a protective garden, a resting spot, a paradise, a site of wells, springs, and other waters of salvation. Alternatively, wilderness was considered a place where life "fades, languishes and expires" (Williams 1962:124)—a fallen world, a barren trial of faith, a dry wasteland of suffering, want and temptation.[3]

[2] One might think of Las Vegas' relation to nature as a relation to the Real in Jacques Lacan's sense: Never outside of or neatly fenced off from the signifying system of the city, instead the real is already constituted by and inscribed within it, and ceaselessly making uncanny return appearances.

[3] The ambivalence of the wilderness motif in the cultural imaginary of North America was in part due to the range of often contradictory meanings attributed to nature in the Old and New Testaments. Wilderness could be interpreted as the promised land, or, as Cotton Mather referred to it, as an "empire of Antichrist, filled with frightful hazards and the demonic minions of Satan" (in Williams 1962: 108).

In his classic study, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith demonstrated how the character of the American empire was defined "by a relation between man and nature—or, rather… between American man and the American West" (1950:187). In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner postulated that the country's development could be understood in terms of the frontier as the scene of a critical encounter between civilization and nature (this he called the "frontier hypothesis").[4] Henry G. Bugbee, a later scholar of the frontier, wrote that "Americans have often thought of their conquering of the wilderness in terms of the development of a garden for mankind…" (in Williams 1962:134). Smith pointed out that two incompatible perspectives collided as the frontier advanced, namely, the "myth of the garden" and "another myth of exactly opposed meaning, although of inferior strength—the myth of the Great American Desert" (Smith 1950:175). Linked to the conflicted allegorical composition of the wilderness motif,[5] the western desert was regarded with ambivalence, imagined both as a place that offered oases and one that presented mirages.[6] Ultimately, westward expansion "would demand a revision of the forbidding image of an American Sahara" (179). In the years following the homestead act of 1862, scholars and politicians alike promoted the curious idea that rainfall was destined to increase in arid regions as people settled there. The desert, they suggested, would be effaced from the map by virtue of man's geographical incursions (179-182).

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[4] As Smith noted, "The idea of nature suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier" (253).

[5] Over the years the term desert shed its association with scriptural wilderness and came to refer to a geophysical landscape of dry sandy terrain (while wilderness came to indicate a dark forest, dismal swamp, or mountainous area), yet the idea of the desert has retained the metaphorical ambivalence of the former concept (Williams 1962: 132).

[6] One can see this duality in the Bible, where deserts could inspire faith, as when Moses struck a rock and water appeared, but were also places of seductive and misleading illusions, as when Christ was tempted by a vision in which all the cities of the world appeared before him.

Although traders and explorers had passed through the Las Vegas area in the late 1820's, Mormons were some of the first to settle there. In 1851, President Brigham Young established a fort that he considered a crucial stopping point in the "State of Deseret" (which stretched from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles), sending missionaries to colonize the region and convert the nomadic Paiute Indians who had lived in the area from around the turn of the last millennium (Gabaldon 2000; Thomson 1999:18-19,162). In the *Book of Mormon* Young wrote: "For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the Garden of the Lord" (in Williams 1962:119). The fort was abandoned by the Mormons some years later, yet with an influx of miners and prospectors to the area in the latter half of the 19th century it became a trading post, and eventually a major station on the railroad line from Utah to California (Gabaldon 2000; Thomson 1999: 18-19).

Desert Vision: Birth of Las Vegas

> When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape you see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! (Baudrillard 1989:69)

In 1905 an auction for lots in the Las Vegas town site was advertised in major newspapers. With investors and squatters came hotels and homes, and gradually the city became more and more associated with liquor and entertainment, including gambling—which continued despite prohibition. In 1931 Boulder City was established as the residence of the Hoover Dam workforce, supplying Las Vegas with a steady stream of business. Gambling was legalized after prohibition, and the city's population grew when an airbase was built in 1940 (Gabaldon 2000). Up until then the "Strip"—now a famous parade of opulent casinos and their grandiose neon signs—had been a barren stretch of desert highway far removed from the cluster of hotels along Fremont Street that made up the city. Although two properties had ventured out a ways into the desert—El Rancho (1941) and the Last Frontier (1942)—it wasn't until 1945 that Las Vegas as we know it today began to take shape. That year, Bugsy Siegal drove from Los Angeles out to the middle of the

empty Nevada desert and “saw” a nonexistent city. In a passage from his book *America* (1989:69), Baudrillard has remarked upon the way in which the emptiness of the desert tends to carry over into cities, effacing the built environment by inspiring mirages not of something but of nothing. Siegal’s vision was more akin to that of the classic desert mirage, in which one perceives substance in the midst of emptiness.

Siegal set about to construct a lavish hotel-casino whose elegance would distinguish it from the Old West theme that local establishments promoted. Aiming instead to cultivate an oasis motif, he covered the Flamingo’s grounds with exotic plant species trucked in from Los Angeles nurseries, including “Oriental date palms, rare cork trees from Spain, and 15 varieties of other fully-grown trees” (DeMatteo 2000). Obsessed with the project of turning his mirage into a veritable oasis, Siegal invested a vast sum of money that wasn’t his (an expense compounded by the exorbitant costs of wartime building materials). Owing to this extravagant expenditure and the project’s failure to yield immediate returns when it finally opened, Siegal was shot to death—a bullet through each eye.

Sparked by a desert mirage, the reality of contemporary Las Vegas was forged “out of nothing” through a certain over-investment in the symbolic. In Seigal’s case this investment built up a mortal debt, yet out of his excessive vision emerged the thriving symbolic order of a city that proclaims itself the mecca of *jouissance* and its discharge, and at the same time a safe containment zone for excesses of all kinds. While it led to his own premature death, Siegal’s drive to transform his fantasy into a reality was an existential bid for a new Las Vegas, a bid that continues to inspire the city.

Mirage: Staging the Spectacle

On the desk of Steve Wynn, Las Vegas’ reigning visionary, rests a framed Jonathan Swift quote: *Vision is that art of seeing things invisible.* Wynn has inherited Siegal's vision in a literal as well as a figurative sense: due to a degenerative eye disorder (incurable retinitis pigmentosa) his field of vision is diminishing to a point of complete blindness. To shield his eyes from the painful glare of desert light,

Wynn wears dark shades during the day; at night, he wears them to protect his eyes from the glare of neon (Seal 1994:82).

Wynn established himself in Las Vegas by staging two events that marked the city's entrance into the 1990's and its final movement in a transition from Mafia to corporate rule. On the Strip across the street from Siegal's Flamingo he constructed a mammoth hotel-casino of golden glass and christened it the Mirage. The Mirage shimmers with the reflection of a manmade volcano that erupts every fifteen minutes at its feet, sending flames across a lake of terraced waterfalls that arches around its main entrance. The structure, along with its volcano and lake, needs no neon to mark its presence.

Further down the strip, an older casino called the Dunes found itself struggling to stay afloat. The tenth casino to open on the Strip (in 1955), the establishment billed itself as "the miracle in the desert." It was one of the first properties to feature a giant swimming pool and lagoon, and in 1983 the hotel added a casino named the Oasis. Its sign, once a glory of the city, seemed sad and frail in the shadow of the Mirage. 18 stories high, weighing 1.5 million pounds, and composed of 3 miles of neon tubing, the sign was manufactured in 1964 for the price of 250,000 dollars.[7] The owner of the Dunes had commissioned the erection of this gargantuan form with the following imperative: "I want a phallic symbol going up in the sky as far as you can make it" (Brown 1993:C4). This symbol was felled thirty years later on the opening day of Treasure Island, the pirate-themed child of the Mirage.

In front of Treasure Island, which occupied the empty desert space beside its parent hotel-casino, a giant skull hangs suspended over a manmade lagoon where two ships battle every hour. County regulators, befuddled by this spectacle, thought they might classify the Hispaniola—the moving ship at the entrance of the casino—as an unoccupied building. One of the ship's engineers commented that this "was very appropriate, because it is an unoccupied building. Underneath the hull is hollow, and inside of that is a large concrete bunker, fully waterproof, submerged." But after much deliberation regulators decided against such a classification. According to the same engineer, "They really didn't know how to classify it. They struggled

[7] The sign cost 47,500 dollars a year to run (DeMatteo 2000).

and were trying to get their arms around what we were doing." The final designation of the ship was that of sign, he tells us, "because it was being fabricated in our shop, and it had all kinds of electrical components within it ... Why they made it a sign just blew my mind, it made no sense to me whatsoever. But then I never cease to be amazed by regulatory authorities" (Johnson 1994:37). Through an anxious twist of law provoked by Wynn's unprecedented construction, the status of sign was conferred upon a material structure, yet this structure was "unoccupied, hollow." The ship's zoning verdict, only a partial resolution of regulators' confusion, is symptomatic of a certain failure in the city's system of symbolic mediation.

To commemorate the opening of Treasure Island, Wynn hired Hollywood demolition expert Joel Silver (Goldstein 1993:82) to engineer what the New York Times called "perhaps the most lavishly choreographed architectural bombing in United States History" (Brown 1993:C4). As a dust-covered crowd of 200,000 rhythmically chanted "Blow it up! Blow it up! Blow it up!" Wynn, in dark shades, stood aboard the swaying deck of one of the frigates in 'Buccaneer Bay' and gave order to fire the 'ceremonial' canon. The legendary Dunes, antiquated icon of Las Vegas' history, was detonated from within, the canon serving as a metonym for the hollow ship-sign on which it rested. Wynn profited from the 1.5 million dollar spectacle by selling footage rights to television stations and film producers.[8] After auctioning off the Oasis' interior furnishings, he completely flattened the property. He had spent 50,000 dollars to prepare the Dunes' famous neon sign for its destruction, making sure each of its bulbs worked properly. On the empty plot where the sign once rippled and waved, an unblinking message lay toppled over and bent in the dust: "Vacancy" (see photo).

Meanwhile, down the Strip at the Mirage "No Vacancy" was being advertised—a strange message for a hotel of that name, except that this hotel looked more like an oasis. In Las Vegas, where "everything is possible," oasis and mirage—the place of desire's fulfillment and the place of its frustration, respectively—coincide. As Siegal and Wynn demonstrate, mirages can become real and oases can become mirages.

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[8] The footage appears, for instance, at the allegorical finale of Martin Scorcese's film *Casino* (1995), signaling the demise of the Mafia and the rise of corporate culture in Las Vegas.

Vanishing: The Trend of Implosion

> The towns of the desert… have about them something of the mirage, which may vanish at any instant (Baudrillard 1989:127)

The implosion of the Dunes was the first in a series of such spectacles. Across the street, the Flamingo staged a slightly less spectacular bombing of Siegal's 1946 hotel suite. The 1995 implosion of the Landmark offered an ironic example of a casino whose name did not serve its purpose—in Las Vegas, landmarks are erasable.[9] In 1996 the Sands was demolished to clear a lot for the Venetian, and on New Year's eve, 1997, the Hacienda was imploded to make room for the Mandalay Bay. The next year the Aladdin was destroyed to make way for the New Aladdin, which opened in late 2000 (DeMatteo 2000). These competing demolition spectacles are reminiscent of the monthly atomic bomb testings that took place over a ten year period beginning in the 1950's at the nuclear test site 70 miles northwest of Las Vegas. The opening of the Desert Inn in 1950 (the fifth casino on the Strip) was timed to coincide with one blast. Uncannily, Steve Wynn has plans to detonate this very property to mark the opening of another hotel-casino.

The New Frontier (the second casino to open on the strip in 1942[10]*)* has also announced its impending implosion. Following this bombing, Siegal's Flamingo will be, as one writer put it, "the first still existing" casino on the strip (DeMatteo 2000). Historian John Findlay speculates: "At some point it might be possible for people in Las Vegas to look at these places and want to save them, because [the city's] history would

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[9] The Landmark's exterior played the role of the fictional Tangiers in Scorcese's *Casino* (1995), and one can see footage of its bombing in the film *Mars Attacks* (Burton 1996).

[10] Originally called the Last Frontier, in 1955 the owner renamed the property the New Frontier, as he felt that this better characterized Las Vegas (at the same time he changed the slogan to "out of this world"). In 1967 the hotel-casino changed ownership—first to a group including the young Steve Wynn, then to Howard Hughes—and afterwards became simply the Frontier, adding a 186 foot road sign. Since 1999 it has once again taken the name of New Frontier.

have tourist value. But right now, it's much more of an attraction to blow them up" (in Brown 1993:C4). Las Vegas' sense of history is such that designating a building a historical site means only that one must wait 20 days before demolishing it; with other buildings, there is no wait at all (Hamilton 1993:18). "In Vegas nowadays," writes David Thomson, "a vital part of construction is demolition" (1999:164). In a real estate environment that constantly remakes itself, property value is measured not only in terms of its potential as a construction site but in terms of what one might call its "blow up value." Speculation on the profit to be gained from destruction is a strange inversion of the projects of conservation, preservation, and environmentalism, where the aim is to quantify how much will be lost (Pandian 2000). This odd type of speculation is part and parcel of the Las Vegas fantasy, in which the materialization of mirages is inextricably bound up with the vanishing of oases.

Making a spectacle of destruction and waste characterizes Las Vegas' relation to its natural resources as much as to its built environment. Nowhere do we see this illustrated more clearly today than in the city's attitude toward water. Explaining his 270 million dollar purchase of Desert Inn, which included the property's 220 acre golf course, Wynn stated: "This is the most powerful piece of real estate in Nevada, possibly in the western United States. It's an extraordinary piece of property, with the opportunity to do just about anything" (DeMatteo 2000). One of its main advantages, Wynn observed, was the property's rights to immense amounts of water.

Water: The Fantasy of Plentitude

> Las Vegas is America's city of fantasy, and water, not wealth, is its greatest fantasy of all. The city that Hoover Dam made possible is the nation's fastest growing metropolis in the country's driest state, the perfect manifestation of the notion that water will never run out. Las Vegas and the desert don't match: the city looks as if it didn't so much emerge from its surroundings as get deposited on them. In this desert of ostentation, water is displayed more lasciviously than sex (Leslie 2000:51)

Hoover Dam continues to be celebrated as the ultimate technological mastery over the desert environment, the last step in realizing the myth of the oasis garden.[11] Yet Pat Mulroy, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, says that "oasis" is a mirage: "The real Las Vegas is so short of water that even if it adheres to its current conservation plan, it will probably run out of Colorado water by 2007" (Leslie 2000:52). Two thirds of the city's water supply is consumed by private homes and housing developments with names like Bayshore, Lake Sahara, Palm Village, Lake Las Vegas, and Southern Cove, which insist on growing lawns and other "hedges against reality," as one journalist called them (Sardar 2000:21). While there are limitations on how much developers and home owners can use, there are no restrictions for casinos, whose prosperous business is so crucial to the local economy. Las Vegas' dazzlingly improbable relation to its surrounding landscape remains a sustaining myth of the city and casinos are anxious to preserve the illusion of bountiful water, which they achieve by way of elaborate underground water treatment plants below each property.

In the 1950's many of the city's hotel-casinos embraced desert themes (Desert Inn, Sahara, Dunes, Sands), but it was the theme of water that prevailed in the boom years following the appearance of the Mirage and the disappearance of the Dunes and its Oasis casino. At the Flamingo, Siegal's suite was replaced by an "edenic garden" of 2,000 palm trees and an extensive landscaped pool. Between October 1998 and May 1999, three hotel-casinos debuted with water themes: the Venetian, featuring an elaborate network of canals and waterways, including a 536,000 gallon gondola-filled canal of recycled water in front of the hotel and a 680 foot, 278,000 gallon "Grand Canal" running down the inside mall corridor (21); the Mandalay Bay, with it's own sandy beach and four foot waves; and the Bellagio, an 18 acre lake filling the crater where the Oasis once stood, surrounding what Wynn calls a "fantasy island."[12] Modeled after Italy's Lake Como, this 40 million dollar, 27 million gallon, 11 acre lake hosts the world's largest

[11] Thomson writes: "anyone who sees Hoover Dam will know and remember that men gave wildness and nature a terrific game, and won the game with grace and ingenuity" (186-187).

[12] Steve Wynn no longer owns the Bellagio; he sold it to MGM as part of his recent purchase of the Desert Inn.

fountain show, choreographed to music every 15 minutes.[13] Inside, Cirque du Soleil presents *O*, an aquatic show whose title is a play on "eau," French for water. The production's rubber stage melts from solid to fluid in seconds, allowing performers to swim and dive. In contrast to this amphibious extravaganza, the new Four Seasons on the Strip boasts of its modest pool: "we have returned to the Oasis" (Lori Kennedy in Sardar 2000:21). City by the Bay, still in its planning stages, will replace the imploded New Frontier with a replica of San Francisco, replete with Fisherman's Wharf.

In a recent piece called "Water Worlds," journalist Zahid Sardar observes that Las Vegas aligns itself with cities famous for their nearness to abundant water as a way to distance itself from the desert (19). Within the symbolic economy of the city, water is a limited resource to showcase while the limitless desert is either to be expunged or staked out and contained with signs. Top casinos flaunt a wealth of water, drawing from Pleistocene lakes that sustain a fragile desert ecosystem and repressing the odds that nature has stacked against them.[14] Water is regarded primarily as a tool of entertainment rather than something that supports life. Sardar writes of "Vegas' epic but fragile alliance with water," suggesting that by making water its central conceit the city has formed a Faustian pact with the barren landscape that surrounds it (19).

Lakes, lagoons, bays, falls, canals—the conceptual wet dream fueling Las Vegas builders' latest wave of construction bears an uncanny resemblance to an oasis that was once there: 30,000 years ago the Nevada desert was a vast lake. This waterland, a geologist reports, was "drained suddenly" (in Ventura 1995:179). The uncanny, Freud tells us, "is like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again" (Freud 1955:223). In the case of Las Vegas, the vast lake that once so abruptly dried up has been pumped back in, first by Hoover Dam and today by hotel-casinos and housing developments. This act of

[13] The spectacle, created by WET design, uses enough energy wattage for 7,500 homes (DeMatteo 2000).

[14] One cannot help but notice the compelling correspondence between casinos' denial of odds with respect to the natural environment and their denial of gaming odds in advertisements to patrons.

hydro-engineering harkens back to a familiar, original wetness, one that disappeared in a confounding and radical act of geological excess. In a sense, the city's logic continues to be structured by this sudden, archaic draining: It is an extraordinary, implausible, discontinuous logic in which opposites converge—emptiness and plentitude, absence and presence, vacancy and occupancy, containment and impulse, fulfillment and temptation, mirage and oasis.

Habitat: Uncanny Natures

> There can't be any real drama without conflict. So we set up a little conflict, in the passive mind of the viewer. What their mind dictated should be here in the harsh Las Vegas desert is one thing. What their eyes saw in terms of verdancy was wrong. Which is why I spent 27 million outside the building before you even go in. To create the conflict, to set up the expectation: 'If this place is like this on the outside what could be on the inside?' That's the moment of truth. Are we going to keep the promise? Or let them down. We kept the promise. The last thing you're supposed to find out here is a rain forest. (Wynn, in Raver 1993:5V).

In this interview from the early 1990's, Wynn posits that the encounter of something familiar in an unfamiliar place—an uncanny encounter, in Freud's sense—sets up a conflict that confounds and yet delights the visitor. Nowadays all Las Vegas casino enterprises attempt to tap into this profitable conflict, making it their business to accentuate what Didion called the "geographic implausibility" of their city.

Mimicking Siegal's pursuit of the desert oasis 52 years earlier at the Flamingo, Wynn created a large conservatory at the Bellagio to house elaborate floral displays. The plants arrangements, which change monthly, are tended to in the early hours by gardeners whose main task is to replace browning leaves and blossoms. Wynn's first experiment with exotic plants was at the Mirage, where he created a rainforest in a domed glass atrium. There, nestled within the foliage set against a rushing waterfall, one glimpses statuary from a variety of past civilizations: Motionless plastic frogs sit amongst Bhuddas, bearded camels, naked mermaids, and Chinese horses. Exotic flowers bear labels designating far-off lands (Thailand, China, Africa), and poppies

and staghorn ferns are placed alongside bougainvillea and banana trees, some real and some fake. “Don’t use the f-word,” said the gardener trainer to a reporter—“we say silks” (Divechio in Gardner 1991:5V). The 40 foot palm that arches over a stream was once alive, but it is now embalmed: “They injected it with formaldehyde and put a steel rod up into the trunk, so it could be bent the way we wanted it to go.”[15] Wynn comments: “the real rainforest—they’d hate it to death.” Two women from New Jersey who had visited tropical forests in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic confirmed this prediction: “This one is better. Everything is in its proper place” (5V). A designer recalls:

> [The Mirage] sent us on trips to places like Bali ... when you go to Kokomo's restaurant you are in a rainforest setting without the mosquitoes and the denghy fever and the so forth you encounter in the real place ... the fantasy is a kind of jungle effect that you don't find in nature and it's really better as a consequence... There’s no place in the South Pacific where the light is so perfect, so beautiful (Brinkerhoff 1990).

As patrons approach the Mirage on a conveyer belt, a disembodied voice reminds them: “should you feel the earth move, remember it’s just a live volcano that erupts every quarter hour on the minute” (Mirage 1995). This volcano belches its pina-colada scented flames at the proper, fixed time.

Tropical iridescent fish and live sharks swim in a large tank behind the Mirage’s registration desk, while at its other entrance white tigers pace in their “natural habitat”—a regal interior of white pillars, mosaics, and pools. The Mirage houses a “special breeding program” for these tigers, a “nearly extinct species” according to the short video that loops on a monitor in front of the viewing area.[16] Slightly down the Strip, the Tropicana features an entire “Fish and Wildlife Department:”

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[15] The Luxor boasts of “real plam trees whose trunks have been injected with a dye-preserving fluid, which also acts as a fire retardant” (in Taylor 1997:245).

[16] While it is true that their numbers are dwindling, white tigers are in fact ‘fakes’ themselves, a mutant strain fostered by a recessive gene. The Maharaja of Rewa used to crossbreed white tigers to make this gene more dominant, and nearly all the stock of white tigers that zoos and others in the West have access to today come from his initial stock. They are a small, inbred, and completely artificial population (Pandian 2000).

> A quick stroll around the Tropicana's casino floor reveals strategically-placed brass perches amid natural settings, on top of which sit chattering tropical parrots, macaws, toucans and other exotic birds. The talking birds have been taught a vocabulary that relates to the areas in which they are displayed. Strolling through the outdoor area, one meets flamingoes, cranes, penguins, swans and other walking birds. Five ponds and lagoons around the outdoor Island area contain fresh water and are stocked with live tropical fish and other aquatic life. A total of 250 exotic fish will eventually be spread between the lagoons, ponds and waterfalls (Casino Gaming Magazine 1986).

As part of a 130 million dollar renovation and expansion the Flamingo created the "Habitat"—a "15 acre Caribbean-themed foliage and water playground… in view of the 550 seat Paradise Garden Buffet." The Habitat includes African penguins, Chilean flamingos, ducks, swans, koi and goldfish, and may soon take on cranes and some marsupials, such as wallabies (DeMatteo 2000).

The importation of foreign fauna to the Flamingo echoes the practice of its founder, who first trucked alien flora to the property in 1946. While Siegal was the first hotel proprietor to "set up a little conflict" of the profitable sort to which Wynn referred, it has become a commonplace tactic to present desert-bound patrons with heavy vegetation and far flung animal species, and today establishments surpass Siegal in their efforts to underscore the "spellbinding discontinuity" that draws their audience.

Time machine: "You're not in Vegas anymore"

The manner in which Las Vegas simulates and attempts to perfect upon reality exemplifies Baudrillard's notion of simulacra (1994). Every hour at the Forum Shops—a sinuous mall leading into Caesar's Palace casino—an arched ceiling forms a beautiful sky of clouds whose hue changes from bright morning blue to the dusty rose of evening (when street lanterns are lit), and then back again. Time is detached from its natural course and bent to conform with the casino space. Following the Forum's introduction of the sky-simulacrum, many have followed suit. Under these virtual, interior skies, one can shop along cobblestone

streets or dine in “outdoor” cafes. Some ceiling areas are set high and dark with scintillating lights, giving the impression of a night sky infinitely extending upwards. The MGM claims, “Once inside you’ll see the kind of sky that Dorothy never saw in Kansas” (MGM 1993).

The MGM fashions itself after the Wizard of Oz’s Emerald City, promising to pull Middle Americans from their drab, grey lives into the vibrancy of a more colorful world: “Follow the Yellow Brick Road out of the woods, past gleaming waterfalls, and experience our Emerald City Attraction. Finally, we can all go over the rainbow. The most fabulous complex you’ve never seen in Las Vegas... the New MGM. You’re not in Vegas Anymore” (MGM 1993). The property’s goal is to interpolate visitors into the role of Dorothy, giving them the sensation of departure from their everyday lives. Similarly, the soundtrack over the walkway leading to the Mirage advertises: “The Mirage isn't far from home, but its surroundings will transport you a million miles away" (Mirage 1995). The Strip as a whole presents itself as a people-mover of sorts, offering visitors access to an astonishing range of far-flung and other-worldly experiences, all condensed along a short stretch of highway. In this sense Las Vegas is the modern-day culmination of what Walter Benjamin called “*passages panoramas*”—where one could see all the magnificent sights of the world in one place (Benjamin 1999).

The Luxor hotel-casino provides a striking illustration of this fantasy. A 30 story pyramid of black glass, it sits in reflective geometrical splendor on the desert floor along the strip. Inside is the largest atrium in the world, where nine 747 airplanes can be stacked. In the words of Luxor representatives, the pyramid serves as a “vehicle” that transports visitors to “extraordinary and mysterious places of times past and future” (Bennett in Gardner 1991:12). As the property’s designers put it, “we made a place that will take you somewhere else physically” (Simpson in Betsky 1994:50). Three cities—ancient Egypt, Times Square, and a deep-space city of the future—compose the time-warping landscape within the pyramid, where ancient motifs collide with virtual reality time machines.

In somewhat oxymoronic terms, the Luxor boasts “an authentic reproduction” of King Tut’s tomb, fashioned in collaboration with world-renowned Egyptologists hired for the project (the resort’s

president himself traveled to Egypt on a “research mission"). A spokesperson emphasizes that the tomb “looks just like it did when Howard Carter discovered it.” During opening week, fifty Egyptian officials were flown in to view the completed museum. A promotion read: “The Luxor once again opened the doors to the tomb of King Tut” (Luxor 1993). “Pyramids,” one designer said, “are about transcendent experiences. Inside them, people have always had weird visions or expect to be taken into other worlds” (Betsky 1994:50). Given that the Luxor is modeled in the image of a tomb, one could say that the “other world” guests are taken into is the world of the dead. Not only does the Luxor entomb once again the history it brings into the present, but in a sense the massive structure allows visitors to travel to another dimension: “Once inside, the Egyptians believed the Pharaoh's body and soul roamed freely in a heavenly surrounding. Sounds like a vacation to us” (Luxor 1993). The Luxor metaphorically links the concept of vacation with the death of the ordinary lives visitors leave behind. Some of these visitors, however, literalize the deathly element of the vacation by choosing the central atrium of this necropolis as the site of their dramatic, plummeting suicides.

Las Vegas has the highest suicide rate in the nation (Thomson 1999:279), and lore has it that more of these suicides have taken place at the Luxor than at any other casino. Since its opening in 1994 the Luxor itself has been rumored to be sinking. Although representatives insist that “Luxor will stand test of time” (Shemeligian 1994:1A), some experts consider the glass-sheathed pyramid inappropriate for a desert climate, fearing the structure may leak. There are other worries: While those inside the pyramid can see out of the reflective black glass, in the late afternoon the structure blinds automobile drivers with its intense glare and many are convinced this causes traffic accidents along the busy strip: “it is a mirror image of the sun” (Welsh 1993:1K). At night, projected images forming composite graphics and misty auras emanate from the eyes of the 10 story sphinx head that majestically chaperones the swimming pool just off the strip. One of its engineers describes the sphinx: “As you drive, you might see an image of King Tut with lasers suddenly shooting through his eyes toward the boulevard" (Ruling 1994b:29). The 315,000 watt shaft of light that beams up every night from the apex of the pyramid is the most powerful in the world; allegedly, one can read a newspaper by its light ten miles into space, and horizontally it is visible from 250 miles away on a clear night

(Taylor 1999:251). “The light,” one representative insisted, “is not a blinding light, but rather a landmark.” In contrast with the demolished Landmark property, which no longer serves the purpose of its name, the Luxor’s shaft of light is an example of how signs have come to serve as physical markers on the horizon: “It’s being considered exactly that by the Department of Aviation and the Federal Aviation Administration. It actually is a navigational aide” (Ruling 1994a:28). As in the case of Wynn’s ship, a regulatory twist accommodates the classification of new signs.

Further down the Strip, Bob Stupak's Stratosphere Tower—billed as the tallest structure in the world—is not being considered a navigational aide. Rather, the FAA has deemed the 1,825 foot erection a hazard to planes in the nearby airport. It is not a question of *whether* an airplane will hit the tower, officials say, but *when* (Gallant 1993:1A). Even during its construction the Tower was associated with catastrophe, having been the site of three dramatic fires. Journalists rendered poetic accounts of these conflagrations: “Orange ashes fell like heavy rain from the top of the tower as occasional fireballs barreled to the ground like miniature comets. The blaze could be seen for miles” (Holland 1993:1A). Those who drove past the blazing, half-built Tower must have witnessed a spectacle bearing an uncanny resemblance to the flaming Mirage volcano further down the Strip. Perhaps it was this affinity that inspired these thoughts from a tourist: “This was the prettiest fire I've ever seen. The whole thing was just on fire. *It was just like a volcano*. It lit up the sky” (emphasis mine,1A).

Epilogue: Vegas, Underwater

> The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself and hence not authentic in the sense of unspoiled (Culler 1982:261)

Other times, other skies, other species, other natures—otherness in Las Vegas is authorized through its very inauthenticity: The desert is rendered habitable by the extravagant use of scarce water; time is marked by pirate battles and volcano eruptions; skies are painted; near-extinct species are bred, tamed, and placed behind glass; exotic flora

are cultivated and “bent the way we wanted it to go.” In Las Vegas the authentic oasis is staged as a mirage and acknowledged as “better than the real thing.” Mirages, in other words, function as oases.

J. G. Ballard’s *Hello America* (1981) is a futuristic tale that describes how the mirage of Las Vegas became an actual oasis, which then revealed itself as another mirage. In his story, an excess of fantasy has led to a collapse of America's economy. The abandoned country has been subjected to climate control measures to sustain a swelling European population and nature is manipulated to the point where the landscape is reversed, its verdant areas turned into parched deserts, and its deserts made into wet jungles. Perhaps inadvertently, this fictive setting recalls the time when Nevada’s desert *was* underwater, before “violent titanic episodes of uplift” raised the ocean floor to form what geologists designate the "Las Vegas Zone of Deformation." Ballard writes:

> The last reports from Las Vegas described the abandoned gambling capital sitting half-submerged in a lake of rain-lashed water, its wheels stilled, the dying lights of its hotels reflected in the meadows of the drowned desert, a violent mirror reflecting all the failure and humiliation of America (48).

Ballard’s novel opens when explorers from Europe set foot in New York, an eerie, sandy wasteland. The protagonist says: “it’s strange, and yet familiar at the same time. I feel I’ve been here.” They begin their voyage across the country, stopping at Holiday Inns and Howard Johnsons as they make their way toward the swampy green Vegas, where Charles Manson, the self-proclaimed president of the United States, plays with giant cybernetic holograms of dead celebrities. The travelers see the city in the distance, “gripped by the forest” where the desert had once been:

> A lake of neon signs formed a shimmering corona, miles of strip-lighting raced along the porticos of the casinos, zipped up the illuminated curtain-walling of the hotels and spilled over into mushy cascades. Under the ultramarine sky, so dark now that the tone had left their faces, the spectacle of this sometime gambling capital seemed as unreal as an electrographic dream ...Large sections of the city had been invaded by the jungle, and the neon signs on the Dunes and the Desert Inn shone through a tangle of vines and giant ferns. The southern half of

> the city, to the east of the Strip, was partly submerged under a large lake fed by the mountain rivers, and a second Las Vegas, a drowned city as incandescent as the first, glimmered at them from a sea of light (115-117).

The city which seemed an unreal, electrographic illusion from a distance continues to present itself as a mirage close up. The first "life" encountered by the party of travelers are cybernetic images of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Judy Garland dressed as Dorothy. Like living lip-synchers performers today in Las Vegas, dead celebrities make uncanny return appearances to the city they built. An attempt to interact with these ghostly characters drives them into a mechanical frenzy; Dorothy beats her heels together like a frenzied hummingbird—she still wants to go home.

Ballard's account of what Las Vegas will be like in the future is not far removed from the sorts of environments built there today and highlights the fantasies of nature at work in the staging of the city. When and if the desert mirage of contemporary Las Vegas becomes a jungle oasis, we may learn that this oasis is really a mirage, one which may vanish at any moment.

* *Note*: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the California Psychoanalytic Circle Annual Symposium in San Francisco on April 2, 1999.

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