

# Las Vegas and the End of the World

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When we look at Las Vegas, many of us see the end of the world.

Popular culture, including films, comic books and US counter-terrorism officials have imagined Vegas as a scene of disaster; some religious leaders pray for its destruction as a modern city of Sodom; the urban critic James Howard Kunstler writes almost gleefully about his vision of a future Las Vegas as a deserted, decaying ghost town. Many of those who portray Vegas as a grave seem to wish that the recent tourism board slogan would come true, that what happens in Vegas should stay in Vegas.

On the one hand, Las Vegas seems like hell on earth to some environmentalists and cultural puritans. On the other hand, the whole world can appear to be following Macau, transforming into a simulation of Vegas. While there may be truth to both opinions, Las Vegas turns out to be just another (real) place for both tourists and residents; an improbable city built on stolen water, selective memory, and a “retro” idea of the future.

While I love Vegas, I certainly know that it is in need of criticism. But how to criticize the culture of Las Vegas without lapsing into a moralizing, essentially theological condemnation of the place called “sin city”?

I like to argue that tourism is, at least in part, a critical practice—a practice of criticism. It’s perhaps obvious that tourists sometimes do research, choose destinations and activities carefully, make recordings of their experiences, and complain, praise or brag about them in conversations or on their blogs. But intellectual criticism of Las Vegas often turns its back on the desires and affections of tourism. Whether celebrated or looked down on (or both), the Vegas that is the object of criticism is made “other” to the critic, and this distance or difference is what so often enables critiques of the city that are in one way or another moralizing.

When this shift into a moralistic stance occurs, we immediately leave the city itself, and find ourselves comparing an abstract construction of the place with an abstract system of values. Aesthetic moralizing compares Vegas culture to pre-existing cultural hierarchies and finds that the city produces “trash” culture. Political moralizing sees the undeniable corruption of Vegas without acknowledging the desire for license—that is, for “liberties”—that fueled its power. And environmental moralizing similarly seizes (correctly) on the impact of tourist culture without analysis of the cultural *meanings* of that consumption and destruction.

Vegas culture *is* excessive, unsustainable, and un-natural. Wasteful behavior and disregard for future consequences is the *nature* of Vegas. But please think of “The Nature of Las Vegas,”

not as the place boiled down to its essence; rather, this “nature” is what is so often opposed to the term “culture.” Nature, in this thinking, is what culture is made of, perhaps even what is sacrificed to make culture. The “nature” of Vegas is not gone, but it is always in the midst of disappearing.

I am speaking both with and contrary to the implication of the title of perhaps the most scathing essay in Mike Davis’ book *Dead Cities*: “Las Vegas Versus Nature.” Against, in that I do not see the city as a cultural crime against an innocent and abstract nature.<sup>1</sup> However, I agree with all of Davis’ indictments of the human-made devastation that Vegas development has entailed. So while I do not see Vegas as *against* nature, it certainly can’t be said to be *for* nature in any ecological sense. Rather, Las Vegas *is* of nature just as it is of culture, and this relation is even more violent than it is beautiful.

An oasis of artificiality blossoming in the desert, Vegas *seems* to be Culture embedded in Nature. The desert and hills surround “sin city” and can be seen, for example, from many hotel rooms or the tops of casino parking garages. The history of real estate development in Vegas is one of gradually pushing the boundaries of “culture” further out. On the one hand, the Strip has moved steadily south, while on the other the vast suburban sprawl of Henderson, Nevada and other “bedroom communities” has rolled northwest and southeast. Vast tracks of open space remain, however, and define the feeling of being in the city, even for many gamblers who never walk outside. These spaces include wild areas such as Red Rock Canyon (populated by wild burros that threaten indigenous species and encroached upon by recent development projects), Lake Mead (the incongruous freshwater sea created by Hoover Dam), Mount Charleston, and enormous military bases (home of Area 51 and important sites in UFO mythology). A bit further off, the Nevada Test Site (the United States nuclear testing grounds) and Yucca Mountain, developed unsuccessfully (so far) as a national storage site for nuclear waste. The “unnatural” culture of the city is thus surrounded by the un-natural nature of the American West.

As a post-industrial tourist city constructed in the desert, Las Vegas has a peculiar relation to its various resources. If culture is in one sense nature which has been cooked, Vegas culture has been created from thoroughly “cooked” bits of “nature” and innumerable cultural leftovers. Natural and not so natural resources—water, food, art, and animals—are woven through multiple levels of Las Vegas tourist experience.<sup>2</sup> In the interrelated and even systematic ways in which visitors use the odd and remarkable manifestations of these resources in constructing their daily tourist itineraries, it is clear, if counter-intuitive, that tourist experience in Vegas is in part an engagement with the natural world.

One of the most striking re-arrangements of “nature” in Las Vegas is the profusion of water features along the Las Vegas Strip. The transformative energy of Vegas mutates “natural” and traditional materials, from land and water to pre-existing genres of performance or architecture. I’ll return to displays of water shortly, but we can see how a journey through Vegas is organized

by landmarks recognizable as clusters of resources, and figuratively speaking these displays typically take two forms, the pond and the fountain. “Ponds” are resources accumulated, hoarded. Ponds display wealth in waiting. Examples include the increasing use of ostentatiously real and expensive building materials, such as marble, in newer ultra-luxury resorts; the mounds of food displayed in all-you-can-eat buffets; the accumulated fine artworks at the Strip’s new museums; the passive animal displays featuring “non-performing” animals— “charismatic megafauna” such as marine mammals and big cats.

“Fountains,” on the other hand, are culture animated. Within the Bellagio’s lake are high-tech jet fountains that play a nightly choreographed display with lights and music. In contrast to buffets, high-end restaurants offer fountains of food; in contrast to art museums, performances such as those of Cirque du Soleil offer high culture, activated. Seigfried and Roy built their zoo-like Secret Garden to resemble a pond, but in their magic act they animated animals into fountains of exotic flesh.

These two forms also define the arrangement of human bodies for tourist pleasures. In ponds are displayed service workers (performers who are always there); they are costumed, the women sexualized, their quiet attention radiating outward to the tourist. In casino showrooms and nightclub stages, fountains of human (and sometimes animal) flesh erupt. Whether in ponds or fountains, Vegas entertainment genres produce bodies for display.

Perhaps because of this, it may be that Las Vegas also produces a different kind of body than some other tourist destinations, and relies on different consumer expectations of those bodies. Jane Desmond, in *Staging Tourism*, stresses the “physical fundamentalism” in which performing bodies guarantee “authenticity” in many tourist performances.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Vegas mythology implies that, where there was “nothing,” exotic species were imported and then mutated. The spectator of celebrity impersonations does not expect the authentic, but instead seeks a performer who has mutated toward that which she or he imitates. Similarly, consumers of erotic performance may choose between more and less “natural” performers (the women of *La Femme* are reputed to be less surgically altered than the “Crazy Girls” in the review at the Riviera), but no performance I have seen thematizes an “authentic” female body. Even the performing and display animals in Las Vegas produce mixed messages, valued for their authentic rareness or supposedly scientific value, they are also clearly out of place: prisoners, freaks, and commodities.

This un-natural nature is on display amid the supposed emptiness of the West. Especially the desert is always imagined as empty, waiting for culture to fill it. The West is empty—it is open range, cattle range, bombing range. The US atmospheric atomic tests in the Pacific, perhaps in part because it was for the most part non-white others who were irradiated by them, did not take hold of mainstream popular culture on the mainland as did the explosions on the Nevada test site. The cold war iconography of the atomic era is when the theme of “western”

enters the meta-narrative of “east versus west,” and cultural artifacts such as the comic book of “Godzilla attacks Las Vegas” marks the return of the (south) east atomic repressed. The atomic era seemed for a time as if it was the end of the western theme in the U.S. west, the end of “old Vegas.” But atomic culture is experiencing a renaissance in Vegas, and perhaps in US and global politics. The test site continues to conduct “subcritical” testing, and mothballed tests stand ready to be resumed in a matter of months. Some have called for a resumption of testing, supposedly to maintain “readiness;” others have argued that our current arsenal is aging dangerously and that whole new weapons systems should be developed. In Vegas and surroundings, there is continued struggle over the possibility of storing nuclear waste at the now-closed underground site at Yucca Mountain, while the new Atomic Testing Museum constructs a gruesome self-congratulatory narrative of US righteousness. By visual implication, it credits testing with helping Reagan “win” the cold war and then bestows that legacy on the second Bush administration with the surprising presence, near the exit, of a steel girder from the fallen World Trade Center.

A common fear of nuclear energy is the potential for radiation to produce mutation, “sports of nature.”<sup>4</sup> In the culture of Las Vegas a constant theme is of nature mutated. On the one hand, there was supposedly the desert, now there is the Strip, the lights, the golf courses, the test site. On the other hand, there was culture, culture “proper,” the way it should be. In Vegas this proper culture is mutated by the action of a unique and “unnatural” business plan, a freak formation of capital, producing new species of pleasure. It also produces many unique “sports” of culture—the popular saying “only in Las Vegas” is both a boast and an admission. As distressing as are the environmental and humanitarian catastrophes associated with this most “western” of landscapes, its cultural mutations should be analyzed in context of those histories (rather than dismissed out of hand as the necessarily worthless products of a failing civilization). Considering such cultural formations as mutations, rather than as “failed” representations or stupefying simulations, may offer a way to evaluate them with care rather than with moralizing condescension.

The metaphor of mutation has the disadvantage, however, of describing “culture” in natural terms. We may need to pair it with a notion that lets us keep in mind the production of culture as human, meaning-laden and at least in part intentional.

Las Vegas performs. It is full of language which takes action, which is to say that it is “performative.” It is also full of *actions* that are primarily *expressive*. This other sense of performativity almost reaches back around to theatricality. An appropriate example of an action-taking performative is “to wager.” An example of an *expressive* (if still performative) action is “to waste.”

If “to wager” is a classic example of performative language in that it has real effects (in this case economic ones), in Vegas “to waste” is an action for which the symbolic,

expressive outcomes may be even more important than its “reality.” Performance itself can be characterized as “unproductive expenditure;” it is “something for nothing,” but not in the usual Vegas sense of the phrase.<sup>5</sup> Rather, performance expends resources for its own sake. In this sense, then, the apparent “waste” of water in the construction of Las Vegas experience can be considered not only for the literal truth (where does the water come from? how much? where does it go?) but also as performance (who shows what to whom?). Especially because practices which appear wasteful are in many cases much more efficient than the average citizen of the “real” Las Vegas watering their lawn, water “waste” on the Strip should in fact be judged not only for what it expends, but for what it means.

In most cases, that meaning is “luxury,” but it does not follow that all the water consumption by casinos is egregiously wasteful. The Bellagio’s dancing fountains, for example, use recycled “gray water” from the hotel’s sinks and showers. Further, the aggregate individual water use by visitors vastly exceeds its symbolic and decorative consumption. Moreover, the true water impact of tourism is manifested in the permanent population growth, especially among the middle and upper classes.

The implication of shifting from an ecological/conservation perspective on “waste” to a focus on its *meaning* within tourist culture is that such things can be judged as *representation*. In this way, the problematic use of resources in a fountain or a wild animal display can be critiqued without relying exclusively on environmental science or abstract ethical precepts. Rather, it becomes possible to also ask what the expressive, political effect of “waste” and other resource use is.<sup>6</sup> For example, in the case of water, one critique might attack the elitist traditions of aquatic display and landscaping referenced by Lake Bellagio. Another analysis might emphasize instead the relatively democratic access to that display offered to the public without regard for their spending at that location. Yet a third line of inquiry might note the dependence on corporate patronage to create private “parks” in a city with notoriously little actual public green space.

Along these lines, the stupendous swimming pool maintained for Cirque du Soleil’s performance titled “O” could seem modest across the Strip from the Venetian’s fake canals, or by comparison with the water park at Mandalay Bay. It can also be seen, beyond its multiple aesthetic functions in the show, as a marker of extravagance, a frame as well as a pool and a fountain. This meaning of water connects O to its place in the desert, signaling its unity with rather than opposition to the rest of Las Vegas’ theatrical, performative culture.

Such complications of the “nonproductive” expenditure of water indicate the limitation of moralistic approaches to Las Vegas culture. Conservative commentators refer to the town as “sin city,” and mean it. Many other critics use the same phrase with a sense of irony or even approval. But they all draw on the assumption that pleasure (and by extension “culture”) is fundamentally immoral. In the same way that “waste” is understood (particularly within the so-

called Protestant work ethic) as sinful, so are sex, freedom, “unearned” gains, and pleasure more generally—and at times in the history of Western theatre, that has included performance pleasure as well.<sup>7</sup> The example of water waste illustrates that it is more valuable to skip the assumption that waste is sinful and instead ask what waste does, what its performance entails, what it means.

This emphasis on meaning does not imply that the “real” issues confronting the city do not matter. That physicality is inseparable from culture. Social conservatives are not likely to give up their suspicion of pleasure, but cultural criticism should leave behind the vestiges of a “sin-based” approach to Las Vegas culture—and, one might add, to popular culture more generally. Pleasure, and especially theatrical pleasure, is the most powerful “place-maker” in Vegas. It may be useful to ask whether and how certain pleasures are “ethical” or “just,” but “Sin City” is a theme, not a theology.

Yet we can hardly ignore the real material outcomes of the pursuit of the desires that this “theme” represents. And if Las Vegas, that supremely wasteful, water-guzzling, carbon-emitting place can offer any service to the earth’s environment, it might be to exemplify so clearly a seemingly intractable human cultural problem. For while I happily disagree with those who see the pleasures humans take in culture as “wasteful” and even sinful, I must acknowledge that one of those pleasures is wastefulness—wanton destruction—itself. Vegas is many things, but one of those things is this—a place we go to—driving, flying—to take pleasure in waste: in paving the dry soil, evaporating the Colorado river, consuming sushi and watching dolphins in the desert, organizing the bodies of other humans as if they were our possessions. I don’t think it is interesting to think of Las Vegas as a sinful tourist destination, but I do think it is materially undeniable—and also symbolically meaningful—that so much cultural production comes at the price of so much natural destruction.

## Notes

1. Mike Davis, “Las Vegas Versus Nature,” *Dead Cities* (New York: New Press, 2002): 85–105.
2. If “culture” is a central concern of Las Vegas itself and of Las Vegas studies, each of these examples emphasizes the dynamic relation between ideas of “culture” and “nature.”
3. Jane Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1999).
4. Davis, among others, has detailed the real horror of mutation experienced in human and animal reproduction “downwind” of the test site; see Davis 42–59.
5. The phrase “unproductive expenditure” is Georges Bataille’s, but it is apt even without his theoretical development; audiences are keenly aware that on many levels performance is a “waste.”
6. This is not to say that ethics or the natural sciences do not provide effective means to critique many such uses of resources. In fact, the “conservation alibi” put forward by magicians Siegfried and Roy for their use of performing animals (that their white tigers are a distinct population in need of special preservation measures) is best refuted with reference to actual biologists and conservationists.

7. James A. Morone, in his book *Hellfire Nation: the Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), explains the dilemma of Puritanism, which preaches hard work, which in turn creates social mobility; “the social order, fixed by God, kept coming unfixed.” Morone narrates U.S. history in terms of a recurrent puritan/Victorian moralism suspicious of worldly things. (Morone: 43)

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