Baroque or Renaissance-such as Borromini, Brunelleschi, or Michelangelo-made, one could really feel a deep sense of despair or nausea.

Caesars Palace offers another hyperkitsch environment for entertainment-Caesars Magical Empire. It combines dining with show and architectural spectacle in a stage reminiscent of Caesar's world 2,000 years ago. The rhetorics of the advertisement reinforces the mythical aspects of Imperial Rome, and sets the experience in an atemporal time filled with mystery and magic:

> *"Enter through the Celestial Court, the gateway to this enchanting new world. Your adventure begins in the Chamber of Destiny, where the story of Caesars Magical Empire is told as you experience an environmental illusion that spirits you along an underground catacomb. You will be guided through Catacomb Maze, past intriguing artifacts and imposing doorways, to one of ten dining chambers of the Gods. Here a sumptuous three-course feast is served to the 24-chamber guests as a sorcerer weaves magic spells before them. [...] After you have been charmed by all the wonders of Caesars Magical Empire, pass through the Infinity Hallway, a final phantasm that transports you back to reality. We hope your virtual visit to Caesars Magical Empire will conjure you to our mystical realm again and again". [caesars.com, 2001; my emphasis]*

New York- New York

Two big corporations (MGM Grand and Primadonna Resorts, Inc.) teamed up to create the New York-New York Hotel & Casino, a $350-million, 2024-room complex in 1996. Hailed as "the greatest city in Las Vegas", this collage property re-creates America's most paradigmatic metropolis. Why would a person visit the real New York City now if s/he can have its best pieces collaged and sanitized in Las Vegas?. In fact, NY-NY manages to package a 300-foot-long Brooklyn Bridge, a 150-foot-tall Statue of Liberty, and twelve New York-styled hotel towers, featuring the iconic Chrysler, AT&T, and Empire State buildings.

Coney Island Emporium provides an array of amusing activities at NY-NY, including interactive laser tag, virtual reality games, and all the latest simulators: futuristic attractions set against the sights, sounds, and thrills of old time New York. A roller coaster surrounds all the attractions of the hotel, adding "urban" noise and thrill to the atmosphere. The 84,000 square foot Central Park-themed casino, the charm of Greenwich Village streetscape, and the excitement of Times Square are all collapsed together under a simulated star-filled night-an impossible sight for Manhattan.

New York - New York Hotel & Casino

Aside of all the obvious kitsch and grand hyperreality, three incredible details gives a more subtle idea of the dimension of hiperkitschification at New York-New York. First, the domestic scaling of urban furniture and details. At the Greenwich Village simulation, there are scaled-down buildings, with cute little windows depicting flowery curtains and semi-open blinds, street lights and signs. More surprisingly, mailboxes and other street furniture portray characteristic New Yorker street art or graffitti, in what constitutes an outrageous cooptation of a quintessential language of urban reaction and resistance.

Second, the collapsing of iconography of different domains of meanings in the decoration of the casino. Maybe the most uncanny of the examples is Marilyn Monroe's enactment of the Statue of Liberty. Monroe, the mythical godess of American pop-culture in the posture of one of her most famous and suggestive photographs is yet attired as the most respected woman of American symbolism: Mrs. Liberty. Holding up her fake flame, Monroe conveys the deceptive message that in the land of the hyperreal "big apple," people can have it all-i.e., there is no need for them to yield passions, desires, and compulsory gambling, in the pursue of the most supreme of moral values.

Finally, the attempt of the reproduction at different scales of the 'essence' of New York. From a cramp of skyscrapers at the outside façade to the nittygritty recreation of Greenwich Village in the inside. Yet, this hallucinatory game with scale reaches its ultimate expression in a souvenir selling cart: within a skyscraper-like hotel, a souvenir-selling cart designed with motifs of skyscrapers, selling skyscraper souvenirs. This chain of simulations signal the apoplectic triumph of kitsch: the dissolution of the distinction between nostalgic kitsch (i.e., cultural fossils) and melancholic kitsch (souvenirs), in one continuum realm of hyperreality [4].

In Las Vegas Strip, besides the aforementioned re-creations of Rome and New York, there are essentialized urban microcosms of Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo, and other places. In many of these environments, the distinctions between nighttime and daytime are purposely blurred or made insignificant for the creation of spectacle and the production of a sense of alienation from time and reality. The blurring of nighttime and daytime that started in The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, and followed at the New York-New York, has become a mandated feature in the new resort casino complexes in Las Vegas. Today, The Venetian, The Paris Las Vegas, and Aladdin, are among the newer hotels that feature an ever perfected in-door versions of 'natural' (night)time.

The Venetian

Located at the very center of Las Vegas Strip on the former site of the legendary Sands Hotel (which was torn down to open room for this new hotel), The Venetian is a $2 billion, 3,036-suite luxury resort inspired by the splendor of Italy's so-called most romantic city: Venice. A destination within a destination, according to the advertisement, "the world's most romantic city is now in the heart of the world's most exciting destination location." At The Venetian, life is explicitly conceived of as spectacle, a mise en scène. It "all come together to create one of the world's truly great resorts, a center stage for the theater of life and the best it has to offer. [...] Discover Venice at its finest and Las Vegas at its finest" [venetian.com, 2001; my emphasis]. "Built virtually to scale of the original," according to Time Magazine, The Venetian reproduces the legendary city's most storied landmarks and rituals:

"Graceful arched bridges, flowing canals, vibrant piazzas and welcoming stone walkways capture the spirit of Venice in faithful detail. Stroll beneath the majestic colonnades of the Doge's Palace and enter the Grand Casino. Linger along the Rialto Bridge and gaze across the lagoon. Join the masked Carnivale performers who revel in St. Mark's Square. Pass beneath the soaring 315-foot high Campanile Bell Tower and discover the Grand Canal Shoppes. Enjoy the welcome of The Venetian's magnificent piazza, the place where your visit to this fabulous city within a city begins. [...] From the gondola-filled lagoon that beckons to visitors all along the famous Las Vegas Strip to full-scale reproductions of well-known architectural landmarks, The Venetian re-creates the glory and grandeur of Renaissance Venice, providing hospitality and entertainment in a lively streetscape setting" [venetian.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Strolling down stone walkways along the simulation of nearly a quarter mile of Venice's famed Grand Canal, visitors are seduced not only by the compelling recreation of Venice, but also by a selective collection of stores and boutiques. The sense of an open air experience culminates at St. Mark's Square. In this piazza, beneath a 70-foot ceiling filled with the ever-changing Venetian sky, a mix of shops, cafes and live performances is meant to "truly attain the level of Venice in Vegas".


St. Mark's Square at The Venetian

Moreover, the experience of Venice at The Venetian is projected beyond the immediacy of the hyperkitsch tridimensional environment. Thus, the Theater of Sensation at The Venetian features, among other virtual rides, one called "Escape from Venice." The hyperkitsch trip whirls

past, present and future time to produce a new "real time," which takes visitors on "a mystical virtual gondola ride to a mysterious Venetian Carnival and through a time portal to King Tut's Tomb." The ride starts in the Las Vegas Laboratory of a mad scientist who invents a Titan Continuum Engine, which suddenly whisks people to old Venice, where a medieval Venetian carnival is underway. Then, the virtual gondola takes riders to ancient Egypt, where the gods of Egypt offer up precious secrets inside the Giant Pyramid. Surprisingly enough, the realm of hyperreality acquire mind blowing dimensions in Las Vegas, if you realize that you do not need a virtual gondola to get from medieval and renaissance Venice to ancient Egypt. Rather, a real walk or a short taxi ride would suffice to take you from The Venetian to Luxor Las Vegas, only minutes apart from each other in The Strip.

The Luxor

In Las Vegas Strip, not only the simulacra of contemporary cities can be visited. You can also go back in time-in less than 10 minutes-to the golden era of Hollywood in the 1950s (at MGM Grand, "the city of entertainment"); medieval England (at Excalibur); or ancient Egypt (at The Luxor).

The Luxor hotel is a $375 million extravaganza that opened in 1993. Architectural critics Anderson and Chase said about it: "If you thought your post-modern palettes could deal with any bizarre combination of deracinated cultural images-the blurring of simulacra and reality, of ancient and futuristic, of virtual, superficial, and material-wait until you see The Luxor" [Anderson and Chase, 1997]. The Luxor depicts a giant Sphinx of Giza, the avenue of the Sphinxes, an obelisk, and the Keops Pyramid in black glass. The Pharaoh's Pavilion, located one level above the casino, is the gateway to the world's largest atrium, displaying a world all its own within the pyramid, a pastiche of past and present, West and Easter civilizations. The Luxor also features IMAX movies and ride films with ancient Egyptian themes, such as "Mysteries of Egypt" or "In Search for the Obelisk." In addition, there is a virtual-reality Roller Coaster that ride people through the movie "The Greatest Pharaohs."
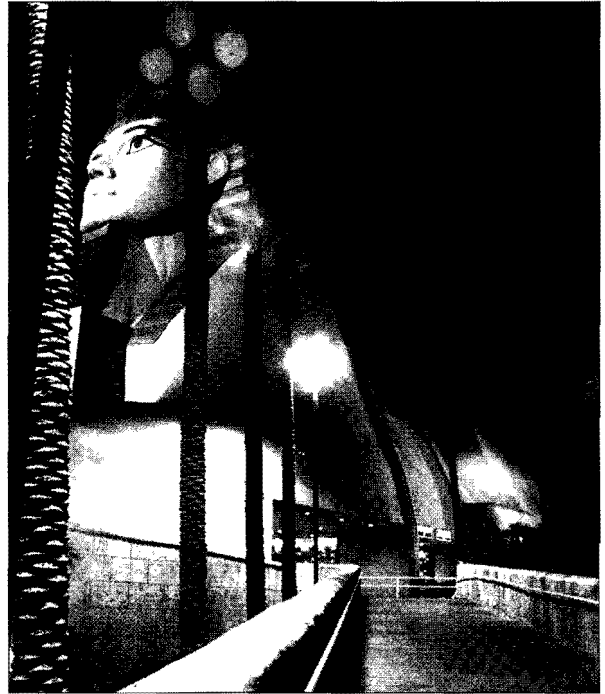
The Sphinx of Gizat at The Luxor Hotel

The term 'authenticity' acquired a distorted meaning at Luxor Las Vegas' Tomb and Museum of King Tutankhamun. It features an expert Egyptologists-supervised reproduction of tutankhamun's tomb as it revealed itself to Howard Carter on November 22, 1922:


Pyramid's interior at Luxor Hotel

"Luxor Las Vegas has once again opened the doors to what has been called the greatest archaeological find in the history of the world, an authentic reproduction of King Tutankhamun's tomb. The measurements of each of the rooms are exact. The treasures therein were reproduced by artisans using the same gold leaf and linens, precious pigments, tools and original 3,300-year-old methods, and each is meticulously positioned according to the records maintained by the Carter expedition [...] The exhibit houses hundreds of reproductions, including the world-famous guardian statues, King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, and an array of statues, vases, beds, baskets and pottery" [luxor.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Paris Las Vegas

Park Place Entertainment Corp.'s luxurious new $785 million, 3,220-room Paris Las Vegas resort and casino, opened on September 1, 1999. It is envisioned to immerse visitors in a "complete Parisian experience," bringing the excitement and 'savoir-faire' of Paris to the entertainment capital of the world: "From the Arc de Triomphe to the Louvre to the elegant decor and world-class cuisine, no stone is left unturned, no detail spared" in the attempt to create French's reputable 'joie de vivre.' In addition, Le Boulevard beckons shoppers with European-style boutiques. These efforts at theming Paris Las Vegas, however, are not only made to entice gamblers and shoppers, for the industry of "fast weddings" is also a competitive big business in Las Vegas. Thus, competing with the mystery of Luxor (at The Luxor), the urban vibrancy of New York (at the NY-NY), or the old charm of Venice (at The Venetian), "Paris Las Vegas adds French flair for romance to the traditional honeymoon in Vegas."

Reinventing the 'real', the advertisement of the Paris Las Vegas features "authenticity" as the resort's hallmark. Its advertisement claims that 'authenticity' is evident from the very first glimpse of Paris Las Vegas, with its Eiffel Tower soaring 50 stories into the sky. The gaming tables and slot machines of the casino are set among three of the Tower's enormous legs, and amid winding cobblestone pathways, French wrought iron street lamps, period architecture, and the River Seine. Again, a 40-foot ceiling painted to mirror the Parisian sky at twilight completes the atmosphere of the Parisian street scenes surrounding the casino.
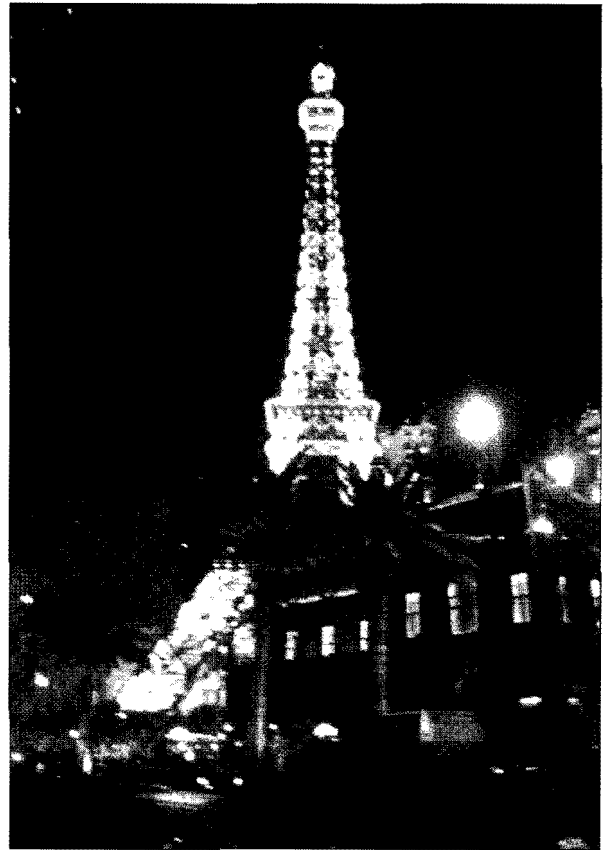
The Eiffel Tower at Paris-Las Vegas Hotel Casino

Aladdin Resort & Casino

After 33 years of operation, the legendary Aladdin casino was imploded on April 27, 1998. In its place, the $1.3-billion brand-new hotel complex Aladdin Resort & Casino opened in mid-August, 2000: "the first resort of the new millennium and the future of Las Vegas entertainment" [www.aladdincasino.com, 2001]. Las Vegas' newest resort features an exotic theme based on the legendary 1,001 Arabian Nights, and includes more restaurants, shops, entertainment and casino options than any other destination in Las Vegas. Aladdin Gaming, LLC. is the Las Vegas based developer of the new Aladdin Resort & Casino complex, and TrizecHahn Development Corporation, is the developer of Desert Passage, the resort's expansive shopping, entertainment and dining destination. With extensive entertainment and gaming offerings, the 34-acre complex site includes a new 2,600-room hotel; a 100,000-square-foot casino; the completely remodeled 7,000-seat Theatre for the Performing Arts; The London Club at Aladdin, a 35,000-square-foot European-style luxury casino, and extensive meeting space.

Interestingly enough, the Aladdin Resort signals the end of an architectural layout dogma in Las Vegas. Whereas in other hotels of The Strip, guest and visitors are forced to pass through the casino floor in their way to their rooms or any other hotel destination, the Aladdin features a unique stacked layout allowing hotel guests to access their rooms, the pool, and the health spa without walking through the casino or other public areas. Such is the confidence of the designers and developers in the profitability of the multifaceted attractions of the hotel, that the rest of the amenities are not conceived as accessories to the casino, but as complements to it. Just as all the other Las Vegas' themed hotels, Aladdin features its share of grand hyperkitsch. There is, for instance, a towering 50-foot golden lamp in the center of the casino floor, a striking tribute to the tale of Aladdin; a dramatic sculpture of giant, winged horses at the entrance to the sports book facility; and a constantly changing wall of light, representing flowers blooming in an enchanted garden, that fills the room with brilliant color.

All this detailing at the Aladdin, however, pales when compared to Desert Passage's hyperkitsch. Truly unprecendentedly, in the wondrous world of fantasy at Desert Passage, hyperkitsch peaks its allucinatory potential. Guests find a spatially sweeping experience at Desert Passage, the most comprehensive, 500,000-square-foot entertainment and shopping adventure in Las Vegas. The environment at Desert Passage transports visitors to a recreated geography of exotic, ancient trade routes stretching from the coast of Spain across Northern Africa onto the Arabian Sea. 130 stores and 14 restaurants are arranged into a series of merchandising districts which blend architectural styles from the deserts of Morocco to the farthest regions of India. "Along the way, you will be able to browse intriguing marketplaces like the Lost City, which is tucked into a towering mountainside, or enjoy street performances in lively gathering places like the North African Harbor" [desertpassage.com, 2001]. Desert Passage has an outdoor-like, Oriental-Village-like design, with multiple entrances-such as the India and Morocco Gates-levels, and overlooks. It also features a dramatic, four-story ceiling-the highest in Las Vegas-creating the mysterious atmosphere of an Arabian night. Lee Wagman, president and chief executive officer of TrizecHahn Development Corp., said: "We've created an adventure so complete, guests will feel they are traveling along the streets of the great market cities of Tangier, Fez, and Marrakech."

TrizecHahn Development Corp. has followed a clear, single goal-oriented market strategy. For them, Desert Passage is "the only destination on the south end of the Strip which satisfies the longing for tourists' number one preferred activity... shopping." To be sure, in their creation of this consumer haven-or heaven-they have paid due homage to "authenticity:" TrizecHahn has worked directly with the Moroccan government "to create a comprehensive presentation of entertainment elements which thoroughly articulate the customs of desert lands." Here, I allow myself to cite extensively from Desert Passage advertisement [desertpassage.com, 2001], in an attempt to convey through content-analysis the unprecedented, mind-blowing extent to which interior architecture and technology are used to create a sense of pleasurable, exotic places and times and, henceforth, catalize consumerism. What follows is a singular example of hyperkitsch rethorics that work together with the hyperkitsch physical environment at Desert Passage to create special, alluring time/place settings aimed at promoting the image and profitability of famed stores-which, by the way, are not from the geographies depicted. In addition to the time and place-related physical and discursive metaphors, note how the whole experience of visiting Desert Passage is depicted as an adventurous journey [5]. An adventure, however, without the unknown-risks, dangers, surprises.

"Four unique merchandising and design zones inspired by ancient desert trade routes from Morocco across North Africa provide exceptional, authentic environments for retailers, specialty stores, culinary destinations and a wide variety of exotic merchants. Desert Passage will transport guests to the world's most exotic marketplaces. The exotic and mysterious lands that span the deserts from Morocco through Africa and onto the Arabian Sea and India have long been the fascination of adventurers, and the focus of fables still as much alive and wondrous today as in ancient times. The romantic Spice Routes; the striking diversity of the desert landscape; its peoples, its colors, geometry, and symbols remain vivid influences in modern culture, inspiring the fashions we wear and the stories recreated in literature and on the silver screen.

The journey begins just off the Strip through the Morocco Gate, a grand portal rising 90' above the Strip, which beckons travelers [...]. The visitor is immediately immersed into a vividly authentic street scene brought to life with aged Moroccan antiquities and artifacts dotting the pathways, tiled patterns, Moorish architecture and ancient

buildings etched with the patina and character of a thousand years. If the beauty is found in the details, the grandeur is found in the architectural scale. Although completely enclosed and sheltered from the elements, Desert Passage conveys a remarkable sense of openness and light, creating the sensation of travel through such great market cities as Tangier, Fez, and Marrakech. Far from being all desert, these colorful cities exude a spectacular beauty ubiquitous in the repetitive arches, the mosaic tiles, the straw-permeated stuccos, patterned metalwork and fountain courtyards.

The guiding principle throughout the adventure is to enable travelers to not only observe, but also to hear, taste, touch and even smell the experience. Nowhere within Desert Passage is the engaging of the senses more apparent than in the next Encounter, the Fragrance Market. Here, the subtle rich aromas of essential oils and fragrances surround travelers in a collection of intriguing and intoxicating health and beauty products [...]. Traveling on through a desert fortress and it's Treasure House, visitors are tempted with a vast array of treasures and specialties [...] Emerging, the drama is magnified by the traveler's first glimpse of the majestic Lost City; the grand public square nestled among soaring buildings, tall towers, domes and balconies that sit at the base of a towering 85' mountainside. From balconies carved into the cliffs, onlookers survey the bustling activity of this lively marketplace filled with a public fountain and purveyors of food and fancy. Renowned retailers [...] and acclaimed restaurants [...] serve travelers under the canopy of a sunny desert sky which transitions to a breathtaking sunset and twinkling stars during the evening hours.

In the foothills of the Lost City, the dramatic Sultan's Palace towers over the courtyard below, its golden dome glistening in the sunlight. [...] In the distance, sounds of the bustling Merchants Harbor draw travelers to a breathtaking North African harbor front and a remarkable discovery, the hull of a 155' steam ship which is moored into port. Sounds of footsteps along the wooden gangway echo through the streets as longshoremen scramble to unload new merchandise for trading. Scattered clouds drift across the sky as a light breeze tempers the summer heat. The sea gently laps against the wharf as a passing seagull cries overhead. The breeze builds, a buoy clangs and a far off thunder rumbles. Soon, the storm arrives in port and a gentle rain begins to fall, but not for long. Soon, the skies clear and the Merchants Harbor is once again a bustling with all the eclectic energy of true ports of call where hip fashion and resortwear boutiques [...] are bursting with styles from New York, LA, Great Britain and Paris.

For those travelers in search of designer fashion, the preferred destination is the exquisitely proportioned Hall of Lamps. Repetitive arches patterned in the Alhambra's distinctively colored striping frame the walk [...]. The adventure permeates every detail as travelers are enveloped in cityscapes filled with lush marketplaces where trinkets are presented streetside, musicians, artisans and acrobats punctuate the landscape, and pedicabs gracefully transport travelers from one venue to another. No matter where the journey leads, an underlying warmth and typical hospitality of always wanting to please follow travelers from one moment to the next" [desertpassage.com, 2001; my emphasis].

Freemont Street Experience

As The Strip was gaining in profitability, Fremont Street and the surrounding area in Downtown Las Vegas suffered decline and urban degeneration. It should be noticed that the hotels casinos in The Strip are owned by big corporations, and are located in the county. Therefore, they do not pay taxes to the city of Las Vegas, producing only indirect contributions to the municipal economy. Slowly loosing its customer base to The Strip, by the early 1990s Freemont Street had become a forgotten, crime-ridden neighborhood. Finally, a consortium of casino operators formed a public/private partnership for a downtown revitalization effort, and agreed on a project to roof over Freemont Street, "enshrining the casinos and transforming the area into a giant, controlled, pedestrianised urban entertainment experience" [Anderton and Chase, 1997].

Hotel casinos in The Strip are not the only ones that are taking advantage of the night-being it real or hyperreal-as instrument of spectacle. The Freemont Street Experience is a 90-foot high framed vault covering 4 blocks, where a spectacular lighting Sky Parade set off by the dark sky at night is performed. It has successfully transformed these blocks into a giant foyer for the Freemont Street casinos. "The irony of the Freemont Street"-say Anderton and Chase-"is that it had to be killed in order to be saved. The Freemont Street Experience represents the adaptation of a suburban model-the sanitised shopping mall-to an urban situation" [1997].

The Vault at Freemont Street

Learning from Las Vegas' hyperkitsch

The suspension of real time and space in these resort casino complexes in Las Vegas is aimed at both facilitating the deceiving perception of false, constructed 'natures;' and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. The move to facilitate the perception of constructed 'natures' is a direct response to the current social crisis of urban identity formation for both the human subject and the public sphere. For many of Las Vegas' tourists who visit the hyperkitschy setups of the cities represented in The Strip rather than those real cities themselves, these representations become the visitors' 'real' mental image of those cities. These urban images have been conveniently located and hygienically packaged, detached from the troublesome aspects of real urban life-congestion, crime, pollution, poverty, etc. Similarly, the iconic collages of world-class cities in Las Vegas have been comfortably detached from the somewhat distant and often culturally foreign settings they represent, to be clustered around an accessible, familiar American strip [Irazábal, 1998]. In these ascetic Las Vegas' landscapes, people are driven to suspend their belief, given that space, time, whether, and even reality are recreated for the sake of entertainment. Here, hedonism and consumerism are constructed as two sides of the same coin, disguisedly provoked by spectacle [Irazábal, 2000].

The examination of recent architecture in Las Vegas Strip proves the fluid boundaries between reality and fantasy, and how they are exploded by the sensibilities aroused by the use of kitsch and hyperreality. Kitsch is the medium used in Las Vegas for the production of hyperreality, i.e., the kitsch buildings in The Strip "simulate to have what they haven't." The kitsch landscape in Las Vegas is configured by the substitution of architectural and urban signs and simulations of the real for the real itself. The fascination of people with hyperkitsch iconography inspired in internationally renown urban cities in Las Vegas results from their alienation from their real cities. This is especially true for American visitors-whom constitute the majority of visitor in Las Vegas-and their disenchantment with the anomic American urban and suburban landscapes they inhabit everyday. In Las Vegas Strip, these visitors can enact their fantasies of inhabiting essentialized urban microcosms of world-class cities, particularly from charming Europe-Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo,...-or from the 'exotic' Orient-Luxor-or from an idyllic past-Imperial Rome, Medieval England,...-which create imaginary landscapes upon where to ease-however briefly and superfluously-the emptiness and estrangement derived from conflicted urban identities and poor citizenship. These phenomena evidence the current social crisis of urban identity formation-for both the human subject and the public sphereamid the accelerating metamorphoses of our contemporary culture of spectacle, hedonism and consumerism.

Despite the incredible capacity that Las Vegas Strip has shown to reinvent itself every couple of years (with an ever shorter cycle), there are many analysts who believe this hyperkitsch landscape has almost reached its limit. The city may in fact be on the verge of a very crude awakening, if for nothing else, because of natural resources depletion, another major aspect of its excesses: with more than 100,000 hotel rooms and the fastest growing population in the U.S., this city in the middle of a desert adds 6,000 people every month, and has the highest per capita water consumption rate in the world, 375 gallons of water per day [The Associated Press, 2001]. Thus, despite its demonstrated resilience, hyperkitsch may not survive in Las Vegas, as Michael Ventura (author and journalist) predicts: "You have all these classic images from all of Western civilization that kind of come here to die. It is as if they have come here for one last party... Everything begins and ends, and one day the desert will come back [to Las Vegas] and take it over again" [Berman et.al., 1996].

Even for a critical visitor to Las Vegas, one who is not readily flimflammed by the enchanting hyperrealism of hotel casinos in The Strip, the risk of not grasping the transcendence of this phenomenon is still very strong. Paraphrasing the analysis of Disneyland by Baudrillard, just as prisons exist to mask the fact that society itself is one, Las Vegas Strip is presented to us as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact much of the new American urban landscape is no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal. Yet, for all the negative connotations herein explored, is there a pedagogical, liberating, or redemptive potential in hyperkitsch? The anti-kitsch, anti-hyperreality positions that most literature on the subjects endorse remain to be challenged. I briefly point to three different visions along those lines.

First, hyperkitsch as pedagogical. Dissertating about the potential of kitsch, Abraham Moles wrote: "[T]he passage through kitsch is the normal passage in order to reach the genuine. [...] Kitsch is pleasurable to the members of mass society, and through pleasure, it allows them to attain the level of higher exigencies" [Moles, 1971]. Calinescu also succumbs to the enchantment of Moles' paradox, i.e., that the simplest and most natural way toward 'good taste' passes through 'bad taste'. Extrapolating from this notion, if we acknowledge that hyperkitsch is rapidly becoming to be a standard 'art' of our time, then it may very well be the unavoidable starting point of any aesthetic experience. Now, if hyperkitsch thrives on aesthetic-and urban experience-naïveté, it also may offer pedagogical possibilities, including the realization that there is difference between hyperkitsch and other forms of art and (urban) reality.

Second, hyperkitsch as liberating, i.e., as the exercise of plurality and as antagonistic to hegemonies of power and art production. Within the specific realm of architecture, it is only fair to note that kitsch has not always being perceived as retrograde and reactionary. Rather, it found strong advocates among the critics of the universalistic and elitist postures of modern architecture. The greatest vindication of kitsch in architecture is found in the work of Californian architect and architectural theorist Robert Venturi. In his groundbreaking book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture [1966], Venturi advocated for the creation of architectural language that could be read and interpreted at different levels by different people, appealing to different tastes, and not only to the elite's. His

posture promoted an unprecedented questioning of the hegemonic architectural ideology of modernism. Sending into apoplexy the shaky architectural establishment, in 1972 Venturi published his book Learning from Las Vegas, with Dennis Scoot Brown and Stephen Izenour. Certainly, Las Vegas made the best place on Earth to pursue their argument. Their work served to promote a plurality of approaches to architectural form and style. Kitsch was legitimized as an outcome of a populist and pluralist approach to architecture, and many sought it purposefully "as an 'anti-art' that aimed to destroy the barrier between high and popular culture in the architectural medium" [Kiliçkiran, 2000].

Thirdy, hyperkitsch as redemptive, i.e., as critical, creative, revisionary practice. Olalquiaga claims there are possibilities for a sort of progressiveness in kitsch[6].She calls this particular approach to kitsch production third-degree kitsch. In third-degree kitsch the iconography of first- and second-degree kitsch is coopted and invested with new meanings, generating a hybrid product that blends different cultural symbols in varying degrees of transformation. Intensity is sought through the simulation of a recasting of the lost experience. The recreation of objects as third-degree kitsch invests them with new political meanings, and changes them, again, from referents to signs. Third-degree kitsch is a result of a paradox: When third-degree kitsch accentuates the attributes for which kitsch was banned as art in the first place-namely, eclecticism, visual saturation, or figurativeness, for instance-it achieves a unique artistic experience. This paradox-namely, the social production and construction of kitsch as true art-promotes the collapsing of modernity's basic opposition between art and kitsch, or high and popular art. Within the current crisis of representation, "copy, simulation, and quotation are raised to a new level of interest, representing a different experience of art and creativity. In postmodern culture, artifice, rather than commenting on reality, has become the most immediately accessible reality. [...] [F]ake and simulation are no longer distinguishable from quotidian life. The boundaries between reality and representation, themselves artificial, have been temporarily and perhaps permanently suspended" [Olalquiaga, 1992].

Third-degree kitsch reappropriates traditions from a detached vantage point, cannibalizing on imagery as needed to absorb the icons and traditions and remake their meanings. Yet, the colonization of imagery works in the opposite

direction as well, i.e., it causes 'reverse colonization:' "Instead of appropriation annihilating what it absorbs, the absorbed invades the appropriating system and begins to constitute and transform it. Third-degree kitsch iconography can "occupy the appropriator's imagination by providing a simulation of experiences the native culture has become unable to produce." Hence the progressive potential of third-degree kitsch for the destabilizing of traditional hegemonies, forcing negotiations with different cultural types of production and perception previously oppressed. "The ability of cultural imagery to travel and adapt itself to new requirements and desires can not longer be mourned as a loss of cultural specificity in the name of exhausted notions of personal or collective identities. Instead, it must be welcomed as a sign of opening to and enjoyment of all that traditional culture worked so hard at leaving out" [Olalquiaga, 1992].

Far from being realized in current Las Vegas, only time would tell if the envisioning of these new notions of (hyper)kitsch have only been an exercise of wishful thinking and naïve optimism. For the time being, I have my contentions. Regarding the pedagogical potential of hyperkitsch, if it appears as a necessary step on the path toward an ever elusive goal of 'authentic' aesthetic experience, would the viewer come to be receptive to the experiences of coming upon the real cities after seeing architectural icons of New York, Paris, or Venice in Las Vegas? Calinescu seems overly optimistic when he believes in the awaking of the subject, i.e., in the unexpected failure of kitsch, reassuringly show-ing deceivers who are deceived, and fools who realize their foolishness and become wise: an utopia not yet realized in 2000's Las Vegas.

If from the dawn of postmodern architecture in the 1960s and 1970s Venturi et.al. found kitsch to be produced as an expression of plurality against political and artistic hegemonies, in the 1990s and 2000s the world of architectural production seems to have come full circle. The postmodern architecture of the 1960s and 1970s did indeed show a progressive ability-through the production of kitsch and hyperreality-to contest the hegemony of late capitalism and imperialism-expressed through the universalist and elitist postures of modern architecture. This progressive potential, however, has now been coopted by the new hegemonic economic and cultural systems (such as the multimillion corporations of Las Vegas' hotels), which have found in kitsch and hyperreality production-i.e., postmodern architecture-a superb language and media for the deployment of power.

Lastly, the architecture reviewed here as currently present in Las Vegas Strip erase the difference between reality and representation, only to promote the consumption of commodified urban nostalgia. As such, it is second-degree kitsch or hyperkitsch. For this architecture to become third-degree kitsch, or as I would rather put it, post-hyperkitsch, it would have to transit back the way from exchange to use value, from referent to sign,... and in the process be invested by new, plural, syncretistic, and changing meanings acquired at several levels-personal, social, cultural, and political. At present, however, the production of hyperkitsch in Las Vegas is blatantly hegemonic, and there is no sign of this condition changing in the foreseeable future.

How should we proceed from here, then? I suggest that future critical studies turn from an interest on kitsch as object and hyperreality as technique of re-presentation to the investigation of the production and reproduction of the "hyperkitsch-human" as subject, i.e., the numb consumer of hyperkitsch. Truly enough, the hyperkitsch-human is immersed in an ideology of escapism, subjugated to the hallucinatory effects of the mystification of reality, incapable of either facing the challenges and responsibilities involved in a real urban experience; or, worst yet, incapable of finding a real urban experience in the midst of a hyperreal world. We should not, however, yield to the thought of the hyperkitsch-human as helpless or hopeless subject. Rather, we should reenact the wildest utopian dream of Adorno, uttered in 1947: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. [...] Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" [Adorno, 1947]. It might not be long before we are apt to discover hyperkitsch falling into its own traps, paradoxically revealing both its own distortions and its latent potentialities for new syncretistic art and reality forms. We may then, after all, become post-hyperkitsch subjects.

fotografías: Dinah Bromberg

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NOTAS

1- Paper presented at "Night and the City" Conference, March 16-18, 2001. McGill University. Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I thank Professor Eduardo Subirats, PhD. in Philosophy who has written extensively about postmodern culture as spectacle, for his comments on some ideas presented here.

2- I thank my late friend Tamra Suslow, Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature. who suggested the term to me in our conversation on January 18, 2001.

3- By the way. The Mirage can be considered the ultimate metaphor of Las Vegas: an artificial, impossible mirage in the Mohave Desert!

4- For a detailed discussion of nostalgic vs. melancholic kitsch, refer to Olalquiaga [1998].

5- In the citation. I highlighted in italics words such as journey, traveler, traveling. transport, adventure, and adventurer. I also made italics the descriptions referred to the created time and weather in Desert Passage's different districts. Although I suppressed all the names of the stores from the narrative (supplanted by this sign: '[...]'), I still feel the rethorics strongly conveys the manipulation of three image-making dimensions: time, place, and adventure, in support of consumption.

6- Much of Olalquiaga's work on kitsch has been influenced by Walter Benjamin. It is significant to note that Benjamin considers kitsch to be more accurate that immediate perception, for immediacy, he claims, only allows a notion of reality. Hence, a true apprehension of things is only possible in the distance left by the loss of this immediacy [Benjamin. 1970]. For Olalquiaga. each degree of kitsch has a different way of satisfying a desire for intensity. First-degree kitsch maintains a hierarchical distinction between reality and representation. while helping to familiarize the intangible (religious beliefs, for instance). It uses images that are part of a readily available cultural heritage. First-degree kitsch strives to satisfy the desire for intensity by the collection and possession of objects infused with use value. In second-degree kitsch the difference between reality and representation collapses, and representation becomes the referent, i.e., the real. Second-degree kitsch displaces use by exchange value, and satisfies a desire for intensity by the consumption of commodified nostalgia. This is the hyperkitsch that I claim exists in the hotel casinos of Las Vegas Strip.