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Las Vegas in Film

It's either a familiar cry of pleasure, or a lament: The song starts with quick and repeating guitar riffs, and in then drop a pair of voices, instantly recognizable as Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons: "Ooooohhh Las Vegas, ain't no place for a poor boy like me. / Every time I hit that crystal city ya know it's gonna make a wreck out of me." If there is any city in the United States that better-embodies the image of lovably losing, share it later. Not just Americans but citizens around the world see Las Vegas as the spitting image of hope, of luck, of possibility, and the bellwether of life and of chance winning out in the end – while never failing to acknowledge the house edge.

For that reason alone, Las Vegas is the Red Queen of popular culture, and inspiration for a remarkable set of films. They come in various flavors, but understatement isn't a part of any of them; watch at will, though with a little wariness for the strong fare.

Vegas and Casinos in Film

With its jejune if cheerful image as a loser's paradise, home to the fabled national tag-line, "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," and for fifty years strutting a hard-earned demographic supremacy as among the very fastest growing cities in the United States, Las Vegas is perennially in the world view.

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The Riviera Hotel, site of the 2009 AAG Annual Meeting, provided the backdrop for the 1995 film Casino, starring Robert DeNiro. For more on Las Vegas as portrayed in film, see article at right.

**Annual Meeting Abstract Submission Deadline
Extended to November 13. www.aag.org/annualmeeting**

Not all is about losing, however. Twenty-five years ago, A. Alvarez recounted the story of a man who came in off the night-shrouded desert with two suitcases, entered Benny Binion's Horseshoe Club, and quietly converted a half-million dollars to chips. He navigated to a roulette table, put the entire amount on red to win, and watched the spin of the wheel. The ball dropped to "red," he tipped the croupier, cashed out the chips, put the neatly-wrapped bills into the two suitcases, and headed back into the desert: a seamless single transaction. As he approached his car, someone thought to ask what he was doing. "I had the money lying around, and I figured I might as well double it or lose it," and with that closing note, he disappeared forever.

Vegas-based casino films are a tough bunch, and not for everyone. Many are fixed firmly on the odds — and beating them, either by dint of personality or by scheme or scam. Still, the Vegas scenery, economy, and élan dominate. For pseudo-historical films, there is 1991's *Bugsy*, directed by Barry Levinson, with Annette Bening (as Virginia Hill) and Warren Beatty playing Ben Siegel, the godfather of the modern casino magnate. No truer than most fictionalized biopics, it's without a happy ending, unless you're pulling for Vegas, itself. The combination of *Oceans 11* (1960), starring the fabled "Rat Pack," and the 2001 remake, directed by Steven Soderbergh, with George Clooney and a distinguished cast, present two versions of what is essentially an ensemble heist flick, with lots of eye candy from actual Vegas properties. The banner film year was 1995, with three releases representing essentially the alpha and omega of visions of Vegas. *Casino*, directed by Martin Scorsese, is a gritty and unrelenting film noir in the spirit of the director's early work, and earned Sharon Stone best actress recognition from the Academy. *Leaving Las Vegas*, from Mike Figgis, offers Nicholas Cage as a down and out alcoholic whose end seems near as he heads to Vegas to finish himself off, until the intervention of Elizabeth Shue. She plays a familiar type in the old-style Western, a "soiled dove" who ultimately works him down from his psychological ledge — in a role

that earned Cage an Academy Award. Las Vegas casinos wouldn't allow interior shots from their properties for what they saw as a "depressing" film, so much of it was filmed in Laughlin, a newly-emerging gaming center along the Colorado River. The 1995 Paul Verhoeven vessel, *Showgirls*, can be described as almost anything except art, unless you're into feathers boas and startling pneumatics; it won nothing (except seven "Razzies" for worst film, plus a posthumous eighth for "worst film of the decade"). Perhaps the best recent effort is the 2003 Wayne Kramer-directed *The Cooler*, starring William H. Macy as an ex-gambler so unlucky that he's on retainer with an old-time Vegas casino boss to "cool off" tables where a gambler is on a roll and cutting too deeply into the house take. Several of these offer superlative film-making and excellent character studies; certainly they are well above the sort of fare offered by NBC television's *Las Vegas* television series that aired for five years, disappearing in 2008.

The Other Vegas

When you check on imdb.com for a plot outline of *Viva Las Vegas* the window says "The plot synopsis is empty." No truer words were ever spoken. But with Elvis Presley and Ann-Margret romping around Las Vegas in a 1964 film, any injection of plot might be overkill. Lucky Jackson (Presley) is trying to race in the first Las Vegas Grand Prix; Rusty Martin (Ann-Margret) is the distraction, with glorious scenes set on-campus at the "Southern Branch" (later UNLV), and dancing and singing enough to go around. Of course, Clark County now has a current population of more than two million people (2008), and is the fifteenth-largest county in the U.S. (larger than New Jersey). Las Vegas is one of just five major cities in Clark County, and there is a considerable life to the place beyond casinos and gambling, even if many of the forty-million tourists a year who go to Las Vegas (itself) don't have a clue about what lies beyond. Elvis and Ann-Margret knew; various film-makers do also.

Films made in Vegas that don't necessarily emphasize libertinage and the clink and

gasp of the slot machines are an eclectic but hardly displeasing bunch. If Las Vegas (and Clark County broadly) can accurately be said to have been formed by what Victoria Randlett once called "Mormons, the military, and mobsters" (Marc Cooper, in *The Last Honest Place in America* added "MBAs"), then there are stories to be told.

Perhaps the best single effort is a twofer: the first pair of "Godfather" films (#2 and #4 on the IMDB top 250 film list), based on the novel by Mario Puzo. Especially good is *The Godfather: Part II*, from a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola, who directs the entire series. Significant parts of the effort are set in Vegas, and the role played by the city is both gentle and reminiscent of some of the mid-period work by crime novelist Thomas Perry, which portrays Vegas as home and sanctuary to a variety of organized-crime family members. The "truthiness" of this, as Stephen Colbert might have it, is not absolute, but the story and setting is grandiose.

Other efforts do interesting things for Vegas, including a couple of dark horses. A small gem is *Desert Bloom* with Jon Voight, JoBeth Williams, Ellen Barkin, and the memorable Annabeth Gish, in a 1986 portrait of family adaptation to a variety of dysfunctions that end in a flash with detonation of an atomic test that the family watches going off in the distance. A more ominous view of the Atomic Test Site, which loomed over Las Vegas like a Damoclean sword from the late 1940s through the 60s, is in Jayne Loader's 1982 documentary, *The Atomic Cafe*, which is alternately funny, nostalgic, sarcastic, and terrifying. How DID some of us live through such straits without guzzling "atomic cocktails" by the quart?

The late 1990s yielded a pair of quite forgettable films, each intended as comedy, or so we believe. Not even good enough to reach the status of cult film was Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), based on the hilarious novel by Hunter S. Thompson and starring Johnny Depp and Benicio Del Toro in two essentially brain dead roles. *Vegas Vacation* (1997), is no less a dim bulb, the fourth down payment on the

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Chevy Chase vacation series. Of the last, we can only say, three was enough; it's a Vegas byword to quit while you're ahead: they should have done.

At the other end of the spectrum, leaping from film to television, we would be remiss not to laud a global (truly so) exposure to Vegas through *CSI (Crime Scene Investigation)*, now in its ninth season (with multiple spinoffs) and, since 2002 regularly the most-watched show on television. Luckily, the actors only infrequently utter the name "Nevada," which they mispronounce as routinely as the President. Yet, as luckily, the show exposes audiences to a variety of venues for murder – not just casinos and after-hours clubs. Local neighborhoods and outlying or rural areas are featured, although the only reliable on-location filming is in overhead shots of The Strip as each scene opens – a glimpse just to remind you where you are.



In the Sci-Fi classic *Tremors*, giant worms eat their way through the population of Perfection, Nevada.

Vegas Environs

Although the Las Vegas Valley has its charm, the sphere of influence (and reach for resources) goes far wider. Not only are water supplies and long-haul transportation critical to modern-day Vegas, they've been important pivots since 1900. Environs are important; there are loving treatments of the surroundings of Vegas in a number of films, but none improves on the undeservedly obscure early (1980) film by Jonathan Demme, based ever-so-loosely on real events. *Melvin and Howard* is a portrait of Melvin Dummer. Melvin is a resident of Gabbs, Nevada (don't ask),

who when taking a pee break by the side of a rural highway comes upon a disheveled older man, injured in a motorcycle accident, who turns out, of course, to be Howard Hughes. He rescues Hughes, drops him off in Vegas, and is later rewarded — if that's the word for it — by a handwritten note that purports to award him a sizable slice of the Hughes estate. A characteristic chaos ensues, but the loving study is of Melvin, a sanguine soul largely unaffected by his 15 minutes of fame, and of the Nevada countryside, from playas to fault scarps to trailer parks. This is Demme at his best, and clearly a harbinger of such later common-touch work by the director as *Swing Shift*, *Something Wild*, *Married to the Mob*, or *Silence of the Lambs*.

Any science-fiction film fan knows the Nevada desert fare well, and there are at least three modern classics, of widely varying value. Greatest is *Tremors*, a film directed by Ron Underwood with such a great cast and scenery (Alabama Hills, in the eastern Sierra, and various Nevada sites) that it fully merits cult status. What can we say: Giant worms attack "Perfection, Nevada" and eat their way through much of the population (14 people); never has rhythmic movement (pogo sticks, basketball bounces, a broken bearing on a drink cooler) been so ominous. Genius. Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (1996) is, well, bizarre, but the destruction of the trailer park world of Pahrump, Nevada, is epic, as is the treatment of country-western music. And *ID4 (Independence Day)*, 1996) culminates in a delightful version of Area 51 (which, of course, supposedly doesn't exist) and an attack by vicious space aliens. Each of these takes a sojourn

through basin and range topography, which is *sui generis*. The lesson? Vegas is a



Kevin Bacon and Fred Ward in a scene from *Tremors* (1990).

world unto itself, and in full measure, film has found it.

Critical Studies...

Las Vegas as repository of popular culture attracts social commentators, critics, admirers, and detractors almost without limit. Among the better are Neal Postman, Marc Cooper, and our late colleague at UNLV, Hal Rothman, who was more Vegas than Las Vegas itself. Why such a fascination with Las Vegas in film? In part, being a temple of popular culture rings true, and there's an enduring sense among Americans that what's popular is inherently more authentic or accessible. But there's charm – or repulsion – in the gambling and the wonderland of entertainment. Many thoughtful people regard "gambling" – sanitized to "gaming" in the Nevada vernacular – as an exploitation of the less educated, hooking into the hapless. Geodemographics shouts otherwise: Las Vegas attracts nearly everyone (except those who affect disdainful superiority), and it shows 'em a good time. The city has warmth enough for all, up to the point that your money runs out, and then there is grudging sympathy. But what a place Vegas is to visit, in person or on film, and what a Rorschach test it offers of the American psyche. ■

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