

Gambling, Death, And Violence: Hollywood Looks At Las Vegas
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An American Dream

Las Vegas has been the focus and locale of several big Hollywood movies in the past decade. We have chosen three of these movies to represent Las Vegas as depicted by Hollywood. They seem to us to tell the story of the place, the activity it was built to house, the people who created it, and the people who go there to gamble. The three movies are violent. Two of them end in the death of their hero, and the remaining one begins with a death scene and ends with the death of an era. The point here is violence and violent death. Violence in the movies is arresting. Bottom line, violence is about dying. Movies tell us that death is only temporary. The actors who die do not really die. All of these movies about Las Vegas present heroes who have much in common with the hero of the conventional Western, just as Las Vegas has much in common with other Western towns. The stories follow a form parallel to that of the Western as well. They all feature the hero coming into town on a quest or at random, working out his meeting with destiny, and accepting the outcome. In this respect, they parallel the experience of the visitors who come to Las Vegas to gamble. The visitors to Las Vegas thus see themselves as like the cowboys who came to the frontier to seek their fortune.

According to the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, the modal age of people coming to Las Vegas to gamble is between 55 and 65. They are people who are facing the waning of sexuality and imminent death. To these people, Las Vegas is the last promise of the American Dream. It declares that you can beat the odds. You don't have to give in to statistics. You can win. Even though the odds on your dying are perfect in the long term—no one has ever succeeded in not dying—even though the odds on your losing in the long term in casino gambling are perfect—no one lives to walk away with the profits except the casino—still the casino gives you hope. The parallels are amazing, and it took movie makers only a couple of decades after the founding of Las Vegas to figure it out.

The first of the movies we will consider is *Bugsy*, the story of the founding of Las Vegas as a mega gambling city in the 1940s. The second is *Casino*, the story of the industrialization of Las Vegas in the 1960s. The third, *Leaving Las Vegas* depicts the city as an existential locale, a setting for death in the 1990s. Taken together, they offer a kind of film history of the city as a site for gambling from the start to the present. Taken together, they all describe heroes who go to Las Vegas in search and find the individual meanings it has for their lives. One way to see these movies is as a generational saga: They are about one generation apart. The hero of *Bugsy* could have been the father of the hero of *Casino* and he, in turn, could have been the father of the hero of *Leaving Las Vegas*. Another way to see them is as a description of changing American attitudes toward ethnicity, race, and social class and unchanging American attitudes toward gender. All of these have a place in a psychoanalytic consideration of these movies. But the major focus of our discussion has to do with violence in the movies and its relationship to the fear of death and the fantasy of immortality.

All three movies begin with an intimation of violence. An early scene in *Bugsy* shows the hero, Ben, committing murder. The man he kills dies for a reason. Ben tells him that

he has broken the laws of the mob by cheating on the money he pays them. The opening scene of *Casino*, that of a man being blown up in his car, makes the same essential point. The voice over tells us that this happened for a reason: some people ruined their “paradise on earth.” Paradise, after all, is the place where there is no decay, no aging, no death. Death is something to be terrified of and you can avoid death by gambling. Similarly, the opening scene of *Leaving Las Vegas* is a scene of decay. As the cheerful hero collects liquor bottles from a supermarket aisle and loads them into his cart, he slips as if he is starting down a slippery slope. A generally cheerful, even manic affect pervades all three of these scenes, as if to say that death is not so bad, only a joke, only a silly mistake. All three movies set the scene for a place where death is not terrifying, only a joke, and even in the case of *Casino*, reversible.

The movies about Las Vegas tell a story. The first of them is a movie about the founding of Las Vegas: *Bugsy*. In this tale of a founding, the mythical nature of the beginning is emphasized by the mythical stature of the founder. He is the father of an idea. The film begins economically with an introduction to the heroic founder. In an early scene he is selecting clothes with exquisite taste while reciting an elocution exercise. This narcissist is also a perfectionist. He works hard on sounding and looking the perfect gentleman. His elocution exercise is ironic and will provide a leitmotif for the movie. “Twenty dwarves took turns doing handstands on the carpet.” It describes lots of effort toward an absurd end. The man reciting it is making a great effort. The exercise, the movie implies, will lead to an absurd end. The suspense in the movie is what this end will be.

He goes on to meet with a businessman while his partner waits in a limousine in the street below. Ben tells the man that he knows the man has been cheating on him in a business deal, gives the man a gift of some shirts, which he calls “the shirt off my back,” and shoots him dead. This scene makes death absurd. By giving him something new and beautiful to wear before he kills him, Ben mocks the man he kills and reduces the dignity and seriousness of death itself. He introduces a split in our perception of death in the movie. It is serious, but at the same time, not serious, irreversible, yet playfully reversible. The man could wear the ties and shirt to his grave.

One of Ben's partners remarks that he could have relied on a hit man they had hired to do the killing. His other partner replies that Ben has never really cared about money, implying that he is doing the killing himself for the pleasure of it. The hero is violent, yet he is playing by a set of rules of honor. This is a murder, but it is also a rule-governed act of justice. The rules say that if you cheat a business partner, the wages of that sin is death. The scene establishes the hero's likeness to us—the audience that believes it is wrong to kill—by implying that the hero has a different rule, yet is also impulse ridden, not just tough as his partners are tough and not just venial as his partners are venial.

If Ben is not just motivated by money, what does he care about? We know that he cares about family and values his role as the provider for his family when he tenderly asks his children what presents they want when he comes back from a trip. On the train he agrees when a friend asks him for money to pay off investigators. Ben gives him the money and advises him to: “Bend your knees when you jump from the train.” Again, money and life are equated. If a person cheats or loses or gets into debt he cannot repay, the code of honor demands his death in return. Death in this movie is not the result of

natural processes, not the outcome of rage or aggression, but a chip in the game of life, a counter to be paid for a debt.

Ben's train is met by his friend the Hollywood star. He watches a tough guy scene being filmed. He asks a starlet to let him light her cigarette; his friend tells him: "That's Virginia Hill." He tells Ben that she is the girlfriend of a very jealous mobster. She repeats the warning. When he plays with her he plays with fire. He makes an overture, she asks him if he will divorce; he says that he is loyal to his wife; she blows him off. He is motivated also by sexual desire. This moment contrasts with an earlier scene in which he meets a woman in an elevator, seduces and abandons her. She is just a passing moment, a trifle, to him. Women may tempt him sexually, but his family comes first. He still values being a husband and father even though he has moved far away from his family. But Virginia is a tough woman, independent and fiery and experienced. She wants security. We can see that he will have to give up a lot to get her.

In a parallel scene, his friend Georgie shows him celebrity houses. Ben demands to go into one he fancies. Georgie tells him that it belongs to Lawrence Tibbet, an early Hollywood opera star. When Tibbet calls him Bugsy, Ben gently but sternly reproves him for calling him a bug, buys his house, and gives him keys to a bungalow at the hotel. Ben insists on his name, Benjamin, a name from the Old Testament. Throughout the movie there are strong and insistent reminders of his Jewishness. He speaks Yiddish with Mickey Cohen and with his old friends. He has kept his roots in Yiddish culture. The scene establishes Ben's relation to High Culture as well as his pride in his Jewish roots. He wants what the swells have, but his loyalty to a nonreligious ethnic identity is important to him. Throughout the film, the Jewish gangsters are shown having special loyalties to each other, protecting each other from their Italian partners. Ben lives on the boundary edge of the worlds of organized crime, of Jewishness, and of art as well as celebrity. The scene further establishes his impulsiveness and his proneness to violence.

Next Ben sets himself up in business. Ben goes to see Jack, the current boss of L.A., and offers him a deal. Jack will now work for Ben, Meyer Lansky, and Lucky Luciano. When Jack protests, Ben offers him only one alternative: He can kill Ben. Jack caves in, then agrees, but consoles his guys by saying that they will eventually kill him. The scene establishes the identity of the men in the smoke-filled room and the power they have to intimidate even the toughest opponents. It also reinforces the theme of death as a part of business, equating money with life and loss of money with death. This grandiose view of business is underlined in the next scene.

Having established himself in a home and in business, Ben goes out to a nightclub. His grandiosity is established when he meets an Italian count who is a friend of Mussolini. Another theme of the movie, the theme of Ben's grandiosity and passionate intensity to the point of madness, continues. He is outrageous enough to believe that he can rid the world of these dictators. Grandiosity is built into Las Vegas by its founder. The whole of Ben's life is governed by his grandiose sense of being entitled to do whatever he chooses.

Ben is in the nightclub for pleasure. He sees Virginia dancing with another man, sends her a piece of jewelry, and buys her interest. Virginia comes to his house as he is on the phone with his wife; he asks to kiss her, she says Joey would kill them, but would have to worry about which one first. Money is not only what staves off death; it is also

what buys love. The obsessive theme returns: "Twenty dwarves took turns doing handstands on the carpet." Money mediates the tension between love and death. This theme echoes through all three of the movies. The women loved by the heroes are all whores. They sell love for money. In *Casino* a variant on the theme emerges. The beloved sells not only love but also children, the hero's fantasy of immortality.

Conflicting values are shown to be a source of conflicting loyalties in all three movies. In *Bugsy* this is shown in Ben's relationship with Mickey Cohen. Mickey Cohen, a Los Angeles mobster, has stolen money from Ben's partners. Ben does not kill him for this. Instead, he confronts Cohen in a steam bath. Ben gives Cohen a job in return for the restitution of money he stole from Jack. Ben is thus breaking the rules of their game: The wages of the sin of stealing from the mob is death. As in the other tense scenes of the movie he repeats "Twenty dwarves took turns doing handstands on the carpet."

Back home with Virginia, Ben taunts her about former boyfriends; she throws an ashtray at him, cutting his forehead. With the blood still wet on his face, Ben confronts Jack again, tells him he was trying to rape him by stealing from him. In contrast to his treatment of Cohen, Ben humiliates Jack, making him crawl, bark, and oink like a pig. Meanwhile Ben is still bleeding from Virginia's blow. They are both excited by Ben's sadistic humiliation of Jack. They have passionate sex.

The next scene is in an airport. Ben wants to show Virginia a place in the desert. She is too afraid to fly. The pilot says: "Let's go. Time is money." Again the movie underlines the equation between time of life and money. Ben, Virginia, and Mickey Cohen are driving in a car. They go across the desert to the tune of "Ole Buttermilk Sky." They visit one of Ben's gambling spots in Nevada. He closes it down because she thinks it is ugly. Ben quarrels with Virginia about his loyalty to his family in Scarsdale. He leaves the car; she drives off, leaving Ben and Micky walking on the road in the desert. Ben gets an idea. He opens up his world with an image of a desert. To the audience, the desert is a place of desiccation and death. To Ben the desert is a place of infinite possibility, an opening in nature. The duality of the metaphor weaves together the place of death, of skulls and skeletons, with a magical place where mirages can stand for hallucinations of all sorts, even the mirage of winning a fortune.

The Las Vegas mirage turns into Hollywood in the next scene. In another nightclub Ben talks with the countess who offers him a chance to meet Mussolini. He sees Virginia with someone else, goes across to Virginia who is with a guitarist. She leaves saying he is not divorcing his wife. He promises to do it. Micky and Ben eat breakfast, Mickey reads a story about the stool pigeon, the man who Ben gave money to on the train when he was going to Los Angeles. Ben says he's going to New York to get a divorce. Micky says he is sorry.

We next see Ben decorating his daughter's birthday cake. His partners come in and meet with him while he is still in the chef's hat he wears to decorate the cake. The partners are angry that Ben closed their gambling place in Vegas because it produced money every month, Ben tells them he plans to replace it with The Flamingo, a place for sex, romance, money, and adventure, the American dream. It will be a place where gambling is allowed, where everything is allowed. His partner Meyer Lansky says "A good place to get people's money." Ben says the casino will be beautiful because the Hoover Dam will provide enough electricity for air conditioning and lighting. Ben's manic genius has hit

upon the perfect use for the gigantic new source of electrical power in the desert. The manic quality of his thinking is conveyed in a series of rapid cuts: Ben chases after Virginia by phone; Ben rushes back into the meeting; Ben chases after his angry children. Ben's mania will be translated into Las Vegas. The city will embody his brilliant idea and his madness.

Ben apologizes to Joey for taking Virginia away from him. "I know you were in love with her." Joey says "I'd never let myself fall in love with a slut like her." His wife asks Ben for a divorce; he refuses. We see him as a man torn between three loyalties: his family, his business, and his love. The whore is contrasted with the mother. All of the themes of the movie are in place.

Ben's anger frightens Virginia in a scene that sets up the reason for her later betrayal. When he returns to Los Angeles, he finds Virginia in pyjamas with a man. Ben throws him through a window in a defenestration that is a subtle castration. He doesn't believe her when Virginia insists that he is her brother. When the man proves that he is, Ben offers him a red Cadillac convertible. He uses money to make reparations for his anger.

Ben's old friend Harry Greenberg arrives. Harry is the man who ratted on Ben and his friends to the police. Ben offers him a bedroom for a nap. Harry says "If I was anywhere else I'd be dead."

Ben: "You talked."

Harry: "I talked. So what should I do?"

Ben: "Take a drive with me."

Virginia insists on coming along. Harry asks Ben about Virginia's boyfriend. He asks about Esta. He is Ben's dearest friend, his alter ego. Ben and Harry go into the woods. Ben comes back to the car. Virginia asks him what happened. The audience knows Ben has killed Harry. Ben chants to himself: "Twenty dwarves took turns doing handstands on the carpet." Ben's mantra covers his conflict. He has upheld the moral code at the cost of his best friend's life.

Ben kicks Joey to a pulp for calling Virginia a whore. Luciano and the others dance while the beating is going on. Honor is important; violence is not important. Ben sees his wife and daughters leaving him through a rain splashed restaurant window. Cutting his tie to his family echoes his killing his old friend. When his family matters less than Virginia and his friend matters less than his business associates, violence replaces order in his life. He is depicted as slowly cutting his ties to all of his love objects. Each loss is a step toward his own inner death and leaves him more dependent on his grandiosity to replace the lost objects.

Honor extends to money as well as silence. Not keeping one's word about money is punishable, but Ben is heroic in his disinterest in money. When faced with cost overruns, Ben sells his shares in the Flamingo. Meyer warns him he will wind up with nothing. Ben says "The Flamingo will be there. That's not nothing." Both Ben and Virginia are seen to be increasingly irrational, prone to tantrums, and distrustful of each other. Mickey tells Ben that Virginia has two million dollars in a numbered bank account in Switzerland. Joey insists Ben knew about Virginia's stealing. Meyer says Ben did not know about the stealing. He gets the men at the meeting to wait for the Christmas opening. If the casino succeeds, Ben will pay off, if not "I'll handle it myself."

When he gets a telephone call summoning him back to Los Angeles after the hotel's opening night fails, Ben knows he is going to be killed. Ben walks into his house, runs his screen test in which he says that a woman doesn't make a wife for a right guy. Ben is shot to death. Lansky's men take over The Flamingo. Virginia Hill is seen standing in the wind, her chiffon dress and scarf blowing behind her. A black-and-white page on the screen tells us that she returned all the missing money to Lansky within a week. Another screen tells us that she committed suicide in Austria. The final screen says that the original six million dollar investment has returned over one billion dollars in revenues by 1991. Love loses. Death wins. Money wins more. The ironic ending is actually the American dream ending. No one escapes death. The odds are always the same. No one beats them. But life in Las Vegas is about living as if one can beat the odds. The only winners are those like Lansky who accepted that and bet on death, and those like Ben who accept death.

The story of *Casino* echoes that of *Bugsy*. *Casino* traces Las Vegas' history through several decades after its founding. In *Casino*'s opening scene, the hero talks about love as trust and walks into his car. The car explodes. Flashing lights dissolve into flames with figure falling through them. While this goes on in the background, titles appear written neatly over the violence. The title sequence foreshadows the movie's theme of rationality superimposed on violence. The hero's sidekick describes the paradise they had in the desert before they fucked it up. The wife appears briefly. They represent Adam, Eve, and the Serpent in Eden. The movie will tell the story of the fall that ends in the flaming inferno that opens the movie.

The hero of *Casino* is Ace. Like Ben in *Bugsy*, he is a smart Jewish guy with a gangster look. But he is another breed. Dour, cool, calm, and calculating, he comes to Las Vegas looking to work the odds. He is not at all grandiose in the way Bugsy was. Nor is he creative. He is the continuation of Meyer Lansky's attitude: Players don't stand a chance. Everything is arranged to get the money from the people who bring it there. Romance is a dream used to promote the goal. Now Las Vegas appears in a religious light, where the religion is the worship of money: The scene is the room where the money is counted. This room, the count room, is, the voice tells us, the "Holy of holies." The reference is to the Ark of the Covenant in the ancient Hebrew Temple. The religious theme is broached, but blasphemously.

The name "Ace" was chosen for the movie although the character on which the screen version is based was called Lefty. The name "Lefty" would have referred to his body, his humanity. Ace is the name of a card, establishing his identity as part of the system, inhuman and a tool. At the same time Ace is also the winner, the highest card. In the gambling world, Ace is called "The Gold Jew." Back East, Ace is shown as working with a mobster, a criminal who is capable of violence and irrationality as well as clever thievery. It is as if the character of Bugsy was split into two people: One is the calm and rational Ace; the other is his violent and unpredictable friend, Nicky.

Ace is the fisherman who keeps the whales coming. He keeps them playing and keeps them coming back. He pretends that a heavy winner cannot get home because of weather. By the time the man has spent another night in the casino, he has lost back all that he had won. As the voice of a casino owner tells us: "We get it in the end." The voice tells us that problem in Las Vegas is that everyone knows that lots of money is being circulated, and everyone wants some. In Vegas, everybody has to watch everybody else to see that

they are not being cheated or robbed. Ace is constantly watching for cheating. He is clearly honest with his bosses, even though he is playing the casino game. This man has no life outside of his work. He is the ultimate nerd. In this, he is the antithesis of Bugsy. He is a professional, unimaginative, obsessional, cold.

Once Ace is established in Las Vegas as the best casino manager, he looks around for more. The scene of his choosing a lover is completely in character for him. A glamorous blond woman who is betting for a gambler wins a lot of money for him while skimming. The man who is using her to bet for him refuses to give her a share of the winnings, pointing out that she has already taken some of it off the table. She gets even with him by throwing all his winnings to the crowd. Ace sees her and becomes fascinated. She is a hustler, but with a code. For her, love is a business. She tips the guys who park the cars. She knows how to control everyone. She is slick and powerful, but sticks to a code of understanding other people's rights and needs. She is fair. Yet she has a tragic flaw as well. She has a relationship with a man who takes her money: a pimp. With everyone else, she can be tough. With him she is weak. Needing to pay money for love is a pathetic weakness she shares with Ace.

In a hilarious scene, a counterpart to the love between Ace and Geri, Nicky, Ace's old buddy from back East, is shown with his wife going through customs. Nicky's luggage is being searched. Next, they are at home, at the kitchen table. Nicky's wife is shaking diamonds out of her hairdo, having outwitted the customs agents. She and Nicky are clearly a team in crime. Having established his family values, Nicky is next seen in Vegas strong-arming bookies; then he appears watching his son at Little League. The contrast is clear: He is a family man, but will do anything to anyone outside his family.

Next we see Ace supervising the crushing of a cheater's hand in his casino. He then proposes tenderly to Geri, the tall blonde beauty, tells her that he knows she does not love him, and that what he wants from her is a family. Ace is like his friend Nicky in that they both share an ethic of family as the ultimate value. The wedding scene shocks us twice. First, we see the bride wearing a veil like a nun; then we see that she wears it over a mini-dress. In this scene, religious values are presented and mocked. The bride has kept her part of the bargain; she has a baby already. Ace keeps his bargain; she comes home to a surprise wedding gift of an elegant house and lavish wardrobe. He even accepts her telephone call to her lover during the wedding party. He overlooks her alcoholism. He forgives anything and gives everything in exchange for a family. Like Ben in *Bugsy*, Ace chooses a woman who is a prostitute. Also like Ben, he trusts his wife, showing her where he keeps his money and giving her exclusive access to it while the sound track plays the music of "What a Difference a Day Makes."

Nicky is shown to be stopped from going into the casinos because he has a criminal record. By the 1960s the gambling in Las Vegas is an industry under government regulation. No longer an unequivocally mob operation, the casinos are at least nominally lawful businesses. Frustrated, Nicky set up a ring that begins a series of robberies. As a cover and for the pleasure of it, he invests in a restaurant that will be outside the casinos and therefore accessible to people like him who are not allowed in the casinos because of their criminal records. Despite his devotion to his family he begins to date showgirls. We see one of them giving Nicky a blowjob in the parking lot. He chews out an employee who gambled instead of paying for his home heating. In a scene very like that of Ben in his chef's hat, Nicky makes his son pancakes. In the very next scene he tortures to death a

man who killed a member of their mob against orders. He has his code and he lives by it. Even though he is a much tougher and less sympathetic character than Ace in some ways, he has a kind of liveliness and energy that could make him attractive to a woman like Geri.

We next see Geri asking Ace for twenty-five thousand dollars. She will not tell him what she wants it for. He refuses but accepts that she will go to the bank vault in Los Angeles and take it. He gets Nicky to follow her. She gives the money to her lover. Nicky beats the lover in front of her. She screams. She is clearly excited by Nicky's feverish punishment. Nicky asks her what she expects, he tells her to take care of herself, they clinch. Nicky has the romantic violence Geri saw in her former lover. Despite her initial aggressiveness, she now appears to be a masochist.

By contrast, in the next dramatic scene Ace is in his office, dressed as elegantly as he always is. This time he is in shades of powder blue with pale blue shoes to match. But he is without pants. His outfit is ridiculous because he tries too hard. This is a man without humor or a sense of proportion. He takes a call, asks his receptionist to hold the visitor and puts on a perfectly matching pair of perfectly pressed trousers. He is dressed in the best, groomed like a racehorse, perfectly self satisfied. His visitor is the sheriff. He has come to ask Ace to rehire his friend. Ace refuses to rehire the incompetent employee. The sheriff tells him that this is his town and he will run Ace out of it. Ace is now overconfident and overextended, as much in thrall to his grandiosity as Ben was to his.

Ace's grandiosity breeds trouble on all sides. His wife takes pills, drinks, and cries. He screams at her. She promises to try to reform. The bosses complain that their skim from the casino is being skimmed by someone else. Ace gives an interview saying that he is the real boss of the casino. The sheriff gets the gambling board to kick Ace out of town—retaliating for Ace's firing of his brother-in-law. Ace's life is spinning out of control.

The bosses decide that he should walk away. Desperate to ward off loss of status, Ace meets with Nicky, who tells Ace he is the mob guy there and Ace is only his cover. Nicky leaves Ace in the dust of the desert. The scene repeats that in *Bugsy*, when his girlfriend Virginia leaves Ben in the desert. She left Ben to die in that scene and in the eventual ending of the story. Is the parallel to continue? Is Nicky going to leave Ace to die?

Nicky makes his move. He enters the casino even though he knows that his presence could cost Ace and the casino to lose their license. He fights. Like the sheriff, he makes anti-Semitic comments. He is attacking Ace in his career and in his identity. Ace's marriage is breaking up at the same time. Geri sues for divorce and goes back to her lover, taking her child with her. She calls Nicky to get help. Nicky goes to Ace, sits in his car and hears "You can go your own way" on the car radio. These scenes show Ace losing his tenuous relations to people just as Ben lost his.

Ace gets a call from Geri saying that she wants to come back. She tells him that she spent some of his money. He asks: "What's the number?" She tells him it is twenty-five thousand dollars. He says: "More I couldn't live with." His obsessional interest in the amount of the money is all that matters. Neither one of them talk about disappointment or betrayal. It might as well have been a suburban shopping spree rather than an attempt to flee with a lover. They talk it over in a glamorous restaurant. Ace doubts her accounts of what she could have spent on suits or her lover. Ace, realizing that she is relating to him

as she did to the men who paid for her company when he met her, denies what he sees. He says that he is not a John; he expresses his anguish by berating her about money. By saying that he is not a John, he is denying what he accuses himself of being. He is a person who trades money in the hope of getting love in exchange. The realization is his final loss.

Unlike Ben, however, he retains his connection to his child, so that he is not totally at the mercy of his own grandiosity. When Geri leaves, Ace throws money at her, gives her the car keys, but refuses her the child. He will give her money and the things money can buy, but he wants his family. She gets in her car, leaving their child behind. She comes back; she sleeps in his bed. He sends their child to school. He then gives wife a beeper, telling her that he needs to be in touch with her at all times. He tightens his control.

Geri goes to Nicky, asks for someone to help her get the jewelry out of their bank vault. Nicky agrees to do that. She says she could have taken Ace's child to Europe. Nicky says "That's one thing you don't do. You don't take a guy's kid." Geri does not know the code both Ace and Nicky live by. She does not understand the absolute value of family to them. Geri weeps. "He scares the shit out of me. I never know what he's gonna do." The scene resolves into love making between Geri and Nicky. The song lyrics on the soundtrack go: "My only sin was I loved you much too much."

The love scene in the motel is followed by a scene in the boss's home. Rumors have spread. The courier who carries the skim to Kansas City lies, telling the boss that Nicky isn't sleeping with Ace's wife. Cocaine sniffing and random murder establish an atmosphere of menace. The courier is reporting back to Nicky: "He asked me again about you and the Jew's wife." They talk outdoors, hiding their faces behind handkerchiefs. They discuss killing "the Jew." Now Ace's ethnicity is that of the outsider. The Italians have a loyalty to each other deeper than the friendship between Ace and Nicky. The scene echoes that in *Bugsy* in which Meyer Lansky vouches for Ben Siegel when the Italian partners refuse him credit. Both movies make the point of ethnic loyalty within the larger organization. The loyalty to one's own ethnic group within an overarching loyalty is an American ethic first noted by De Toqueville.

As was the case with *Bugsy*, almost all of the major characters are dead by the end of the movie. Ace's voice tell us: "Geri died with bikers in L.A. They gave her a hot dose. In the end all she had left was thirty-six thousand dollars in mint condition coins." The connection between death and money could not be made more clear. Nicky is shown beaten almost to death, but buried while still breathing. Ace turns out to have survived the bombing. But the Tangiers casino and hotel was exploded. After the Tangiers, the sound track tells us, it was all Disneyland. After the Teamsters got knocked out of the box, the corporations took over. Now whales could be asked for their social security number by twenty-five-year-olds. In the final moment, Ace handicaps, makes people money. In the last scene of the movie he has glasses, a pencil, a desk, knowledge. He is still a nerd, still not feeling, still surviving, but still not alive. Ace has remained an obsessional. He is the middle generation, the one who may not live himself, but is intent on passing life on to his children. In that way also he is the embodiment of the American dream.

Leaving Las Vegas takes place roughly one generation later than *Casino*. Its hero is named Ben, like the hero of *Bugsy*. We first see him in a supermarket, pushing a wire

grocery cart down the aisle, loading it up with liquor bottles while the soundtrack plays “*L.A. Love Song*.” At first he looks carefree, but when he drops a bottle, he looks careless, maybe even frantic. As we watch him, we realize that this is not a man preparing for a party, this is an alcoholic preparing for a binge.

We next see Ben in a restaurant meeting one person at a table where two couples are having dinner together. He approaches one of the men, who reluctantly introduces him to the others. The men have Jewish names. Their blonde ladies do not. They are talking about movies. One blonde says that the cool thing about the movie was they use real guns in it. She introduces the theme of violent death. As they talk we see that the man Ben went up to wants to get rid of him. Ben agrees to leave when the man gives him all his cash on the promise that he'll never ask for anything again. Ben was part of this world, but makes a bargain with the devil. Like Faust, he will have pleasure now and accept death later. The bargain is made even more clearly in the next scene where Ben agrees to leave his job when his boss gives him a check on the condition that he never come back again.

The same bargain is made a third time when Ben hits on a woman in a bar, and comes on too strong because he is drunk and unpleasant. The bartender buys him a drink and asks him to never come back again. Being ejected from a bar is the last straw. We next see Ben in a supermarket, buying plastic bags. Then he is in his home, burning papers. A picture of a woman with a little boy curls and burns. Is this his wife and child? Is it himself as a child with his mother? In any case, it is his family. The scene corresponds to scenes in *Bugsy* where Ben loses his wife and children and in *Casino* where Ace loses his wife but keeps his children. Because it comes so much earlier in this movie, we understand that this is a story with no middle, just a long fall to the end. Immediately following this scene Ben gets into his car; he is leaving for Vegas.

The first image of Las Vegas is a dark traffic-filled street in front of a casino. A beautiful, seraphic-looking blond, dressed in silver walks the street. Her blouse, cut square and low across her chest and her miniskirt give her the look of a Botticelli angel or heavenly page. Ben picks her up and pays for an hour of her services, takes her back to his miserable motel, and falls asleep with her. Like Ben's Virginia and Ace's Geri, Sera is a whore. She spells her name out for him ... S ... E ... R ... A. Her name is the first four letters of the word seraph or angel. Sera then appears in the room of her pimp: Yuri. Yuri (You or I) berates her. She has not made enough money for him that night. He roughs her up. She bends over a table to let him cut her haunch to punish her and relieve his rage. She does this sweetly, sorrowfully and deliberately. Is she, like Geri, able to love only the man she gives money to? Is this her masochism? Or is she an angel? No mortal woman could be so selfless.

Yuri and Ben appear in the same pawnshop. Yuri is desperate to sell his jewelry, bargaining with the pawnbroker. Ben gaily accepts five hundred dollars for a 1993 Rolex Seafarer watch. In the perfect Las Vegas metaphor, time is converted into money. But Ben does not care that he is being given so little for what is worth so much. He is letting himself be abused just as Sera was letting herself be abused in the previous scene. Yuri's indignant reaction to the pawnbroker's offer of so little money for his jewelry is more like what you or I might feel. The pawnbroker who sells time for money drives a hard bargain. Ben's carelessly throwing it all away makes him like Sera, selfless. His attitude

echoes that of Ben in *Bugsy* in that he does not care about what everyone else in Las Vegas cares about passionately: money.

Sera finds Ben, who asks her to dinner. She regrets that she cannot. She has to work and bring the money back to Yuri. In a confrontation in his room Yuri tells Sera never to come back. As she leaves, she sees gunmen come to kill him. He has welshed on something, perhaps on paying protection money, perhaps some other kind of deal. His watch is worth nothing. His time is up.

Sera comes back to Ben's miserable motel room to ask him to dinner. She no longer needs to work that night. They go on their first date. He can't eat, tells her about how awful his drinking gets, warns her not to expect him to be acceptable. Sera hears his warning but asks Ben to move in with her anyway. We have the sense that she is terribly lonely, terribly frightened, and determined to be with Ben. He packs his booze, leaving his clothes behind. He comes to her prepared for death, not for life.

Sera comes to the gate of her garden apartment. Lush landscaping alerts us to the middle-class status of her environment. We see her landlady and landlord waiting for her. The camera centers on Ben passed out on the sidewalk in front of the compound, head on his suitcase. Sera defies the nasty landlady and leads Ben into her house. She gives him presents: new clothes, a silver hip-flask. He gives her all his money. In their parody wedding only the emotion is real. They give each other what they have to give. The groom is carried over the threshold. They are married, not for life, but, the silver hip-flask says, for death.

They go to a casino. They are gambling. He gets too drunk, too loud, too sloppy. They get thrown out. This is a repeat of what happened to him in Los Angeles. He is cast out once again. Sera won't give up. She takes him to her favorite inn in the desert. They drink at the pool, he drinks underwater, she pours booze on her nipples, he drinks it. In this scene she becomes liquor, an ecstatic moment of drinking peace and comfort from the breast makes even a nondrinker understand the fatal pleasure. But Sera looks the soul of innocence in this scene. She is the giving mother. But she is the mother who gives the poisoned milk of death. Life can end no other way. In the movie Ben crashes a glass table at the pool side, leaving shards of broken glass where it can cut the bare feet of the bathers. The landlady cleans it up, refuses payment, and asks them to leave and never come back. Ben has been thrown out a second time in Las Vegas.

Ben and Sera are driving back to Las Vegas. Sera goes to work, Ben goes gambling, gets drunk, and brings a hooker home to Sera's house. Sera comes home. The hooker is telling him that he gets her hot, giving him the lines Sera gives her customers. Sera cries and throws him out. He is out for the third time in Las Vegas. Sera then picks up a gang of drunken young men, full of menace. She gets gang-raped and beaten, bruised and robbed. Ben is alone, Sera searches for him. He calls when she is waiting in her pale green, sterile room. She goes to him and Ben agrees to go with her. In a death scene she stays with him until he drinks himself literally to death, keeping him company for his last hours.

Discussion

Bugsy, *Casino*, and *Leaving Las Vegas* are three movies about violent death. By the violence of the deaths of the characters in these movies, the audience is to understand death as the result of people's malevolence and/or self destructiveness. Like all

movies that depict violent death, these movies are strangely comforting. Death is not something that happens to everyone as a result of natural processes, these movies tell us. Death is sudden, unexpected, and going to happen only to people who somehow deserve it. This leaves people the hope that immortality is somehow available for those who have luck, for the elect. The elect behave well because they are the elect. But this Protestant ethic is worshiped at the gambling table instead of in a church.

In the Las Vegas shown in these movies death and immortality are at center stage. The hope of life everlasting is conveyed by the lights that never go out as the gamblers search to beat the odds. Death is represented by the idea that in the end the casino always wins. Cheating is the prime crime, enforced by the casino. Death is the wages of the sin of cheating. This is the ethic of the mob presented in the opening scenes of *Bugsy*, depicted in the early scene in *Casino* where Ace has the cheater's hand smashed and the cheater accepts that as just, and shown in *Leaving Las Vegas* when Yuri is killed for not having met his commitment.

The heroes of all three movies have accepted death. They are the ones who cannot be intimidated because they are ready for it and expect that it will happen to them. Ben Siegel, the hero of *Bugsy*, goes willingly to his death at the end of the movie. He has no fear, no bitterness. He does not expect any reprieve, nor does he try to get out of being killed by repaying the money Virginia has stolen. The hero of *Casino*, Ace, is not perturbed by having his car bombed. He makes no gesture of retaliation. He accepts what happens. But even before the car explosion, he has shown his wife Geri what to do in case he is kidnaped and how to pay ransom for him. He makes these arrangements in a matter-of-fact way. Life is dangerous, so you prepare the best you can. The extreme form of acceptance of death is shown in *Leaving Las Vegas* when Ben plans his own death and commits a long, slow suicide with no reprieve. It is just by their acceptance of death that all of these men become heroes. Like the cowboys of earlier Westerns, these men are willing to die. They are not the Las Vegas gamblers trying to cheat death, but men who stand up and live until they die, never allowing fear to weaken them.

The currency of Las Vegas is money and sex. The women all start out working at sex work. Taking the three movies in sequence, the hero's woman becomes more clearly a hooker and becomes the ultimate cause of the hero's death. All three heroines in these movies are hookers. The man chooses a hooker to link money to sex. After the mother and before the angel of death, each of the heroes chooses as the lover a woman who trades sex for money. The lure of the woman who sells sex in the context of Las Vegas is that you can buy life. This is clearest with Ace, who marries his lover in exchange for a continuation of his life: children. Paying for sex is gaining power. If you pay for it, you are powerful, you are in command. If you buy a woman, you are not dependent on her wanting you. The only woman before whom a man can be powerful and not dependent is the whore. Passivity is death. The alternative to buying it is taking it, forcing by violence. This is emphasized in a fourth movie about Las Vegas, *Showgirls*. In that movie all of the sex is in exchange for money except one scene where the woman wants the man and then he rapes her. The point is that the man is not passive, not the victim, not dead.

Freud (1912) suggests that myths and stories about the woman in a man's life shed light on man's attitude toward death. He discusses stories involving choosing between three boxes. In these stories, the man must choose between three boxes: One is gold; one is silver; one is lead. The correct choice, the one that wins the chooser the hand of the

princess in marriage, is the lead box. Why lead, asks Freud. Because the golden box represents the mother of infancy, the most valuable woman in a man's life. The silver, Freud tells us represents the lover, the Goddess of Love. But the third box, that of lead, represents the Goddess of Death. She is related to the Great Mother Goddess of the east. She is the destroyer as well as the creator. In western mythology the goddess is simply mother. But the myths bring in the three faces of the goddess so that she is won only when man accepts death as the inevitable consequence of birth and love. The myth of Las Vegas is that one can beat the odds. All three of these movies end with the hero's acceptance of not beating the odds, with his acceptance of death. For *Bugsy*, it is the acceptance of going back to Los Angeles to be killed for having cheated on his partners. For *Ace*, it is acceptance of the threat to his life by having his car blown up. For *Ben*, it is the consequence of having lost the picture of his family. All of the heroes accept their death, even walk toward it knowingly. This allows the death to have the heroic quality that the gamblers in Las Vegas feel if they accept the odds, know they will lose and choose to play anyway.

Gender and race are given only the most cursory treatment in all three of these movies. All have a hero, not a heroine; all have no non-White characters. All expect the viewer to identify with the white male protagonist as Everyman. Children are depicted as the objects of their parents' adoration, but not as people with needs or desires of their own. All of these movies see the problem of death as so overriding that it overcomes any differences between people. Since we all die, we are all interested in the passage to death.

In *Leaving Las Vegas*, the early scene in the restaurant is the only scene in which Jewish ethnicity is even hinted at. In *Bugsy*, Ben Siegel joked with his friends in Yiddish and was loyal to and got loyalty from the Jewish partners above and beyond what he got from or gave to his Italian partners. In *Casino*, Ace Rosenthal was not shown to have any special ethnic loyalty to Jews, but when the chips were down his partners called him "the Jew." Ben, whose last name we never learn, has no special ties or loyalties to Jews. He only comes from a Jewish world. Ben Siegel left his Jewish family for a non-Jewish woman. Ace Rosenthal married a non-Jewish woman. Neither Ben's wife nor Ace's understood their codes of honor, and both betrayed their husbands in ways that violated that code. In *Leaving Las Vegas*, Ben's family is shown only in a photo that he burns when he is leaving his home. He will not marry his lover, but she wears a black cross on a black cord around her neck. Not only is she blond, she is labeled by the cross as someone who wants to be recognized as a Christian. If she is Christian, she is the angel of mercy, the transporter of life into death, but death as the promise of eternal life.

All three of these movies were made independently of each other. In this article we have treated them as if they had been a trilogy. The reason for this is that they cover the time span of the birth, growth, and industrialization of Las Vegas to the present day. Together they give a chronological picture of Hollywood's relationship to Las Vegas and the evolution of the American Dream as well as that of the Western. Most important, they show the particular relation between gambling and death that has formed the need for a Las Vegas, the expansion of it, and the evolution of it from a place for the hope of life to the place for the acceptance of death. Las Vegas movies show that the only winners are those who accept the necessity of death, give up the dream of beating the odds, and choose to set the odds for others to lose. In this way, they illustrate Freud's tale of three caskets and elevate it to the ultimate fable.

Reference

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