Spectacular Paris: Representations of Nostalgia and Desire

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Like Bellagio, Mandalay Bay and the Venetian, the other new megaresorts that have opened on the Strip… Paris Las Vegas exemplifies a spiritually enriching trend in Las Vegas hotel-casino design that plays on the universal desire for escape from the mundane, workaday world, promising to whisk visitors away on a romantic escape.

Gary Thompson and David Strow
Las Vegas Sun

The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' [1]

Guy Debord
The Society of the Spectacle

On September 1, 1999, Park Place Entertainment officially opened Paris Las Vegas, the most ambitiously themed of Las Vegas's resorts to that date. Against the backdrop of the increasing geographical and cultural theming of the city's resort and casino venues (other Las Vegas sites conjure Rome, New York, Egypt, King Arthur's England, the Caribbean and Venice, as well as Italy's more obscure Bellagio), Paris garnered publicity by virtue of its comparatively spectacular recreation of the original "City of Lights" – spectacular for both its lavishness and, to some eyes, accuracy. The project boasts a half-scale model of France's Eiffel Tower; exterior recreations of Parisian landmarks such as l'Arc de Triomphe, l'Hotel de Ville and the Louvre; a duplication of the Rue de la Païx shopping district; stores that produce baked goods from French ovens or printed materials from French presses; and employees costumed and occasionally conversant in a "Parisian" manner. The project's

corporate backers, architects, interior designers and expert themers proclaimed a devout and uncanny faithfulness to "the original."[2]

On November 1, 1999, two months after Paris Las Vegas was opened in a blaze of fireworks while the lights were turned on by a switch flipped by none other than French icon Catherine Deneuve, production started on Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*. Luhrmann's film, as well as Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, would be released in 2001 to huge popular success and share with the Vegas resort the mobilization of the brand or commodity "Paris."

The resort and the films each function via a shared alchemy of appeals to potential consumers (tourists *and* viewers in all cases). While the journalists quoted in the first epigraph above describe the particular case of the Vegas resort, the same appeal to the "universal desire" for romantic escape is present in the construction of Luhrmann and Jeunet's narrative films. All feature prominent use of Parisian backdrops, aesthetics and totemic imagery or monuments to situate their narratives of romance and desire, and invite their viewers to travel to Parises born of memory but not entirely bonded to any moment in that city's history. If tourists to Las Vegas are invited both to occupy a (delimited) space within and to visually consume the spectacle of the resort, the same invitations can be seen as applying vis-à-vis the two films, which endeavored to feel as visceral as they did visually rich. Giuliana Bruno has identified this possible relationship between film and touristic spaces in her essay "Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric," in which she writes: "As in all forms of imaginative journey, space is physically consumed [in film] as a vast commodity… architectural space becomes framed for viewing and offers itself for consumption as travelled space – for further cultural travel" (Bruno, 22-3). Speaking of the opening montage of *Moulin Rouge* in practitioner's terms, the film's set designer Catherine Martin refers in the audio commentary on the film's DVD to creating "a vista of Paris that you could travel in to."

This paper will examine how Paris is commodified by the films and resort, as well as what these three examples of its com-

modification can reveal about the image of Paris as an imaginary construct. This is not to suggest that the Vegas venue resulted in the inception or production of the two films, but rather to argue that it is necessary to examine the three phenomena as equal manifestations of a spike in an enduring fascination with particular concepts of Paris and Parisian-ness in the popular imagination and in the uses of commodity culture – a vogue heightened around the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Analysis of the Parisian phenomenon circa 1999-2001, as manifest by the resort and the two feature films, benefits from consideration of Guy Debord's theories of the spectacle, and to theorizations of nostalgia and the touristic drive. The analysis articulated in this paper aims to reveal the extent to which the brand of Paris may have been mobilized to serve as a container or palliative for anxieties around the impending turn of the century, the new millennium and the global changes this particular passage of time seemed to underline.

Spectacle, Nostalgia and Tourism

> *The spectacle's function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation…. The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.*[3]
>
> Guy Debord
> *The Society of the Spectacle*

French social critic Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* has remained an important critique of power and commodity culture since its first publication in 1967. His central analytical focus, the system of the spectacle, is a multifaceted construct of the myriad processes he saw creating and controlling consumers in the modern industrial era. Linked to questions of temporality, visuality, ideology and spatiality, Debord's notion of the spectacle involves a distinct understanding of the relationship between individuals and the visual world: the spectacle, to function, must make the status quo a positive and self-perpetuating manifestation. This process pri-

marily takes the form of commodity culture's production of images for consumption: "It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (Debord 29). In this, Debord may have anticipated the change that came to affect that most prominent of Parisian symbols, the Eiffel Tower. The tower was originally conceived as a place to see *from*, a platform for consuming particularly impressive vistas of the city – and a temporary one at that, as it was created for the 1889 Exposition Universelle and intended to be dismantled afterward. In this earliest conception, it partook of the discourses of nineteenth-century urban tourism, which turned urban space into a saleable product and promoted a fascination with the vistas of the cities of modernity. During the ensuing decades however, the tower shifted registers, the famous viewing point becoming a place to see *in and of itself*, with the view it offers being a deemphasized after-effect. No longer does the Eiffel Tower merely commodify the Parisian cityscape: it has become the commodified image of Paris, a virtual short-hand for the city.

Just as the tower offered and then supplanted views of the city, the spectacle offers and replaces images of history, imposing, among other constraining dictates, what Debord calls a "false memory of the unmemorable" (Debord, 114). The spectacle alienates individuals and citizens from real public history, and thus also personal history, by providing images of the past that are consumable, obfuscating and frequently replaced. Images of history are thus everywhere to be found in the society of the spectacle, but rather than provide real critical access to the past, they in fact distort and distance it. They create and then trade in nostalgia as a motivation of consumerist, and particularly frequently touristic, desire.

The etymological background of "nostalgia" traces to ancient Greece, and refers to a desire for one's homeland that manifested itself as a physiological illness (one that could even be fatal). In considering a more contemporary relationship to objects and souvenirs in relation to longing and nostalgia, Susan Stewart discusses a varied range of what she terms "exaggerated" cultural forms and

manifestations in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, to interrogate the way in which the narratives attached to these artifacts appertain to and create particular versions of identity and understandings about the world. She describes nostalgia as an elusive and frequently misunderstood product of the affective relations between object, narrative and individual – nothing short of a "social disease" (Stewart 23).

Given the perpetual impossibility of ever returning to an original – and, thus, past – experience, nostalgia is the name given by Stewart to "the desire for desire" (ibid). Nostalgia is the form of longing that operates closest to the functioning of desire in the psychoanalytic sense: the response to a lack, insomuch as it is a yearning for the unattainable essence and idealization of past experience. In Debord's terms, the production of the spectacle necessitates a false consciousness of time: just as a monolithic history of Paris is impossible, so is the return of any particular moment from the city's past. Nostalgia may thus be the form of desire most amenable to the spectacle, as by definition it cannot be satisfied but will instead persist as melancholy in search of commodity (object or experience) fulfillment.

A complementary and specifically relevant theorization about nostalgia may be found in the notion of *le petisme*, a construct already interestingly mobilized in relation to *Amélie* by Michelle Scatton-Tessier in her essay, "Le Petisme: Flirting with the Sordid in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*." An emerging concept in French social studies that derives its name from the adjective *petit* (small), *le petisme* is understood as a type of psychological coping response appearing broadly throughout contemporary French culture, through which the simple pleasures and tawdry local details of *la vie quotidienne* are obsessed over as "a reaction to national concern about everything that is gigantic or growing, that is, globalization, crime, ordinary violence, unemployment and the loss of individual identity in the technological age" (Scatton-Tessier, 197). Scatton-Tessier decodes the doubled layers of Jeunet's film, which is once a whimsical tale and a profound account of contemporary

loneliness and worry, through such a lens. The small, contained pleasures that drive the narrative of *Amélie* identified in Scatton-Tessier's analysis bear an uncanny conceptual resemblance to the "souvenirs" discussed by Stewart and to an overall process of creating a comfortable, consumable and enduring branded image of Paris to quell anxieties about the reality of the present.[4]

A final set of theoretical concepts central to this analysis may be found in a deconstruction of tourism forwarded by work such as John Frow's essay "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia"; Claudia Bell and John Lyall's *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism and Identity*; and the conceptual backdrop that inherits from Dean MacCannell's seminal *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, which first inaugurated the term "touristic" in English and created the framework in which tourism would be analyzed in the postindustrial age (MacCannell, 189).

Frow's essay includes a historical account of theoretical discourses around the notions of the tourist and tourism, arriving at definitions that correspond to his contemporary moment of late Western capitalism. Borrowing from Malcolm Andrews, Frow identifies a basic belief in "the restorative effects of happily constituted scenes" as the driving force behind the modern tourist gaze (Andrews in Frow, 144).[5] In effect, we may look to Frow's essay to anticipate how the psychological/affective needs of nostalgia are co-opted by the Debordian spectacle, as an ostensibly visual relationship is purportedly endowed with the power to "restore" the tourist subject.

A similar, if slightly more critical, rendering of this equation is the premise of Bell and Lyall's work. Investigating the ways in which both famous natural vistas and historic sites have been transformed in recent decades into branded, consumable experiences and items, Bell and Lyall track the changing status of "the sublime" relative to the touristic experience of the landscape. In early formulations by Immanuel Kant, for instance, encounters with overwhelming, often natural phenomena such as mountains fulfilled restorative functions: "the sublime was vast, powerful, forbidding, terrifying, awe-inspiring… places where one's psychic composure might tum-

ble when faced with the vertiginous grandeur of the view" (Bell and Lyall, 5). Now, Bell and Lyall argue, the sublime has "become a central enticement in contemporary tourism promotion and consumption" (Bell and Lyall, 4). When Las Vegas journalists Thompson and Strow, cited above, can deem a casino "spiritually enriching," the sublime tourist encounter has transformed quite radically indeed. Tracking the changing nature of the sublime, Bell and Lyall argue that the tourist site's restorative power has increasingly become dependent on some element of challenge, impossibility or defiance of the odds, an aspect of these renderings of Paris to which we will return shortly. It has, however, also been commodified to such a degree that the previous psychological effects of the sublime are now consumed as so much visual experience in an "accelerated" culture.

Frow's essay concludes with the observation that the single most important "product" sold by the tourism industry "is a commodified relation to the Other" (Frow, 150). As in Debord's work, commodity is understood here as image or virtuality, and all material considerations are subsumed to representation and visuality. Thus, while the initial tendency might be to assume that the Las Vegas resort under consideration stands removed from the two films in offering a *physical* tourist experience, the perspective offered by integrating theories of the spectacle, the touristic and nostalgia suggest the falseness of such a distinction. Given that all touristic experience is mediated by and submerged within the spectacle itself, there can be no literal tourism: if the invitations made to the viewers of *Moulin Rouge* and *Amélie* are to be discussed as virtual, they are no more so than those made to the traveler in Las Vegas.

With these central theoretical notions in hand, we may now turn to an analysis of the commodification of "Paris" by the Paris Las Vegas resort, *Moulin Rouge* and *Amélie*. Occurring in relative chronological proximity (a few seasons apart within the lifespan of popular culture and the popular imaginary), these three phenomena appeal to viewers/tourists/consumers via a readily identifiable nexus of values. While each invokes certain additional Parisian tropes, such as Frenchness, class, discernment, art and artistic ways

of being, and the pleasures of café life, the underlying appeals of the Parisian brand/phenomenon focus upon: romance and desire; a revolutionary or populist spirit; the impossibly authentic; and timelessness. In each case, the primary sensory channel for these appeals is visual display and pleasure. The remainder of this essay will examine the three phenomena in terms of these appeals.

Paris as the Site of Romance and Desire

The dream of Paris is so ingrained in the world's imagination that one simple shot of the Eiffel Tower shouts romance.

Kristin Hohenadel
New York Times

One of the most powerful touristic appeals is the promise of romance and passion, whether set against pristine beach-scapes or, in the example at hand, the cobblestones of a city with old-world mystique and charm. Paris is reputed to be among the most romantic cities in the world: known as the City of Love, the City of Lights, its imagery of beautiful, well-dressed couples in passionate liaisons comes easily to mind. MacCannell has called it "the West's most seductive city" (MacCannell, 76). Compared with the other bastion of nineteenth-century modernity and empire, Paris is to romance and impulse what London is to reason and deliberation.[6]

As a result, the project of Paris's recreation was an easy match to the broad goals of the city of Las Vegas, which has increasingly molded itself as an oasis in the desert that can take any form and fulfill the most unlikely of fantasies. Las Vegas has a long appeal to lovers, often those in retreat from the demands, disapproval or delays of the "real" world—hence the surfeit of wedding chapels, even those offering drive-thru services.

The Paris resort is no exception. In the first few years after it opened, images of couples dominated the resort's website, and a section titled "Paris Weddings" was prominently maintained on the page.[7] More recently, as represented by their website, the resort aims

to make an even more explicit appeal, implementing the catchphrase "Everything's sexier in Paris," while a section titled "Between the Sheets" is seemingly just an enticement to read yet another subpage with a blurb about the resort's broad amenities (Paris Las Vegas). In the Las Vegas incarnation of Paris, even more so than in other Las Vegas resorts, the promise of a "romantic escape" as was trumpeted by the original reviewers in the *Las Vegas Sun* is crucial to deflecting the true source of excitement offered by the city's venture: the opportunity to gamble and the accompanying potential to lose one's money. Increasingly, casinos – which Bell and Lyall refer to as "sublime fakes" (Bell and Lyall, 132) – sell themselves via discourses of passion and/or romance. Tourists can be invited to try their luck at love (rather than at the tables) and assured that the odds are stacked in their favor in the resorts' "sensual, stylish accommodations" (Paris Las Vegas). In considering Paris's longstanding associations with romance and desire, the touristic experience marketed by the resort is an ideal cover-up for the primary (and perhaps primal) invitation to gamble.

In terms of cinematic genre, *Moulin Rouge* is also a musical and period piece of sorts, while *Amélie* is part-comedy. It may be argued nonetheless that both films operate above all within the romance genre; one could in fact further posit that they form part of a sub-genre, the Parisian love story, including everything from Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Gigi* (1958), to Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004), to the omnibus film *Paris, je t'aime* (2006). One also thinks of Humphrey Bogart's famous line in *Casablanca* (1942): "We'll always have Paris."

In fact, while Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* stands as a love story in and of itself, it also crucially functions as a digest of countless other love stories. The film's status as a neo-musical allows it to reference other films and narratives about love through its numerous medleys and reworkings of both familiar plot elements and love songs. The most notable instance of this is the sequence titled "the Elephant Medley," in which the lead couple declare their love via

lyrics borrowed from a long lists of songs including U2's "In the Name of Love," David Bowie's "Heroes," Paul McCartney's "Silly Love Songs," intertextual references to other films by way of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" (from *The Body Guard*, 1992) and Joe Cocker's "Up Where We Belong" (from *An Officer and a Gentleman*, 1982), and several others.

Paris of the late nineteenth century was a turbulent and provocative environment. A title-card near the opening of *Moulin Rouge* informs us that we are in "Paris, 1900"; a few moments later, Christian, the film's male protagonist and narrator will reminisce about his arrival in Paris the previous year: "It was 1899, the summer of love. The world had been swept up in a bohemian revolution." Christian, we soon learn, has come to the Paris neighborhood of Montmartre to share in its (post)revolutionary spirit, and to write about "truth, beauty, freedom and love." The film itself shares in its hero's "ridiculous obsession with love": almost every visual detail, word of dialogue or line of music refers to romance or love in ways ranging from classical symbolism to camp: the film is redolent with a surfeit of red and gold; a literal man appears in the moon over the Eiffel Tower, the lovers embrace in a heart-shaped door. This spectacular and theatric element was one key to the film's popular success.

Christian's characterization as a writer is not incidental. Not only does his status as struggling artist mesh with the bohemian ethos, but it also affords the film the opportunity to visually articulate its moral at the outset. As he sits down to write the story of his relationship with Satine, a chronically ailing showgirl and prostitute whose beauty makes her both the leading light but also the primary hope (for revenue) for the entire "show-biz" community, an extreme close-up reveals the words he is typing: "The greatest thing you will ever learn is just to love and be loved in return." As the film ends, a reflective Christian confirms what has already been made more than clear, concluding that his own novel was "above all things, a story about love."

At its outset, *Amélie* seems fractionally less obsessed with

love and romance than Luhrmann's film (which, given the aesthetic scope of that obsession in *Moulin Rouge*, is not difficult): the title character's primary objective is to make her days worthwhile by helping others overcome their loneliness, negativity or insecurities, much of which she does through covert interventions into their daily lives. As the narrative unfolds, however, Amélie becomes obsessed with the mystery of a young man, Nino, she encounters in the *métro*. The focus of the plot, informed by the viewer's conventional understanding of the cues of a romance narrative, shifts toward whether they will meet and become a couple.[8]

Solidifying its love-story status, the film's climactic conflict occurs when it appears that Amélie's sense of isolation will cause her to forfeit her chance to be with Nino. Thus, if the viewer has been made complicit in her schemes to set things right for those around her, we suddenly find ourselves in a position of alienation from Amélie as the climax develops. We are likely to reject her refusal to identify herself to Nino and to count on the film to offer a romantic resolution in spite of temporary delays. After all, this is Paris, and so this must be a romance.

In an uncharacteristically glowing review, the trade paper *Variety* extolled the virtues of *Amélie* in a manner both hyperbolic and useful for situating the film's romantic appeal:

> If Paris were destroyed tomorrow and the recipe for true love lost, archeologists could reconstruct both to perfection from just a reel of Amélie… [t]he beauty of the film's mechanism – an accretion of rapid but perfectly observed wacky ingredients – is that every poignant or silly little detail contributes to the story, which seems to discover a twinkly new constellation in the annals of star-crossed lovers. (Lisa Nesselson, *Variety*)

The setting of *Amélie* takes advantage of the visual appeal of the district of Montmartre, stylizing and idealizing sites ranging from the subway, to a funfair, to a sex shop. The film's concluding sequence,

accelerated-motion footage of a smiling Amélie and Nino riding on a scooter through cobblestoned streets, blissfully indifferent to passing traffic and any danger it might present, secures the implied connection between the space of Paris, the possibility of romance, desire fulfilled and *joie de vivre*.

In the final account however, the idealization of the Parisian couple in both films relates to its ability to represent an alternative, inspirational lifestyle for those kindred spirits around them. Consequently, consideration of the Parisian appeal to romance and (generally heterosexual) desire is linked to the Paris phenomenon's related appeal to a kind of populism and collective action *qua* revolution.

Paris as the Site of Revolution and Populism

In form as in content the spectacle serves as a total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system.[9]

Guy Debord
The Society of the Spectacle

Paris might be as famous for its revolution as for its romance. At several points in its history, the city's populations have staged major acts of resistance to the "existing system," such as the Revolution of 1789, the Commune of 1871 and the student revolts of 1968, not to mention the *banlieue* riots of the 1980s or 2000s.

Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* is so closely wedded to the city's revolutionary history and spirit that it was a favorite text of the 1968 protesters. Ironically, that very revolutionary spirit of the city has become part of the brand or commodity of Paris, with cultural products and images from *Les Miserables* to *Ratatouille* (2007) providing positive visions of the ageless Parisian revolutionary spirit in entertaining form.

In both *Moulin Rouge* and *Amélie*, the narrative focus is on working-class groups or communities and, to a considerable degree, those with socio-economic power over this group are portrayed as villains. It is significant that the plots of both unfold within the par-

ticular area of Montmartre, a neighborhood that is simultaneously marginalized and empowered by virtue of its integrated community and artistic legacy.

In *Moulin Rouge*, the citizenry is a mix of bohemians, who Christian describes as "the young and beautiful creatures of the underworld," and the rich and powerful who pay for entrance to the racy attractions of the Moulin Rouge theater. Christian and Satine come to know each other within a society of poverty-stricken performers, dancers, writers and artists. While animosity and jealously do feature in certain relationships within this group, it is clear that its members identify as a single community, workers in a particular service economy that provide decadence and spectacle for the pleasure of a well-to-do elite. Only one character from the ranks of the better-off elite is ever individuated: the Duke who, significantly, remains unnamed, identified by title instead. The Duke embodies a catch-22 for the bohemian and working-class community gathered around the Moulin Rouge: while they seek upward mobility, respect and independence through their bid to transform the dance hall into a legitimate theater, and their dancers into actresses, they nonetheless require the Duke as an investor or patron. In various ways, they need to sell their performances and skills to a man portrayed as sexually disturbed, useless and potentially violent. Even more so than the regular clients of the Moulin Rouge, for him, money is no object provided he can be made to feel in control, flattered and frequently aroused. The exploitation of the (female) working class by those with economic superiority, powerfully figured in the Duke, provides the central conflict for the film. The specific "tragedy" of Satine's illness (she has consumption), which causes her ambitious peers to encourage her to sacrifice her love for Christian in order to solicit the Duke's investment, may also be read as an allegory for the ultimate compromise of those who seek upward mobility in a strictly coded socio-economic system. Attempts to climb the ladder always result in having to sell something, typically to someone who can name their own price.

The ultimate ideological triumph of Satine, Christian and

those loyal to their love over the Duke and his henchman constitutes the affirming resolution of Luhrmann's film that is nonetheless immediately wedded to romantic tragedy. Satine's death immediately after the lovers' revolutionary reunion emphasizes the need to stay true to one's heart while it nudges the film in the direction of tragic awareness of the perpetual victory of the moneyed class.

In *Amélie*, the central characters are identified as belonging to the service class: they are café waitresses, sex-shop workers, flight attendants, grocers, aspiring poets and photo-booth repairmen. A primary feature of Jeunet's film is representing this group as varied in terms of personality and concerns, but united in a sort of iconoclastic vitality. The negative expression of this vitality is idiosyncrasy, an aspect well described by Scatton-Tessier, who writes "[p]aradoxically however, the characters' lack of healthy interpersonal communications skills creates a homogenous community" (Scatton-Tessier, 200). The film depicts a specific power dynamic by way of the relationship between Collignon the grocer and his employee Lucien, the slightly slow assistant he maligns and mocks at every opportunity. Collignon is not identified as having more money than any of the film's other characters (he even lives in Amélie's building); it simply seems that his position as "boss" either suits or fosters his innate misanthropy. However, he is similar to *Moulin Rouge*'s Duke in terms of being portrayed as a villainous powermonger who must be overthrown, which Amélie does. She booby-traps his apartment one day after witnessing him be abusive toward Lucien, and manages not only to convince him that he is insane but to allegorically depict the dangers of allowing the powerful to abuse their position. While the relationship between the "power overthrown" plotline and the heroine's quest for love are not as closely wedded in *Amélie* as are they are in *Moulin Rouge* (where the Duke is an obstacle to Satine and Christian), both films clearly depict minor acts of revolt against those who would exploit the working class, a grievance which is not allowed to go unchecked in this particular romanticized representation of Paris.[10]

In the end, both films narrate the "triumphs" of a romantic

couple and the working-class communities they represent. How does this Parisian trope compare with the implications of the Las Vegas luxury resort? Vegas is unmistakably a venue devoted to so-called leisure time, with more than enough to keep visitors entertained, whether for a couple of nights or several weeks. As has already been mentioned, it appeals to the desire for "escape" from the working world and restoration of the self, which is the fundamental appeal behind modern tourism, and pretends to offer accessible luxury to the masses: it is a populist destination, the ideal place for the world-weary to throw off their workaday worries and live the high life.

However, Debord's theories contain an illuminating critique of vacation or "leisure time," exposing the entire notion as yet another fiction imposed by the regime of the spectacle. In his articulation of pseudo-cyclical time in the age of alienated labor, Debord writes:

> Pseudo-cyclical time typifies the consumption of modern economic survival… It builds, in fact, on the natural vestiges of cyclical time, while also using these as models on which to base new but homologous variants: day and night, weekly work and weekly rest, the cycle of vacations and so on… Consumable pseudo-cyclical time is the time of the spectacle: in the narrow sense, as the time appropriate to the consumption of images, and, in the broadest sense, as the image of the consumption of time. (110-112)

Bell and Lyall forge a similar claim in arguing that:

> Tourism, as a form of voluntary consumption, was at first the provenance of the wealthy and leisured. But now, hundreds of millions of tourists rove the world… Consumption is essential to industrial capitalism… Citizens can be replaced as workers, but as consumers they are irreplaceable. (153)

In short, rather than existing as an escape from the monotonous sys-

tem, any costly leisure activities an individual worker consumes fail to represent that workers' revolt against obligation but instead cement that individual's position as consumer in the system. Even if the *mise-en-scène* of the Paris resort carefully channels notions of freedom, liberty or a revolutionary spirit, the inescapable fact remains that the more tourists save up their vacation time or simply slip away for the weekend to Las Vegas, the better off the system is. Productivity will never be lost so long as the shifted energy goes into consumption. Consumption is simply an extension of daily life.

While not intending to dismiss the real history of major popular revolution in Paris, analysis of the films and resort under consideration in this paper reveal ideal examples of the recuperative power of the dominant regime and its manipulation of cultural forms. If we conclude that the design of the spectacle renders actual revolutionary images or conceptions impossible, then even the representations of revolutionary communities or substantial ideological change within individuals or groups must be understood as the deliberate productions of the spectacle. As part of the brand of Paris, the portrayals of populist groups by the films and the resort's appropriation of the perennial revolutionary spirit ascribed to the city become more of the working of the spectacular myth.

Paris as Impossibly Authentic

What is this narrative of origins? It is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor…. The souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative. [11]

Susan Stewart

I'd rather be here than in Paris itself. It makes me proud to be mayor of a city with such a wonderful attraction.

Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman quoted in Thompson and Strow

Tourism is about myths and fantasies: "The creation of

unreal images is essential for many tourists seeking to escape the blandness of home and work routines" (Shaw and Williams, 202). Its opening preceding that of both films, Paris Las Vegas may have set a new marker for all future fantasy versions of the city. First, like all Las Vegas venues, Paris stands in fundamental defiance of its Nevada surroundings. In the words of Bell and Lyall: "Las Vegas is situated in the desert. The desert is part of the vast and therefore sublime landscape of the American West, but Las Vegas turns its back on the desert… In turning its back on the physically present sublime, Las Vegas created new, vast mindscapes" (Bell and Lyall, 162). In this reading, all of Las Vegas exhibits a double rejection of context: each major built project there both ignores its own context (America, desert) and the original context (place and time) of the sites it recreates. Having accomplished this much, the fantastic recreation of venues is able to proceed unchecked. The Eiffel Tower may be uncannily transported to Las Vegas (looking real enough that people are impressed, featuring a rigorous duplication of the "original" paint and other details) and few visitors seem to be bothered by the fact that several of its four bases are growing out of another building: the casino. Similarly, few seem disappointed that the much-vaunted facades of several of the city's other major landmark buildings are not matched by equally legitimate interiors. Rather, as one reviewer proclaimed: "No casino has taken theming as far as Paris… The developers went to great pains for the sake of authenticity. Once you're off the casino floor and in some of the restaurants and shops, you could imagine that you were in France" (Faust). This was the hope informing a television ad campaign that preceded the resort's opening in which, as Hal Rothman has described, "the material essence of France [is sent] to its destination in the desert" when movers box up items from Parisian cafés, stores and galleries, and finally, even the Eiffel Tower itself, and ship them to Las Vegas (Rothman, 36). In the end, the dialectic between the real and the fantastic is "bought" by the willing tourist/viewer: here they get Paris to the extreme.

Both films under consideration create their particular Pa-

risian visions via a notable play between realism and heightened expressionism. In *Amélie*, a nostalgia for a romanticized, simple way-of-being is mapped across the face of a largely real (i.e., shot on location) Montmartre, albeit one rendered spectacular in part due to Jeunet's distinctively stylized camera and design work, and his "tidying" of the cityscape. In *Moulin Rouge* by contrast, nostalgia is projected across the face of an entirely false Paris, one created on sound stages and via virtual/digital rendering. The aesthetic techniques that both idealize and rarify these visions of Paris are striking. In either case, the result is the impossible combination of the real image/presence of Paris with the aesthetic exaggeration (to echo Stewart) brought about by the filmmakers. It may in fact be that the tension is what makes the sites intriguing, as physical items are re-materialized in ways that take on the affective traits of the Paris of the imagination.

Still, much as no attempt is made to conceal or justify the fact that the Eiffel Tower's legs descend into the casino floor in Paris Las Vegas, viewers are not meant to be blind to the films' sleights of hand: the awareness of the city's falseness may in fact make it all the more desirable. One *Amélie* reviewer describes the film as "[a] fanciful charmer set in a Paris so romantic, you may want to drop everything and fly to France. But you'd wear out your walking shoes looking for the mythic City of Light pictured here" (Schwarzbaum). Such an invitation could be said to be made by both films and almost equally the resort, which revels in its play of signifiers, right down to a fake "Parisian" sky that covers the main concourses. It also introduces the aspect of Paris that seduces its viewer in part via appeal to a past that always slips just out of reach, and leads us to the final element of the commodity "Paris" that will be discussed by this paper: timelessness.

Paris as Timeless

No city has a more enduring, and more reproduced, image than Paris. [12]

Cynthia C. Davidson
Anymore

Nothing is more beautiful than Paris, except the memory of Paris.

French filmmaker Chris Marker quoted in Hohenadel

The pseudo-cyclical time described by Debord does more than encourage vacation spending; it distorts the progression of "real" time with the aim of preventing any disruptive critique of socio-economic history, hiding from the individual the spectacle's "violent expropriation of their time" (Debord, 114). Thus questions of temporality and notions of timelessness are highly significant in relation to the resort and films. While all three phenomena purport to recreate particular (if enduring) images of Paris, their branded icons and details of Paris function as mere souvenirs, instants of present endowed with a false historicity by the spectator's nostalgic work and desire. The resort, the film set in the relative "present" (*Amélie*) and the film set at the turn of the last century (*Moulin Rouge*) might all be equally analyzed as period pieces. Such an analysis is illuminated by Frow's account, which cites "a 'postmodern' growth in the representations/appropriations of the past, which run parallel to the tourist industry's representation/appropriation of modernity's cultural Other (of which the past is of course one major form" (Frow, 133).

The temporal setting of *Moulin Rouge* has already been mentioned above: the film explicitly positions events in a moment in history that is both particular (1899-1900) and qualitatively defined. While Christian arrives during "the summer of love," he will end up experiencing the dawn of a more sober Paris. After Satine dies, the rain turns into snow and the color bleeds from the image as the

story fast-forwards to Christian's life in the months after her death. All of the lights are gone and the Moulin Rouge lies in ruins, the film's radical change in appearance hinting at the urban decay that would befall the city in the subsequent decades of the twentieth century. However, *Moulin Rouge* is an exemplary model of what I describe elsewhere as an exorbitant period piece (Lawrie Van de Ven). Widely discussed for its hyper-kinetic, irreverent aesthetic, it fits with a standard definition of a period piece (set in historical times, in a location densely coded with symbolic resonance and featuring costumes, spaces and social norms associated with the past) only so far as one also accounts for its spectacular excesses in style and structure which depart from convention by mobilizing the aesthetics and technology of the contemporary moment of its production, creating an uncanny perception of a juxtaposition of times.

In *Amélie*, by contrast, events are set in a more recent era, but the uncanny effect is born of the context seeming intentionally antiquated. The film's prologue situates itself in an astoundingly specific way in the opening shot, as a voice-over informs us that we are looking at an image of a Parisian street on September 3, 1973. However, even in the face of this specification, the golden-hued image of a cobblestone street seems strangely outdated. After the prologue, the majority of the film is situated in the late 1990s; our sense of time is gleaned primarily from the fact that Amélie is now a grown-up but also, significantly, from a reference to the August 1997 death of Princess Diana. Nonetheless, various elements including the conspicuously out-dated dress-style of the film's *gamine* heroine and the accordion music that dominates the soundtrack fight against its proclaimed temporal setting. There are several aspects of both protagonist and her surroundings that do not mesh with the identified setting of 1997, but which rather signal a return to a century or so of French cultural identity, in keeping with the film's appeal to *le petisme*.

Paris Las Vegas is similarly ambiguous in its temporal theming, featuring a range of costume styles and props (such as the bakers' bicycles or printing press) that suggest a Paris spanning early

decades of the twentieth century. Crucially, the resort proclaims its Parisian-ness in large part by the presence of a fifty-percent-scale, strikingly detailed replica of the Eiffel Tower. The tower makes significant appearance in both films as well. On the level of symbolism, it seems that no "Paris" is complete without one; however, the tower's function in the films and resort runs even deeper.

The Eiffel Tower was built by civil engineer Gustave Alexandre Eiffel in 1889 and is still considered a monument to the industrial and engineering prowess of its time. By focusing on the tower as an important symbol, the films and the resort evoke an idealized memory of Paris of the 1890s and the turn of the last century, when the city was at the height of its intellectual and international import but before the damage of the First World War inaugurated a period of progressive blight.

This tendency is striking when set against the context in which both films and the resort were conceived and produced. In the countdown to the year 2000, the tower became the site for a giant digital timer clicking through the days and hours to the new millennium. People were suddenly encouraged to look to the symbol of a previous "fin-de-siècle" moment to discover what stage of progress (or loss, perhaps, depending upon one's point of view) of history had been reached. The tower had at that point weathered more than one hundred years and the passage of two hundred million visitors, and had already stood witness to the turn of a century. Perhaps in the multiple anxieties of the millennium, there was an inclination to look to a monument – and consequentially, a city – that simultaneously represented endurance and paradigm shift.

The function of a commodified experience of the past is well described by Bell and Lyall's study of contemporary tourism: "We used to have history that was in the past, the present and the future. We now live entirely contemporaneously in the present: we run the past in the present as nostalgia, and the future in the present as fantasy" (Bell and Lyall, 48). While the resort and film sell an image of a timeless or classic Paris, it appears that what is really being offered is a transtemporal vision that evokes a distant, seductively

nostalgic memory of the city, as well as a fantastic, idealized vision of the future.

The mobilization of Paris as a commodity between 1999 and 2001 depended upon reference to a time when the city's importance as an emblem of the modern world meant that the world itself was easier to understand. No matter how spectacular, these versions of Paris contain the fear over the passage of time, and the exaggerations of the contemporary landscape.

Conclusions

The image of Paris is a particularly enduring one, and it came to heightened creative use around the turn of the millennium. The particular brand of "Paris" sold by the resort and films should be expected to reappear in consumable guises in the years and decades to come. We might recall the rather outré moment offered by the final scene of *Moulin Rouge* in which the Duke's pistol is knocked free from his murderous hands, sails out the theater window, flies through the night sky and bounces off the Eiffel Tower. The city's iconic image will persist despite whatever turmoil ensues at its feet (whether in the Champ de Mars or plunked in the interior of a Las Vegas casino) or around the globe. A similar point is argued by Carolyn A. Durham, who considers recent examples of films shot on location in Paris and writes that "the symbolic power of Paris can clearly resist postmodernity's effacement of the distinctiveness of place" (Durham). But surely there are serious limitations to such a view of the authenticity of representations of Paris, limits that seem especially apparent when considering how the city's "brand" is mobilized in Las Vegas. There, a Paris praised by consumers and owners alike for its authenticity sits chockablock with the facsimiles of dozens of other places and cultures, entirely out of context with its original site. Paris Las Vegas has become pure "sight" or "citation," to riff on the provocative title of Durham's essay; put differently, it has become an inauthentic souvenir of a memory we never had in the first place. It is part of Las Vegas's "critical massing of simulacra" (Douglass and Raento 21), part of the "Spectacular Spectacu-

lar" so joyously enacted by the performers in *Moulin Rouge*, which, the song says, will leave one "dumb with wonderment." And it is perhaps the ironically largest manifestation of *le petisme* imaginable. Though he is writing about Las Vegas, David Boje may as well be referencing the image of Paris when he argues that it "enacts a storytelling theater to persuade us that the fragments of our fractured lives and the fragmentation of nature itself is whole and not fragmented at all" (Boje, 82).

The branded, consumable instances of Paris analyzed by this paper represent a particularly telling configuration of some of the most profitable attractions common to the popular-culture and tourist economies. Commodified experiences of romance and passion, of rebellion or revolt, of the purportedly authentic and of the nostalgically historical are to be found in especially high concentration around the imaginary construct of "Paris" but pervade the realms of postmodern commodity culture generally. To look to the resort or to the films and uncritically declare their extravagances to be part of "a spiritually enriching trend," or as delightful filmic escapism, is to entirely ignore the manner in which their appeals are a reaction born of fears about the near future as well as the way aesthetic or experiential enjoyment is strictly co-opted by the system of the spectacle.

Representation of stylized and anachronistic urban environments has been a diffuse and potent tendency in recent cinema and visual culture more broadly. While this paper has focused on the specific instances of the creation of a popular-culture version of Paris particularly, there remain many areas for further exploration. Considering the representations of other cities through the lens of a transtemporal analysis offers the opportunity to explore how the "brands" (or essential appeals) of other spaces are mobilized as containers for fears in a changing global culture, or perhaps, some hopeful visions of the urban future.

Notes

[1] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 15.

[2] In addition to Park Place Entertainment, Paris Las Vegas represents the collaboration of the architectural film of Bergman, Walls & Associates, Ltd., the Yates-Silverman interior design firm and the theming work of specialty contractors Keenan, Hopkins, Suder & Stowell, who were also involved with several other major projects in Las Vegas, and the Hollywood and Highland complex in Los Angeles.

[3] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 23-24.

[4] Interestingly, this tendency toward *le petisme* in France seems to be spilling beyond the nation's borders.

[5] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address in detail, discussion of the relationships between the tourist gaze and the Freudian gaze (the latter so often mobilized in film studies) may be found in Rhona Jackson's "Converging Cultures; Converging Gazes: Contextualizing Perspectives" in *The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures*, edited by David Crouch, Rhona Jackson and Felix Thompson, New York: Routledge, 2005: 184-197.

[6] In this context, it is especially interesting to note that the same architectural firm responsible for Paris Las Vegas, Bergman, Walls & Associates, Ltd., espoused plans for a new London-themed resort on the location once occupied by the El Rancho a few years after Paris was completed (circa 2002-2004). They have since abandoned the plan, but its traces may be found courtesy of the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. See http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.bwaltd.com/bwaweb/lon.html

[7] For traces of the resort's previous websites, access http://www.park-place.com/paris/lasvegas/ via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.

[8] The narrative leads the viewer to assume that Amélie and Nico will be perfect for each other by virtue of their respective idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, a split-scene sequence suggests that their oddly socialized behavior can be traced to their respective lonely, sibling-less childhoods, spent a few kilometers apart from one another. And, chiefly, the very essence of romance narrative traditions is the introduction of two individuated halves of a heterosexual pairing that must be brought together by the unfolding

of the plot.

[9] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 13.

[10] However, when a fantasy scene near the film's conclusion shows Collignon and Lucien in the familiar situation but with abuser-abused roles inverted (in short, the power structure remains in tact, only the players changed) one must question how revolutionary Amélie's meddling proved to be.

[11] Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. 136.

[12] Davidson, Cynthia C. "Introduction: Images of Anymore." *Anymore*. Cynthia C. Davidson, ed. New York: MIT Press, 2000. 8.

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