



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Opening Shots and Loose Slots: adapting Las Vegas

Goggin, J.

DOI

[10.1093/screen/hjv029](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjv029)

Publication date

2015

Published in

Screen

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Goggin, J. (2015). Opening Shots and Loose Slots: adapting Las Vegas. *Screen*, 56(2), 245-252. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjv029>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Opening shots and loose slots: adapting Las Vegas

JOYCE GOGGIN

Anyone who has ever seen a film set in Las Vegas will be familiar with opening shots of sensational neon signage clustered against the night sky. This montage sequence, now an established convention, leads the viewer on a thrilling joy-ride, generally beginning on Fremont Street in the old city centre, then heading down the world-famous Strip. Such an opening occurs in textual fictional narratives about Las Vegas in various ways, and in film it visually supplies backstory, indicating to viewers that the movie will feature some or all of the classic ‘Las Vegas total’: hotel rooms, food, gambling, lounge acts, quickie marriages and divorces, commercial sex. Mobilizing these signifiers of ‘Vegas’ to inform viewers that certain fictional codes will be in place, this opening both establishes an implicit pact concerning what to understand and anticipate, and serves as a gateway to various life-changing experiences involving love, fortune, violence or death. So whether it opens a novel or film, or is developed in a flashback, the visual cruise past Vegas landmarks signals associations that ‘stay in Vegas’, from loose slot machines and unsanctioned sex to big losses and drunken disorderliness.

In what follows I expand on Las Vegas’s potential to generate multiple meanings in various media, and analyze how and what this opening shot of Vegas neon has signified from decade to decade. More specifically, my argument hinges on the notion that place is coded through a myriad of visual signifiers – in this case the neon and laser signage for which Las Vegas is famous – all of which coalesce in such a way as to constitute a complex text that has been adapted in film and fictional narratives, which in turn endlessly adapt each other.

To begin with a textual example of this phenomenon, Ian Fleming's novel *Diamonds are Forever* contains the following passage, in which 007 is introduced to Las Vegas by a cab driver who narrates over the 'glittering gunfire of light-splinters' along the Strip:

'Coming into the Strip now' ... 'On ya right, the Flamingo', said Ernie Cureo as they passed a low-lying modernistic hotel with a huge tower of neon. Then here's The Sands ... There's The Desert Inn ... and that dump with the iron sign is The Sahara. Latest thing.' ... 'Then', he waved to the left where the neon was wrought into a twenty-foot covered wagon at full gallop, 'ya get The Last Frontier. That's a dummy Western town on the left. Worth seein' and over there's the Thunderbird, and across the road's The Tiara. Snazziest joint in Vegas.'¹

As they ride into town, the driver provides a backstory for each casino they pass, including key features of the infamous Vegas scene ('hot money', 'legalized cat-shops'), mob members like Bugsy Siegel and important figures from the world of high-stakes gambling.² This passage typifies adaptations of the signage that signifies Las Vegas, and both texts and signs are adapted in film openings to provide an interpretative frame through which to view comedies, gangster flicks and musicals that are set there.³

But this three-way adaptation circuit between signage, text and film is not straightforward for several reasons, the most fundamental being the issue of what constitutes 'text'. It is instructive here to recall Barthes's description of the 'ideal text' that emerges when one is able to 'appreciate' plurality, namely a text constituted as 'a galaxy of signifiers' that has 'no beginning', that is 'reversible' and to which 'we gain access ... by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one'. These rapid-fire comments on the nature of text, along with his later remark that the meaning of an ideal text 'is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice', apply remarkably well to Las Vegas.⁴

Writing at roughly the same time, Tom Wolfe attempted to make sense of the 'electric-sign gauntlet' of clown heads, silver slippers and wedding chapels that announce the Vegas experience to approaching motorists. He described Las Vegas as the 'only town in the world whose skyline is made up ... of signs', and noted that driving in one sees 'no buildings, no trees, only signs'.⁵ Writing shortly after Wolfe, and in a drug-induced state perhaps more germane to understanding Vegas's randomly composed 'galaxy of signifiers', Hunter S. Thompson read nothing less than 'the heart of the American dream' in the 'strange symbols & filigree' of the city's skyline.⁶ Through random and multiple points of entry, then, the 'text' of Las Vegas generates meaning, as if by 'throwing dice', for the observing subject high on gambling and alcohol or the more mundane excitements of shopping and eating.

Also writing in the 1970s, but as architects rather than Gonzo journalists, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour read the city's 'skyline of signs' as a 'primitive vernacular'.⁷ As the authors explained in

1 Ian Fleming (1956), *Diamonds are Forever* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 166–67.

2 *Ibid.*

3 For a comprehensive bibliography of fiction set in Las Vegas, see Edward E. Baldwin, 'Las Vegas in popular culture' (Unpublished dissertation: University of Nevada, 1997); Ingrid Eumann, *The Outer Edge of the Wave: American Frontiers in Las Vegas* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004).

4 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 5, 6.

5 Tom Wolfe (1964), *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York, NY: Picador, 2009), pp. 5, 7.

6 Hunter S. Thompson (1971), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: a Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 27.

7 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour (1972), *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 6.

8 Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

9 Ibid., p. 80.

10 Ibid., p. 35.

11 Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 4.

12 Venturi, Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, p. 87.

13 Klingmann, *Brandscapes*, p. 194.

14 Ibid., pp. 200, 203.

15 Ibid., pp. 206, 207.

Learning from Las Vegas, ‘representational architecture along highways’ articulates the ‘persuasion of road-side eclecticism’ through ‘enormous signs in vast spaces’ to be read at high speeds: an ‘architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression’.⁸ Following their intuition that the city should be read, they were the first to note that designers at the Young Electric Sign Company were (and continue to be) among the most important developers of Las Vegas’s ‘private vocabulary’, and one of the principal ‘authors’ of the city’s innovative casino architecture. Based on these observations, the authors concluded that this ‘impure architecture of communication’ works by mobilizing cliché to create a specific kind of textuality, to which they refer as ‘Pop literature’.⁹

The equation of the city with text also takes in the prevalent notion that casinos should also be ‘seen as moving sequences’,¹⁰ making their signifying potential particularly amenable to adaptation into film. Texts generated by Las Vegas as cinematic or literary narratives morph with ‘economic developments, technological advancements, and social changes’ in keeping with the notion that ‘the urban environment is a product of prevailing economic conditions’.¹¹ Hence, in the decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, Vegas architecture was dominated by ‘ducks’ or sign-buildings ‘distorted by an overall symbolic form’, and decorated ‘sheds’ like the Stardust, which are essentially box platforms for two-dimensional billboards.¹² Now, however, the majority of these casinos have been imploded and replaced by inverted sheds or ‘interior spaces forming one fluid sequence of interrelated event spaces’ and back-lot architecture, like the MGM, New York–New York or Paris, built to keep pace with, or to generate, the desires of today’s tourists.¹³

As such developments occur on the ground, the text that is Las Vegas adapts and is adapted in multiple narrative forms. In the process the city has undergone a shift from ‘figural regimes of signification’ and ‘quoted images’ to a more fully orchestrated ‘cinematic choreography’, with complexes such as the Venetian that offer sensuous narrative ‘ruptures [that are] closely choreographed and follow the script of a spatial scenography’.¹⁴ Las Vegas’s ‘back-lot architecture’ now adapts its own text ‘with elaborate storyboarding techniques’ that orchestrate ‘behavioural scenarios, time frames and social interactions’ as casino visitors ‘move “from scene to scene” through entire building[s]’. So whereas Las Vegas has been conceptualized as a text that is frequently adapted into fiction and film, the city now also adapts its own text as a cinematic experience, to be ‘completed in the imagination of the visitor, similar to what occurs when one watches a movie’.¹⁵

In this regard, Barthes’s definition of text, which includes both ‘plural’ and ‘reversible’ as characteristics of textuality, remains germane to my case here because the movement of the Vegas opening shot from place to text to film occurs in a loose, rhizomatic economy of signification, and because the polyvalent signs of which the shot is composed are reversible, plural and multidirectional. The result is a city that serves itself as a sign and is coded in ways that are immediately significant and quickly understood through a panoply of familiar visual signifiers. So while it might, for example, seem

16 On this point, see Eumann, *The Outer Edge of the Wave*, pp. 29–31; David Schwartz, *Suburban Xanadu: the Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 43–45; Alan Hess, *Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1993), pp. 33–34.

17 William L. Fox, *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle* (Reno and Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2005), p. 4.

18 Cliff Oswick and Tom Keenoy, 'Cinematic re-presentations of Las Vegas: reality, fiction and compulsive consumption', *M@n@gement*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2001), p. 222. <<http://www.management-aims.com/PapersMgmt/430swick.pdf>> accessed 28 March 2015.

19 M. Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins and David R. Dickens, *Las Vegas: the Social Production of an All-American City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 75.

20 Stephen Linstead, 'Death in Vegas: seduction, kitch, and sacrifice', *M@n@gement*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2001), p. 164. <<http://www.management-aims.com/PapersMgmt/43Linstead.pdf>> accessed 28 March 2015.

21 Schwartz, *Suburban Xanadu*, p. 57.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

logical to assume that the semio-text of Las Vegas, the place, has been adapted in Hollywood film, the relationship between these two entertainment centres actually began with Las Vegas adapting Hollywood's Wild West concept as a theme for its first casinos, such as the Last Frontier.¹⁶ The dynamics of adapting the Vegas opening shot, therefore, complicate conventional adaptation studies because it is impossible to determine which of these nodes – Las Vegas, Hollywood films about Las Vegas, textual narratives about Las Vegas – is the adaptation and which is the text being adapted.

One notable example of the city as a sign is the banner that greets visitors on arrival at the McCarran International Airport, bearing the words, 'What happens here stays here. (Just a friendly reminder).' This is an opening that says both what is on offer and how to act in this hard-ball desert heterotopia. Indeed, it is often remarked that the Mojave desert surrounding the city 'provides a prophylactic barrier against reality', where visitors can involve themselves in excessive gambling, drinking and sexuality in a playground for adult experimentation 'free of real-world consequences'.¹⁷ Hence one thing that the classic opening shot in whatever medium communicates is the notion that 'Las Vegas [is] a safe haven; a context in which excesses ... are not considered abnormal', an oasis 'of heightened symbolism'¹⁸ that engulfs the visitor in a 'transformative, magical space'.¹⁹ Vegas neon thus opens the way to life-changing experiences, providing the visitor with a physical 'opening shot', while in various media this view prepares the spectator for gambling and libidinal activities as well as for 'various forms of late capitalism, including gangster capitalism' and the 'risk [of] symbolic death through loss of property, status, esteem or career, or even ... actual death'.²⁰

In addition to all of the above, this desert laboratory for life-changing experiences is associated with any number of movie stars and entertainers who have played Vegas, been married in Vegas, made Hollywood films or opened casinos in Vegas. Indeed, there has always been a direct and profitable link between Hollywood and Vegas, through 'celebrities [who] actively promoted Las Vegas' by performing there, and through casino resorts that 'became natural extensions of the nation's film capital'.²¹ Vegas also benefited from its 'proximity to Los Angeles [which] encouraged not only tourism from Southern California but also around the nation',²² as evidenced in the opening shot from *The Las Vegas Story* (Howard Hughes, 1952), which features a map of Nevada. As the voiceover explains 'nobody knows much about Clark County, Nevada', and as the camera zooms in on map of Las Vegas, the shot fades to a montage of Fremont Street signage and the voiceover announces, 'but just you say "Las Vegas" anywhere in the world and folks pick up their ears. The lucky ones can remember picking up some money or dropping some along with last year's wife.' Here the opening shot serves to promote tourism, while the voiceover is visually supported by signs that read, 'Gift and Novelty Shop', 'Wedding Chapel' and 'Howdy Podner Law Offices Wilk and Son', so that the spoken word and signage work in tandem to let the viewer know *where* Las Vegas is and *what* is on offer there.

Fig. 1. Maria (Cyd Charisse) and Chuck (Dan Dailey), in *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (Roy Rowland, 1956).



Meet Me in Las Vegas (Roy Rowland, 1956) similarly opens with a song explaining how to get there ('by car or plane, by bus or train') and its location ('it's in Nevada, Nevada USA!'). Described as 'the city's best cinematic commercial', *Meet Me in Las Vegas* was advertised as 'MGM's Gold Mine of Entertainment' filmed in a 'glamour town full of guest stars', many of whom were already performing there when the film was made.²³ Although the 'opening shot' occurs after the main characters have been introduced, it is the first colour version of this sequence and the first to take in both Fremont Street and the Strip. So along with a theme song that explains how to get there, the shot opening onto the Vegas experience announces 'exciting CinemaScope and Color' and the thrill of the Strip, where the first clubs were built just a decade before (figure 1).

The opening shot occurs as dancer Maria Corvier (Cyd Charisse) discovers that when she holds hands with Nevada cowboy Chuck Rodwell (Dan Dailey), 'something happens': slot machines spew coins, a dry well gushes oil and hens 'lay enough eggs for a year' on Rodwell's 'Lucky 7 Ranch'. This plot device supports the notion that 'there was a curious parallel between the loosening of fiscal restraint' 'and the lowering of sexual inhibitions' in postwar America; Las Vegas cashed in on both.²⁴ So while looser sexual mores are reflected in hand-holding that invariably leads to some form of ejaculation, Rodwell, who consistently loses large sums, explains that 'cards, dice and roulette wheels don't care who you are', that 'if you work hard you make money but it leaves out surprises', and that 'gambling is just entertainment, like everything else'. In other words, Vegas offers occasions for sexual encounters along with democratized entertainment, and gambling offers relief from the boredom of hard work. *Meet Me in Las Vegas* thus promoted gambling as a new form of middle-class entertainment while anticipating the zenith of the baby boom, addressing 'modern youth' with numbers such as 'I Refuse to Rock-and-Roll' and much sexual innuendo.

The Hollywood–Vegas outreach to youth culture reached a high point with the Elvis Presley vehicle *Viva Las Vegas* (George Sidney, 1964), which features the definitive example of the opening shot under discussion, accompanied by a song that narrates what Vegas offers, from one-armed-bandits to the city's capacity for 'turnin' day into night-time, turnin' night into daytime'. It also adapted a typically 1960s strategy for projecting

²³ Mike Weatherford, *Cult Las Vegas: The Weirdest! The Wildest! The Swingin'est Town on Earth* (Las Vegas, NV: Huntington Press, 2001), p. 208.

²⁴ Schwartz, *Suburban Xanadu*, p. 59.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

'nowness' through supposedly liberated or emancipated sexuality, while promoting Vegas as a 'good place to live'. Highlighting the city's domestic potential was part of an attempt to improve its declining reputation and to address labour shortages connected to the opening of the Las Vegas Convention Center in 1959, which 'spurred an increase in the size of casino resorts' and the flow of tourism.²⁵ While this musical followed the established formula by capitalizing on the city as its setting and featuring Vegas performers, its pivotal scene follows Rusty Martin (Anne-Margret) and Lucky Jackson (Elvis Presley) on their first date, doing everything there is to do in Vegas *except* gamble. What is more, their date begins with a dance recital at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, thereby letting viewers know that there is a university in a town where they might least expect to find one. Hence, even though the opening shot suggests the typical Las Vegas package, the film actually promotes the city as a 'nice place to raise a family' by featuring the university and highlighting the engineering wonders of the Hoover Dam and employment opportunities for those thinking of settling.

Martin Scorsese's 1995 adaptation of Nicholas Pileggi's true-crime classic *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas* (1995), itself a fictional adaptation of the city's history, adds an interesting twist to the opening shot. Although it contains the obligatory montage of neon, it is rendered in closeup so that no headliner text or casino names are visible. In spite of the closeups, the Vegas *habitué* will recognize the neon of the Riviera, Bally's, the Flamingo and so on, as Ace Rothstein's (Robert De Niro) voiceover tells us that Vegas has changed: 'the big corporations took it all over. Today it looks like Disneyland . . . the corporations tore down practically every one of the old casinos. And where did the money come from to rebuild the pyramids? Junk bonds.'

This film dramatizes events that followed the passing of the Nevada Corporate Gaming Act in 1969, assisted by Howard Hughes, and the process of casino corporatization more generally. The act legitimated gambling as corporatized entertainment as casinos joined other, less stigmatized public offerings on the market, and the old 'sheds' and 'ducks' were imploded and replaced with themed complexes built on junk bonds. This was the moment when the casino industry merged with the financial market, resulting in Disneyfication and diversification, beginning with the opening of Circus, Circus. Presenting the opening shot as a blur of nondescript neon thus signals the passage to a faceless, undifferentiated Vegas where 'few tourists walking the Strip know that MGM Mirage owns the MGM Grand, New York–New York, Bellagio, Mirage and Treasure Island'.²⁶

Whereas *Casino* was a swansong for the old, pre-corporate Vegas, *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995) paradoxically helped to establish the city in the 1990s as a place where 'fake becomes more real than the real', a place where one can find 'real fake of the highest, loudest and most authentically inauthentic level of illusion and invention'.²⁷ The opening shot of the Strip in this film hints at gritty authenticity, accompanied by the unmistakable irony of Sting's melancholic rendition of 'My One and Only

26 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

27 Linstead, 'Death in Vegas', pp. 159, 161.

Fig. 2. Ben (Nicholas Cage) and Sera (Elizabeth Shue), in *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995).



Love'. The opening shot, which typically spells fun and thrills, here frames the coupling of self-destructive alcoholic Ben (Nicholas Cage) and abused prostitute Sera (Elizabeth Shue), and what will be a life-changing experience for both of them, ending in Ben's death. The shot occurs a second time in the film, after the opening credits, as we follow Ben drinking heavily and driving down the strip, while in the novel a drunken Sera covers this same ground as the 'relatively undiminished activity of pre-dawn Las Vegas raises her spirits' and provides hours of solipsistic musing because 'the Tropicana lies virtually at the end of the Strip', miles from where she begins.²⁸

Once more the opening shot in both novel and film is the gateway to the protagonists' awakening, but should be read through Mark Taylor's characterization of the 1990s as 'a period of undisciplined excess',²⁹ during which a crisis of representation occurred, culminating in the postmodern aesthetics of fake. Coming to similar conclusions, Sharon Zukin has pointed out that, in the 1990s, any form of grit became appealing as a reaction to 'the postindustrial spirit of the times' and as an example of 'the symbolic economy's ability to synthesize dirt and danger into new cultural commodities'.³⁰ The visual code of Las Vegas in this film certainly accomplishes all of that, and can be seen as establishing Vegas not as the glitz and glamour capital of America, but rather as a place of fake-fake and overdetermined grit, where one could go for that most authentic of experiences – death.

Pileggi's semi-factual adaptation of Las Vegas in his novel does not contain the opening shot with which Scorsese's adaptation of that book begins,³¹ and this underscores one of the central issues raised here. What Scorsese adapts in this gesture is not a passage from the novel but rather the text of Vegas itself, along with the filmic convention established by other Las Vegas movies. In adapting the opening shot from other films rather than from the text, Scorsese challenges, however implicitly, the notion that

²⁸ John O'Brien, *Leaving Las Vegas* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1990), p. 41.

²⁹ Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 1.

³⁰ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: the Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 51.

³¹ Pileggi wrote the screenplay and the novel at the same time, both of which adapt the 'true' story of Las Vegas, which reinforces the argument about the ambiguous flow of adaptation.

adaptation is a one-way street from source text to screen rather than a process that takes in multiple sources from various media.

As I have argued, in this particular case the opening shot presses the question of where one places the limits of 'text', given the long-standing tradition of reading Las Vegas and its signage as text in its own right. This is perhaps best illustrated by the use that Figgis makes of signage in *Leaving Las Vegas*, where it frequently dominates and virtually engulfs the characters, speaking for and with them (figure 2), as in a montage sequence of Cage gambling and drinking, for example, which is interspersed with neon signs that flash 'Open Daily', 'Lady Luck' and 'Unfinished Business'.

Las Vegas movies adapt stories about the city, mafia bosses and historic events, just as they adapt the 'text' constituted by the enormous semiotic playground of the city's signage, while the city continues to provide evocative settings and to structure the mise-en-scene of films shot within it. At the same time, the Vegas signage used to compose opening shots communicates a 'meta-narrative of excess (comprised of compulsion, addiction and escapism)' and the history of Vegas as a 'macro-spectacle of compulsive consumption'.³²

Moreover, as Philippe Sohet³³ has observed, incipit forms of address such as the opening shot are not stable, and the Las Vegas opening shot has developed over the decades, along with its changing function as a sort of parallel narrative of the city's industrial history and long-standing collaboration with Hollywood studios. I have tried to show how various moments in the legitimation and industrialization of gambling are legible in the famous opening shot, along with key junctures in the city's Disneyfication and diversification as Vegas established itself as a family holiday and convention centre. With *Leaving Las Vegas* however, the city has come to signify fake so overdetermined that it becomes, paradoxically, the shorthand for grit and authenticity. Given that Las Vegas is increasingly seen as 'a perfect reflection of America',³⁴ and the epicentre of the American dream, or the place 'where all the excessive acts of the modern, capitalist dreams were played and played-out',³⁵ this opening shot demands a better look.

32 Oswick and Keenoy, 'Cinematic representations of Las Vegas', p. 218.

33 Philippe Sohet, *Images du récit* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2007), p. 107.

34 Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 7.

35 A. Fuat Firat, 'The meanings and messages of Las Vegas: the present of our future', *M@n@gement*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2001), p. 102, <<http://www.management-aims.com/PapersMgmt/43Firat.pdf>> accessed 28 March 2015.