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The consumer's sublime, by David E. Nye

In 1845 an American visitor to Niagara Falls stood watch on the piazza of his hotel during a thunderstorm. He later wrote: "The finest thing we have seen yet – and one of the grandest I ever saw – was a thunder storm among the waters . . . the other night, which lighted up the two cascades, as seen from our piazzas, with most magnificent effect. They had a spectral look, as they came out of the darkness and were again swallowed up in it, that defies all description and all imagination."¹ This spectacle combined the mathematical sublime of the vast waterfall with the dynamic sublime of thunder and lightning, creating a still more powerful effect.

In a few years, the gorge at Niagara was spanned by Roebling's railway bridge, which many thought as wonderful as the falls. Two generations later, the falls were illuminated by searchlights. These lights – major attractions of the electrical sublime – received their power from Niagara's new hydroelectric power stations, which themselves became tourist attractions and which provided the theme for the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. The industrial sublime also emerged here, for the factories attracted to the site by cheap electricity drew crowds to witness the wonder of mass production. Thus, a succession of natural and technological sublimes appeared at this one site.

The sublime has persisted as a preferred American trope through two centuries. Aside from the specific characteristics of each form, Americans seem to have a particular affinity for sharp discontinuities in sensory experience, for sudden shifts of perspective, for a broken figure of thought in which the quotidian is ruptured. The psychology of the sublime has long been a recurrent figure of thought as Americans have established their relationship to new landscapes and new technologies. This underlying pattern persists in the descriptions of objects as disparate as Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Natural Bridge of Virginia, the first railroads, suspension bridges, skyscrapers, city skylines, spectacular lighting, electric advertising, world's fairs, atomic explosions, and the rockets of the space program.

Europeans neither invented nor embraced the vertical city of the skyscraper. Europeans banned or restricted electric signs, and rightly saw the landscape of Times Square as peculiarly American. Europeans did not see atomic explosions as tourist sites. Europeans seldom journeyed to see rockets go into space, but Americans went

by the millions.² There is a persistent American attraction to the technological sublime.

Not only is the sublime a recurrent figure in American thought; potential sublimity has also justified the creation of new technologies in the first place. This was not merely a matter of the rationalization of new projects, or a simple form of class domination in which an overawed populace acceded to new displays of technological power. There is an American penchant for thinking of the subject as a consciousness that can stand apart from the world and project its will upon it. In this mode of thought, the subject elides Kantian transcendental reason with technological reason and sees new structures and inventions as continuations of nature. Those operating within this logic embrace the reconstruction of the life-world by machinery, experience the dislocations and perceptual disorientations caused by this reconstruction in terms of awe and wonder, and, in their excitement, feel insulated from immediate danger. New technologies become self-justifying parts of a national destiny, just as the natural sublime once undergirded the rhetoric of manifest destiny. Fundamental changes in the landscape paradoxically seem part of an inevitable process in harmony with nature.

After centuries of neglect, the sublime – first described in classical antiquity – reemerged in the eighteenth century in tandem with the apotheosis of reason and the advent of industrialization. This broken figure of thought, which permitted both the imagination of an ineffable surplus of emotion and its recontainment, was not based on a perceived opposition between nature and culture in the ancient world or in Enlightenment England. Nor was there an absolute opposition between the natural and the technological sublime in Jacksonian America. Although there is an undoubted tension between what Leo Marx terms “the machine” and “the garden,” Americans looked for sublimity in both realms.³ Each provided a disruption of ordinary sense perception, and each was interpreted as a sign of national greatness.

At first the sublime was understood to be an emotion almost exclusive to the male sex, women being relegated to the realm of the beautiful, as in Kant’s early writings. The mature formulation of Kant’s aesthetic held, however, that the sublime was a universal emotion, accessible to all. Yet, in practice, the scenes that elicited the sublime were usually more accessible, and accessible at an earlier time, to men than to women. The explorers who first saw Yosemite and the Grand Canyon were men. The engineers who built the railways, the architects that designed the skyscrapers, and the technicians who created the electrical displays were men. Men created virtually all the central objects of the technological sublime that have been the focus of this study. It was the male gaze of domination that looked out from the railway engine, the skyscraper, and the factory manager’s office, surveying an orderly domain. Though women were not absolutely excluded, they were marginal.

Yet women played a vital part in the incorporation of the technological object into ordinary life. Once the initial shock of the sublime object had passed, it was domesticated and made familiar through a process of feminization. The railway engine soon became a “she,” and train crews spoke of getting “her” to the station on time. The steel mill became an industrial mother, giving birth to molten ingots. Electricity was usually represented as a woman in statuary and paintings.⁴ In the 1950s there was a “Miss Atom Bomb” beauty queen. In 1986 the sophisticated

engineering of Eiffel and the copper cladding of Bartholdi merged with laser beams and computer-designed fireworks in the rededication of the Statue of Liberty. Feminization transformed the alien into the familiar and implied the emergence of a new synthetic realm in which the lines between nature, technology, and culture were blurred if not erased.

Feminization tamed technology, preparing the subject to experience new forms of the sublime. Despite its power, the technological sublime always implies its own rapid obsolescence, making room for the wonders of the next generation. The railway of 1835 hardly amazed in 1870, and most Americans eventually lost interest in trains (though that particular “romance” lasted longer than most). During each generation the radically new disappeared into ordinary experience. The shape of the life-world, the envelope of techniques and customs that appeared natural to a child, kept changing.⁵ Travelers on the first trains, in the 1830s, felt that their disruptive experience was sublime, and remained in a state of heightened awareness, but the sense of an extraordinary break in experience soon disappeared. Similarly, the wonder of 1855 was to see a freight train cross the suspension bridge over Niagara Gorge. In the 1880s came the Brooklyn Bridge; in the 1930s came the Golden Gate Bridge. Each of these structures was longer than its predecessors, sustaining more weight over a greater span.

The logic of the technological sublime demanded that each object exceed its precursors. Similarly, each world's fair erected more elaborate lighting displays than its predecessors, creating more powerful illusions to satisfy the viewers' increasingly voracious appetite. The first skyscrapers, which had fewer than 15 stories, soon were overshadowed by far larger structures. The once dizzying and disorienting view from atop the Flatiron Building became familiar, and higher towers were needed to upset the sense of “normal” spatial relations. Likewise, the first airplanes to appear over Chicago or New York drew millions out into the streets; yet within 20 years daredevil stunts were necessary to hold the crowd's interest, and by 1960 aviation had passed into the ordinary. Each form of the technological sublime became a “natural” part of the world and ceased to amaze, though the capacity and the desire for amazement persisted.

Although the wonder of one generation scarcely drew a glance in the next, each loss of sublimity prepared the subject for more radical shifts in perspective yet to come. In the early 1950s Las Vegas newspapers complained that a recent round of open-air atomic explosions had been too small: “‘Bigger bombs, that's what we're waiting for,’ said one Las Vegas nightclub owner. ‘Americans have to have their kicks.’”⁶

Sublime experience is not merely a matter of vision; all the senses are engaged. Burke noted that, although the eye was often dominant, movement, noise, smell, and touch were also important. A city sounds much different at the top of a skyscraper than on the street below. The wind makes one feel more vulnerable out on the open span of a long bridge. The steam locomotive shook the ground and filled the air with an alien smell of steam, smoke, and sparks; the Saturn rocket did much the same thing on a larger scale. The strong contrast between the silence of a rocket's liftoff and the sudden roar that follows a few seconds later is also a vital element in making that spectacle sublime. The sheer size of the crowd attracted to a technological display

further arouses the emotions. In each event, the human subject feels that the familiar envelope of sensory experience has been rent asunder.

Most Americans have not interpreted these powerful experiences according to Kant. In the case of the natural sublime, while some well-read individuals deduced from the magnificence of Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge the existence of a universal moral sense, many early visitors to these sites felt that they proved the existence of God. Technological marvels were even less likely to be “read” in Kantian terms. Most Americans thought that a man-made rupture in ordinary experience proved the potential omnipotence of humanity. A railroad, a skyscraper, or a hydro-electric dam proclaimed the ever-increasing power of technicians, demonstrating their ability to disrupt what had become normal perception and creating the discontinuity that Americans seemed to crave. This radical break in experience became a necessary epiphany; it reinforced the sense of progress. At the same time, the “Americanness” of this epiphany invigorated nationalistic sentiment.

There were occasional dissenters. Since the 1820s some have greeted new technologies with skepticism. Thoreau suggested that the railroad, for all its admirable celerity, nevertheless exemplified a more general development, in which (in Emerson’s words) “things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”⁷ Later, others felt the skyscraper destroyed the scale of the city and reduced the citizen to a stick figure, a featureless pedestrian seen from a great distance. This opposition suggests a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime that invites the observer to interpret a sudden expansion of perceptual experience as the corollary to an expansion of human power and yet simultaneously evokes the sense of individual insignificance and powerlessness. One is both the all-seeing observer in a high tower and the ant-like pedestrian inching along the pavement below. One can either be outside, terrified by the speed and noise of the railway, or riding triumphantly over the landscape. One may (like the young Lewis Mumford) experience the electrified skyline as an epiphany, or one may (like Claude McKay) feel overwhelmed by the swirling lights of Times Square. Technologies can be perceived as an extension and affirmation of reason or as the expression of a crushing, omnipotent force outside the self. In this bifurcation, those who have the greatest political, economic, and social power are more likely to find themselves inside the panopticon, surveying the vast surround.

Such a division was less evident during the Jacksonian period, when new technologies were embraced by a cross-section of the body politic. In the 1828 parade that celebrated the construction of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, representatives of virtually all trades and every social class took part. (Such events contrasted with unruly, spontaneous parades of the unskilled and the working poor.) During the remainder of the nineteenth century, formal parades organized by local elites gradually deleted the skilled worker and the ordinary citizen, focusing instead on engineers, entrepreneurs, and a few elected officials. Even more important, attention shifted away from human beings to technological objects. The huge Corliss Engine became the icon of the 1876 Centennial Exposition. A decade later, few of the millions who saw the inauguration of Brooklyn Bridge or that of the Statue of Liberty heard the speeches. The word was increasingly replaced by massive representations, a process advanced by the electrical sublime at world’s fairs and the Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909. Gradually the word ceased to be the carrier of sublimity. Reenactments

and displays became important before film and television, which proved ill suited to convey the full force of the technological sublime. It had to be seen, heard, and felt in person. The citizen had become less an active participant than a tourist and a consumer – a fact well understood by corporate exhibitors at the New York World's Fair of 1939 and self-evident by the rededication of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.

The classic location of such experiences was the urban metropolis. It possessed the magnificent railway stations, the artificial cliffs and ravines of the new skyline, the skyscraper panoramas that encouraged fantasies of domain, the de-natured industrial districts, and the phantasmagoria of the Great White Way. Each of these offered the visitor a powerful demonstration of what human beings had accomplished. In the view from a skyscraper, in the artificial totality of the factory zone, or in the special effects of the Great White Way, nature had disappeared. The visitor was by turns terrified, exalted, and reduced to insignificance. The new skyscrapers reduced the individual to an insect or a shadow. The new factories contained vast interiors filled with workers whose sheer numbers demonstrated the insignificance and interchangeability of individuals. Electric advertising did not emphasize producers, engineers, architects, or inventors; rather, it paraded the brand names of mass-produced products. Whereas Independence Day had been a once-a-year commemoration, the factory tour and the skyscraper observation platform were open each day and the Great White Way shone every night.

The paradox of the technological sublime is that it pretends to present a legible materialization of the unrepresentable – as though a physical construction could be infinite, as though the boundless could be bounded, as though the shapeless could be shaped. Slavoj Žižek has called the sublime “a unique point in Kant's system, a point at which the fissures, the gap between phenomenon and Thing-in-itself, is abolished in a negative way, because in it the phenomenon's very inability to represent the Thing adequately is inscribed in the phenomenon itself.”⁸ For Kant the hurricane was not a concretization of reason, but Americans have long thought that new machines are nothing less than that. For Kant the natural sublime object evokes the feeling of enthusiasm, or a pleasure of a purely negative kind, for it finally concerns a failure of representation. In contrast, the American technological sublime is built on a pleasure of a positive kind, for it concerns an apparently successful representation of man's ability to construct an infinite and perfect world.

In the search for this positive pleasure, a “consumer's sublime” has emerged as Americans shop for new sensations of empowerment. Icons of the natural sublime, such as the Grand Canyon, are subjected to this process, and indeed the national parks have far more visitors today than in the early twentieth century. But increasingly they are appreciated not as signs of nature's immeasurable power and sublimity but as contrasts to a civilization that threatens to overwhelm them. The national park thus becomes a species of theme park, making available a relatively unspoiled nature which society has spared from development. In this reconfiguration, part of the Grand Canyon's attraction and interest is that it is threatened by an array of technologies and therefore should be seen immediately before it is further defiled by the smog blowing in from the west, by acid rain, and by the “light pollution” that makes it hard to see the stars at night. The tourist is told to feel pleased if the weather is clear. A fortunate few fill the quotas for river raft trips, although the rapids are more predictable now than in

the nineteenth century because the waters of the Colorado are dammed to the immediate north and south of the park. Glen Canyon Dam impounds the silt and rock that once would have been carried through the gorge and replenished its sand banks. It releases water at an even rate, thus slowing the erosion that carved the canyon in the first place. The moderate flow permits the growth of dense foliage where once the plants would have been scoured off the banks by flash floods. The water also is much colder now, since it comes from the deep lake behind the dam, and several species of fish unique to the area, such as the humpback chub, have been driven back to the warmer tributary streams. At the other end of the canyon, a 1984 government report found, unsupervised “use of the remote portions of the Colorado River from Diamond Creek to Lake Mead is increasing dramatically. Boating upriver from Lake Mead is increasingly popular and difficult to regulate.”⁹ (Environmental protests protected the canyon from another dam within its boundaries.) Noise pollution is also a problem. Overhead, planes and helicopters carrying tourists from Las Vegas and Phoenix can be heard during half of the daylight hours.¹⁰ Five million people came to the park in 1993, and the visitation rate has doubled every decade since 1919. This massive influx greatly exceeds the park’s hotel capacity of 3628 hotel rooms and 329 campsites. One feels fortunate to get a room inside the park, fortunate to have good visibility, fortunate if there are not too many planes overhead. In short, the Grand Canyon, if one is lucky, may appear undisturbed and “natural.”

Yet the environmental threats to the canyon and the increased visitation are only one side of the problem. In the past the Grand Canyon invited reflection on human insignificance, but today much of the public sees it through a cultural lens shaped by advanced technology. The characteristic questions about the canyon reported by Park Service employees assume that humans dug the canyon or that they could improve it so that it might be viewed quickly and easily. Rangers report repeated queries for directions to the road, the elevator, the train, the bus, or the trolley to the bottom. Other visitors request that the canyon be lighted at night. Many assume that the canyon was produced either by one of the New Deal dam-building programs or by the Indians – “What tools did they use?” is a common question.¹¹ These remarks reveal a common belief that the canyon is a colossal human achievement that ought to be improved. Visitors enjoy it in its present form, but some see room for improvements: light shows, elevators, roads, tramways, riverboats, luxury hotels at the bottom. The assumption of human omnipotence has become so common that the natural world seems an extension of ourselves, rather than vice versa. These are by no means the opinions of all visitors, of course. Many want no “improvements” in the Grand Canyon, and some hope to see 90 percent of it set aside as a designated wilderness. Yet even the Park Service, which does not want further development, has asked the managers of Disney World for advice on how to deal with the enormous influx of visitors.

Paradigmatic sites of the natural sublime have long been made more accessible by improved transportation, beginning with the Erie Canal. But increasingly advanced technologies not only get people to the site; they also provide alternatives to seeing it. A maximum of 92 people per night are allowed to stay at the Phantom Ranch, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon; but outside the park 525 people per hour can sit in an IMAX theater and watch *The Grand Canyon – The Hidden Secrets*, a 34-minute film

shown on a 70-foot screen with six-track Dolby sound. As an additional attraction, the theater advertises "Native Americans in traditional dress on the staff." During the performance guests are encouraged to "enjoy our fast food, popcorn, ice cream" and other snacks. Why bother to hike into the canyon when all the highlights have been prepackaged? Similar theaters now serve Niagara Falls and Yosemite. Their gift shops sell videocassettes, postcards, photographs, slides, maps, guides, and illustrated books. These representations cannot extirpate the sublimity of these sites, but they can make it difficult for tourists, who usually remain for only one day, to rid themselves of their pre-visualizations. Many people experience a natural wonder as incomplete, disappointing, or overrated, and even when the Grand Canyon satisfies it often does so because it lives up to its image.

This egotistical sublime is hardly new. In the nineteenth century it was familiar to Margaret Fuller, to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and to the geologist Clarence Dutton. But this response has become pervasive, signaling the triumph of the consumer's vision, which asks that each object be clearly labeled, neatly packaged, and easily appropriated. Each year several people fall into the Grand Canyon because they venture too close to the edge, and their relatives then sue the Park Service because there were no fences or guard rails – as if a terrifying immensity that people journey great distances to see ought to have hand rails and warning signs; as if the "thing in itself" ought to be equipped with a snack bar; as if the unrepresentable could be projected on a 70-foot screen. The notion of a consumer's sublime is ultimately a contradiction in terms. Not only does it deny the existence of transcendental values that might be deduced from the natural object (that denial was always latent within the technological sublime): it also denies the exaltation, the danger, the difficulty, the immensity, and the otherness of the wild and the nonhuman.

The American fascination with the trope of the technological sublime implies repeated efforts at more and more powerful physical manifestations of human reason. For more than a century it was possible to incorporate each new technology into the life-world. The succession of sublime forms – dynamic technological, geometrical, industrial, electrical – fostered a sense of human control and domination that was radically at odds with the natural sublime. From c. 1820 to c. 1945 this incompatibility, rooted in the difference between Kantian reason and technological reason, was muted. However, the atomic bomb manifested a purely material negativity; it was the ultimate dead end of any attempted representation of the technological "thing in itself." The bomb materialized the end of human technique even as it dematerialized its target. Here the shaped and the bounded works of man merged with the shapeless and the boundless, and Americans first glimpsed the death-world that the technological sublime might portend.

Yet history is not a philosopher's argument. It records not logical developments but a mixture of well-reasoned acts, unintended consequences, accidents, shifting enthusiasms, and delusions. Though by the logic of argument the technological sublime "ought to" have gone into terminal decline after Hiroshima, something more complex occurred instead. While most people dreaded atomic weapons, many embraced the space program and most enjoyed spectacles such as the rededication of the Statue of Liberty. At the same time, Disney transformed the exposition, merging the amusement park with magical corporate displays. These changes

marked a nostalgic return to the nineteenth-century technological object and to a sanitized recollection of the city before the diaspora into suburbia. Like the Jacksonians who mingled their awe for natural and man-made wonders, late-twentieth-century Americans seem oblivious to the logical impasses posed by the technological sublime, as their leisure travel increasingly demonstrates. They flock to the Kennedy Space Center, the Empire State Building and other skyscrapers, the Gateway Arch, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, Disneyland, and, most recently, Las Vegas.

Unlike the Ford assembly line or Hoover Dam, Disneyland and Las Vegas have no use value. Their representations of sublimity and special effects are created solely for entertainment. Their epiphanies have no referents; they reveal not the existence of God, not the power of nature, not the majesty of human reason, but the titillation of representation itself. The genuine ceases to have any special status; the faked, the artificial, and the copy are the stock-in-trade.

Las Vegas, with more annual visitors than Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the Empire State Building, and Cape Kennedy combined, exemplifies the full development of the consumer's sublime, which first emerged prominently at the 1939 New York World's Fair. The traditional underpinnings of a city do not exist in Las Vegas. Not the forces of trade nor those of industry nor those of religion nor those of government explain its emergence as a metropolitan area with a population of more than 800,000. One-third of all its jobs are in the hotel and gaming industries, and a good many of the inhabitants who do not work in those industries benefit from tourism indirectly.

Las Vegas's popularity is recent. Begun as a watering hole for westward-bound migrants traveling by horse and wagon, it emerged as a raw railroad town in the early twentieth century. Its spectacular growth began after 1931, when the State of Nevada legalized gambling (which was already prevalent).¹² The construction of Hoover Dam and the establishment of military bases brought in new customers for the casinos. After World War II, the mushrooming population of California and the rest of the Southwest enlarged the clientele further. As casinos grew more spectacular,¹³ the city invented its "strip," a long row of lavish hotels decked with the most elaborate lighting west of Times Square and distinguished by an approach to architecture later celebrated by Robert Venturi.¹⁴ In the 1960s air travel made the city accessible to the rest of the nation, and it became a convention and entertainment center as well as a gambling mecca. More than 2100 conventions were held there in 1992, when Las Vegas had more hotel rooms and a higher occupancy rate than London. The more than 21 million visitors stayed an average of four days, gambled more than \$430 per person, and produced more than \$14.6 billion in revenues.¹⁵ Measured in terms of time or money, Las Vegas has become one of America's most important tourist sites. Built not on production but consumption, not on industry but play, not on the sacred but the profane, not on law but chance, Las Vegas is that rupture in economic and social life where fantasy and play reign supreme, the anti-structure that reveals the structure it opposes.

Neither the slow economy of the 1970s nor the stagnation of the early 1990s affected Las Vegas's surging growth. Long one of the most spectacular sites of the electrical sublime, the city has undergone a multi-billion-dollar development program

that includes several skyscrapers and most of the elements once associated with world's fairs and amusement parks. The new casinos combine hotels, gaming rooms, and "Disney-quality" theme parks. The 3000-room Mirage Hotel (1990) cost \$630 million. Despite dire predictions that it would never be profitable, it has proved a "cash machine." The Mirage's \$30 million, five-story volcano, which erupts several times each hour in front of the hotel, was such a success that in 1993 the owner opened, right next to it, another casino hotel: Treasure Island, where battles between full-size replicas of a pirate ship and a British frigate are staged. Nearby the 4000-room Excalibur (1990), an ersatz castle with hotel towers attached, stresses a pseudo-Arthurian motif, with jousting matches every evening. The Luxor (1993) is a 2500-room pyramid-shaped hotel with a replica of the Sphinx, King Tutankhamen's tomb ("Tut's Hut"), talking robot camels, and a "Nile River" boat ride under the casino, "past murals illustrating the rich history of the Egyptian empire." Circus Circus, which looks like an enormous tent, stages acrobatic acts every hour through the night and contains a \$75 million climate-controlled amusement park called Grand Slam Canyon. The film *The Wizard of Oz* provides the motif for the billion-dollar MGM Grand Hotel (1993), the largest in the world. The visitor passes between the golden paws of a 109-foot lion and along a yellow brick road to a 60-foot-high Emerald City, beyond which lie a 33-acre theme park, a 15,200-seat sports area, and eight restaurants.¹⁶ Theme casinos and their amusement parks attract whole families rather than only individuals and couples.¹⁷ They combine fantasies and legends with simulated sublime experiences, including volcanoes, waterfalls, Grand Canyon raft trips, and skyscrapers.¹⁸

The transformation of Las Vegas into a family theme park in the desert makes it the premiere postmodern landscape – a fantasy world for the middle class. It develops the disembodied illusions of the Great White Way into a multidimensional hyperreality, juxtaposing scenes from fairy tales, history, advertising, novels, and movies to create a dreamscape of disconnected signifiers. At the upscale Forum Shops a cornucopia of designer goods are for sale on a simulated Roman street where the vaulted sky passes from morning to evening to night and "Roman gods come to life in the form of 'animatronic' robots."¹⁹ For those with less cash there are ordinary malls near other casinos and factory outlet stores at the end of the strip. Likewise, Las Vegas stages entertainment for every taste, including Broadway musicals, magic shows, dancing girls, tennis tournaments, world championship boxing matches, demonstrations of virtual reality, and rock concerts. It even recycles elements of the zoo, displaying caged white tigers and tanks full of sharks. This is the landscape of capitalist surrealism, where a man-made order seems to replace the natural order entirely. Visitors experience a potpourri of the technological sublime in a synesthesia of lights, heights, illusions, and fantastic representations. All of these enhance the visceral excitement of gambling, which contains the terror of financial catastrophe and the allure of a huge jackpot.

Whereas the older forms of the technological sublime embodied the values of production, and literally embodied the gaze of the businessman as he surveyed a city from the top of a skyscraper or appreciated steel mills from the window of a passing train, Las Vegas validates the gaze of the consumer, who wants not the rational order of work but the irrational disorder of play. Las Vegas manifests the dream world of

consumption. The steamboat, the train, or the Corliss Engine has no role here. The city presents itself as a world entirely without infrastructure and beyond the limitations of nature.²⁰ The dislocation and the “incoherence” of this landscape are its strongest attractions, suggesting that technology faces no natural or economic constraints. Las Vegas offers visitors an intensification of experience, speeding up time and extending itself round the clock. Its lavishly mirrored interiors, like its landscape of electric signs, destroy normal spatial relations. The aesthetic of Times Square merges here with the automotive strip as the consumer moves along the conveyor belt of images from one fantasy to another. Las Vegas fuses the theme park, the shopping mall, and the casino, presenting itself as the central attraction and other nearby attractions – the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, the atomic testing site – as secondary.

The consumer’s sublime on offer in Las Vegas anthologizes sublime effects. These effects emphasize not solitary communion with nature but experiences organized for the crowd – not the mountaintop but man-made towers; not three-dimensional order but spatial and temporal disorientation. Kant had reasoned that the awe inspired by sublime objects would make men aware of their moral worth despite their frailties. The nineteenth-century technological sublime had encouraged men to believe in their power to manipulate and control the world. Those enthralled by the dynamic technological, geometrical, electrical, or industrial sublime felt omnipotence and exaltation, counterpointed by fears of individual powerlessness and insignificance. Railways, skyscrapers, bridges, lighting systems, factories, expositions, rockets, and bombs were all extensions of the world of production. Through them, Americans inscribed technological systems on consciousness so that the unrepresentable seemed manifest in human constructions.

But in the consumer’s sublime of Las Vegas or Disneyland, technology is put to the service of enacting fantasy. The technological sublime had exhorted the observer to dominate and control nature. It celebrated rationality, substituting technique for transcendental reason, celebrating work and achievement. But the consumer’s sublime erases production and excites fantasy. It privileges irrationality, chance, and discontinuity. There had always been an element of escapism in the tours to sublime objects, but there was an uplifting lesson to be drawn from Niagara Falls (God’s handiwork) or from a railway, a skyscraper, a factory, or a moon rocket (man’s accomplishments). The electrical sublime elided the line between nature and culture and, in the process, dissolved the scale and the three-dimensionality of the landscape; yet it could still serve a vision focused on progress. In contrast, the billions of dollars spent in Las Vegas represent a financial and psychic investment in play for its own sake. The epiphany has been reduced to a rush of simulations, in an escape from the very work, rationality, and domination that once were embodied in the American technological sublime.

Notes

- 1 George Ticknor, *Life, Letters and Journals of George Ticknor*, cited in Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, vol. 1 (State of New York, 1921), p. 221.

- 2 On European intellectuals and their postmodern visions of America see Rob Kroes, "Flatness and Depth," in *Consumption and American Culture*, ed. D. E. Nye and C. Pedersen (Amsterdam: Free University Press).
- 3 I believe Professor Marx would agree with this statement.
- 4 Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 761.
- 5 Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 21–30.
- 6 Catherine Caufield, *Multiple Exposures* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 106–107.
- 7 Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Collected Works*, vol. 9) (Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 78.
- 8 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989), pp. 203, 204.
- 9 National Park Service, *Grand Canyon Natural and Cultural Resource Management Plan*, April 1984.
- 10 See U.S. Department of the Interior, *Aircraft Management Plan Environmental Assessment, Grand Canyon National Park*, May 1986.
- 11 These questions had been put so many times that the rangers at the information counters had a list of the twenty most common queries printed up and taped it to the counter in early December 1993. I interviewed five staff members, all of whom confirmed that these were frequently asked questions. It is also common for people to ask where the geysers are and to ask for the location of the "carved stone faces." Some people also want to know if it is true that someone jumped the canyon on a motorcycle.
- 12 For a history of gambling with a focus on Las Vegas see John M. Findlay, *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas* (Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 13 For a survey and a history of Las Vegas's casinos see David Spanier, *Welcome to the Pleasure Dome* (University of Nevada Press, 1992).
- 14 Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, revised edition (MIT Press, 1991).
- 15 Statistics from Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, *Las Vegas Perspective*. Las Vegas Review Journal, 1993.
- 16 My descriptions of the hotels are based on visits, brochures, and advertising. See also Sergio Lalli, "Big Projects Boost Vegas," *Hotel and Motel Management* 206, November 4, 1991; "Wynn's World: White Tigers, Blackjack, and a Midas Touch," *Business Week*, March 30, 1992; David B. Rosenbaum, "Resorts: Precast as Big Winner in Vegas" *ERN* 229, July 13, 1992.
- 17 This fact has interesting financial implications. Surveys already show that Las Vegas attracts mostly middle-class consumers who gamble "voraciously and with less regard for income" than those who go to Atlantic City. In effect, those who visit Las Vegas pay a highly regressive tax for their pleasure. See Mary O. Borg, "An Economic Comparison of Gambling Behavior in Atlantic City and Las Vegas," *Public Finance Quarterly* 18 (1990), no. 3, pp. 291–312.
- 18 For background information on the new casinos I am indebted to the Las Vegas News Bureau.

- 19 Mike Weatherford, "Where Dreams Come True," *Nevada*, January–February 1993, pp. 10–14.
- 20 Though water is used lavishly at the new family resorts, water shortages present a potentially crippling barrier to further development. See John Jesitus, "Growing Gambling Mecca Reacts to Dwindling Supply of Water," *Hotel and Motel Management* 206, November 4, 1991.

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First published 2006

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Robert Hassan and Julian Thomas 2006

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-10: 0 335 21710 9 (pb) 0 335 21711 7 (hb)

ISBN-13: 978 0335 21710 6 (pb) 978 0335 21711 3 (hb)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
CIP data applied for

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Poland by OZGraf S.A.
www.polskabook.pl