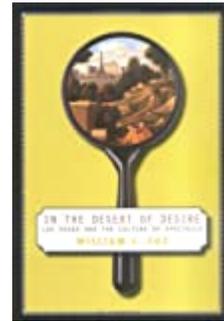


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**William L. Fox.** *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005. 186 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87417-563-9.



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**Published on** H-Amstdy (November, 2007)

Independent scholar and writer William L. Fox, who has written extensively about Las Vegas and the arts, combines these interests in his latest book *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle*. Noting that cultural critics, arts administrators, policy analysts, environmentalists, and nature scholars “don’t talk to each other as often as they might,” Fox attempts to broach an interdisciplinary discussion about Sin City that encompasses the visual arts, architecture, urban geography, zoos, exotic dancing, ballet, tax law, and museum policy (p. 181). Fox also offers a more balanced assessment of the city than the libertines who celebrate it and the moralists who deplore it, as he offers “both a critique and a celebration of how Las Vegas creates spectacle in response to our desires” (p. xiii).

The focus of Fox’s readable book is the commercialization of culture and nature in a city where “vast sums of money ... have warped local social forces,” which elsewhere “maintain more widely separated orbits between for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government” (p. xiii). As he explores these issues, he takes his readers on an adventurous ramble through Las Vegas, visiting Steve Wynn’s remarkable art collection, the visual spectacle of Dale Chihuly’s sculpture in the lobby of the Bellagio, the Mirage’s Secret Garden (where Siegfried and Roy’s big cats are housed), Mandalay Bay’s state-of-

the-art Shark Reef, Cirque du Soleil’s new show Zumanity, and extravagant multimillion dollar strip clubs. All of these he contrasts with the struggling Las Vegas Zoo and Las Vegas Art Museum, nonprofits that receive little assistance from the government and barely compete with the privately owned spectacles on the Strip.

Fox has extensive experience with the visual arts in Nevada. He served as the associate director of the Nevada Museum of Art and then as the visual arts and architecture critic for the Reno *Gazette-Journal*. In 1979 he went to work at the Nevada Arts Council, first as the coordinator of the Artists-in-Residence Program, then as deputy director, and in 1984 he became executive director, a position he held until 1993. These years of experience shine in the first four chapters, where Fox is at his best. In these essays, he discusses the blurring lines between high and low culture and for-profit and nonprofit organizations in the art world, both in Vegas and nationally. Where else but Las Vegas does a museum visitor first traverse a gaming area to reach the Old Masters? In a discussion of the Guggenheim Las Vegas, Fox argues that it is not the objects on view that are “being sold,” but the experience of viewing some of the best and most expensive paintings in the world, in short, spectacle (p. 49). Fox charges, on the one hand, that the Guggenheim and the Guggenheim-Hermitage Museums fail to fulfill serious

cultural missions; they are manipulating art as a commodity by functioning as “mere exhibition space posing as [museums] in order to increase the verisimilitude for tourists of walking in the presence of luxury” (p. 50). Of a Warhol exhibit, Fox states that there may be no more appropriate artist for Vegas than one who made his career commenting on surface appearance, fame, and spectacle. On the upside, however, galleries in casino-hotels and their educational programs make art available to people who might not otherwise have access to it. Steve Wynn may have manipulated state tax laws to his advantage, but he is still required to open his collection to Nevada school children for free ninety days each year. Despite his ambivalence, in the end Fox argues that only a real, locally grown, private, nonprofit, tax-exempt museum can “perform a genuine cultural service” that is “more about knowledge than about entertainment” (p. 50).

Chapters 5 and 6, perhaps the least provocative in the book, contrast the Secret Garden and Dolphin Habitat at the Mirage and Mandalay Bay’s high-tech Shark Reef attraction with the Las Vegas Zoo to illustrate that nature, like art, has become yet another experience to be consumed as spectacle. However, the positive outcomes Fox acknowledges as a result of commercialization in the visual arts, and that raise so many interesting questions, are missing here. Although the Secret Garden, Shark Reef, and other successful tourist attractions, such as Sea World, support educational and research agendas, they are fundamentally about the bottom line. Through a brief history of zoos, Fox argues that exploitation of animals for human benefit has resulted in saving relatively few species, an argument often advanced in favor of zoos, and typically increases a sense of human superiority rather than one of stewardship. In Las Vegas, “themed tourist attractions approach the reality of civic amenities” [but] the “visual rhetoric and signage are meant to disguise the distinctions” between recreation and education (p. 97).

Fox finds two exceptions to the scenario of struggling educational nonprofit versus private spectacle as public service. In chapters 7 and 8, Fox argues that the Las Vegas Springs Preserve and the Nevada Ballet Theatre are successful because they have co-opted, to varying degrees, the methods of their competitors, the big hotel-casinos on the Strip. The Springs Preserve is a 180-acre eco-park that deploys all the entertainment technology of the Strip for the cause of water conservation. The facility, he writes, “is emphatically not a theme park, but a park that has been themed, the difference being that the former has profit as its goal, while at the preserve the bottom line is learning. It is an educational facil-

ity wrapped around a working facility, and it uses entertainment technology such as theme architecture ... to accomplish its goals” (p. 113). The economic realities of Las Vegas encourage creativity, and Fox notes approvingly that the park “thoroughly combines cultural and scientific exhibitions and programs in a matrix of governmental, business, and nonprofit operations” (pp.114-115). The Nevada Ballet Theatre exemplifies the flow of ideas, people, and money between the commercial and the artistic in Las Vegas. Since its inception in the 1980s, the company has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with dancers on the Strip and strip dancers, many of whom are trained in classical ballet. Some of the ballet dancers retire to the less physically demanding, but better paid, performances on the Strip. In both of these examples, Fox finds a productive *frisson* that generates “new business models and opportunities as well as aesthetic cross-fertilization” (p. 134). Thus Vegas is a “unique laboratory for experimentation” as nonprofits invent new kinds of organizations and cooperative strategies to accomplish public objectives. Museums may change their standards, by working with casinos for example, to bring in wider audiences, but entertainment venues like Mandalay Bay are also including educational zoological attractions and art galleries as cultural tourism becomes more popular and profitable. Such diversity among organizations is healthy in the long run and offers multiple points of access for educational, cultural, and scientific opportunities without limiting options (pp. 150-151).

While Fox’s narrative scholarship and travelogue approach make the book interesting and entertaining to read, they also create some difficulties for an academic audience. Fox acknowledges one of these problems: “It is anchored in a specific time and place, and things change,” especially in Las Vegas (p. xvi). Many of the spectacles Fox describes were already evolving into something new by the time the book was published, although he addressed these issues in the afterword. Second, the lack of images in a study of Las Vegas and visual spectacle seems a lost opportunity. This reader would have liked to see Picasso’s *La R  ve*, for which Wynn paid \$48.4 million, or the excess of Chihuly’s *Fiori di Como*, or the priceless Ardabil carpet. Fox’s book abounds with colorful anecdotes and fascinating tidbits of historical knowledge; it needs some equally exciting images to accompany the text. This is an especial loss for student readers.

More at issue, however, is the lack of footnotes and index, and a bibliography that contains “only those sources directly influencing the text” (p. 181). These point to the more serious flaw of neglecting the extensive

literature on the subject of Las Vegas, tourism (specifically in the West), spectacle, and visual culture, and leaving readers without the means to engage with the larger scholarly discussions Fox purports to unite. The lack of an index makes it very difficult to locate information, which is sometimes scattered in unlikely places due to the narrative structure of the book.

Readers might also question to what extent we can apply Fox's arguments to a national context. In his introduction, Fox states that in many ways Las Vegas anticipates national trends, and that the economic developments he describes are increasingly applicable to the rest of the country. For example, as government support declines, museums are forced to rely more and more on retail sales, weakening the distinction between entertain-

ment and education. As a result, floor space in American museums dedicated to retail grew by almost 30 percent in the 1990s, while gallery space increased by only 3 percent (p. 36). Fox repeatedly weakens his own argument, however, when he makes the case that Vegas is unique in its population characteristics, tax structure, and weak state and city government institutions. If these circumstances do not apply in other parts of the nation, how far can we extend his argument?

Despite these problems, *In the Desert of Desire* is, like the spectacles on the Strip, both entertaining and educational. Fox raises important questions for students of American and visual culture, museum studies, and western tourism, and contributes to the growing literature on Las Vegas itself.

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**Citation:** Victoria Grieve. Review of Fox, William L., *In the Desert of Desire: Las Vegas and the Culture of Spectacle*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13829>

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