Viva Las Vegas!
City, Stage and City-Stage in Francis Ford Coppola’s One From the Heart

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When, in 1982, Francis Ford Coppola’s film *One from the Heart* was first released, both the public and the critics were unprepared for its visual extravagance and Broadway musical narrative style. In fact, *One from the Heart*’s poor performance at the box-office was responsible for the financial collapse of Coppola’s Zoetrope studio and became “one of the biggest flops in motion picture history” (Schumacher 314). Nevertheless, in recent times this film has gained special significance amongst those who see it as a groundbreaking cinematic exercise which allows the audience to undergo an exquisite aesthetic and conceptual experience.

*One from the Heart* has also been regarded as a Hollywood prognosis of the money and image-driven society that the Reagan administration was to inaugurate and instigate in the United States during the 1980s. In other words, Coppola captured the signs of an America undergoing change from an anxiety-ridden society, trying hard to exorcise the ghost of the Vietnam War and of the economic effects of a severe oil crisis, to the consumerist and new technology-wired society that took over in 1983 with the help of several media and corporate finance entrepreneurs grounded in highly sophisticated marketing techniques (Troy 117-120). This explains Coppola’s embrace of electronic cinema’s\(^1\) technological inspired imagery

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\(^1\) The definition of electronic cinema used here refers to an innovative technique that started to be developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s and that consisted of the combination of traditional filmmaking techniques with a sophisticated video-assisted editing system. This new interface not only allowed for the exploitation and application of video practices to film production and post-production processes, while simultaneously saving time and money, but also favored the exercise of new aesthetic possibilities, as demonstrated in *One from the Heart* (Prince 112).
(Millard 151) as well as his choice to change One from the Heart’s original screenplay setting from Chicago to Las Vegas (Schumacher 279), since Coppola considered the latter to be “a metaphor of America itself” (Schumacher 279) in the sense that it symbolizes the triumph of capitalism and the pursuit of wealth above all else. Moreover, Las Vegas is evidence of a change of paradigm in American society since “in Las Vegas the ethic of hard work, which is at the root of the American Dream, can be replaced by gambling as a way of acquiring instant riches” (Dika 172). However, in gambling there are no certainties. It is all a matter of chance. This, according to Coppola, bears resemblance to love. Therefore, in One from the Heart, Las Vegas “is [also] a metaphor for the state of love itself” (Phillips 60).

Based on this premise, Coppola went on to direct a film about a couple of Las Vegas residents, Hank (Frederic Forrest) and Frannie (Teri Garr), reaching middle-age, who break up on the 4th of July as they come to the conclusion that they can’t live together anymore. Therefore, as observed by Vera Dika, they both achieve their independence (172). While separated they both have affairs only to come to the conclusion that they can’t live apart after all. This apparently light and simple love story combines several dated movie conventions (for example, the happy-ending, uninventive dialogues, flat characters, amongst several others), along with conventional film genres (such as, the musical, film noir and romantic comedy) only to stress their status as simulacra (Gaggi 79). At the same time, Coppola explores the hyperbolization of Las Vegas kitsch and the city’s hyperreal aesthetics while simultaneously presenting “America as a place of illusion and broken dreams” (Dika 172), a place characterized by the loss of the real. In this sense, Las Vegas functions as an evocation and reflection of a paradigm of happiness that doesn’t really exist. In other

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2 *The Godfather II* (1974) had already been set in Las Vegas. However, at the time, Coppola used this city as “a metaphor for the destructive effects of American corporate capitalism on the individuals” (Dika 172).

3 As noted by Francisco Menendez, Coppola’s happy-ending goes against Las Vegas myth as a merciless “moral testing ground” for outsiders because “Las Vega’s seductive and destructive powers… only work for those who come to Vegas from the outside, not for those who live there and work within its system” (Menendez 48)
words, romantic love only works in the realm of fiction because it is a fictional entity itself.

Planned and built to act as a dream-factory and to trigger a consumer mood amongst those who visit it, Las Vegas knows no architectonic barriers. Furthermore, “[t]he architecture of Las Vegas relies heavily on fantasy material, and it does so by drawing its images and allusions from pictures” (Dika 172), including moving pictures. It’s a limitless simulation process that Louise Pelletier explains in the following manner:

The more one feels, the less one gets bored. … [I]n order to create sensations that will fight boredom, one needs to reject all natural passions that can move the soul in an unruly manner, and replace them with artificial ones created by art as imitations of the natural models (194).

One could say the same about Las Vegas — that it is the epitome of hyperreality. The replica of a Venetian or Egyptian site fills a historical as well as emotional gap. As stated by Humberto Eco: “we are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel the need for the original” (19). Therefore, the fiction is better and more pleasant than reality itself, thus leading to a status quo where the real is one dominated by simulation (Dika 171). In One from the Heart Coppola highlights Las Vegas simulaclral qualities by refusing to film on location, and by choosing to reinvent and build his “own fantasy of Las Vegas” (Schumacher 279) because “[t]he real Las Vegas wasn’t as good as the Las Vegas of the Mind” (Goodwin and Wise 331). Coppola wanted a super-real Las Vegas, “shinier, brighter, and more aesthetically designed” (Rothman and Davis 49) than the real thing. Having said this, we are invited to consider several layers of representation — the original set (the city itself, which is made up of several replicas of real and imaginary buildings and places from diverse parts of the world) and the film set, which “is a copy of a copy” (Dika 273).

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4 In Tom Stempel’s opinion, Coppola’s exploration and exploitation of technological innovations in his film was also responsible for the film’s financial failure, since the audiences of the time were not prepared for the film’s, then, excess of technologically generated special visual effects as it contributed to their detachment from the plot (Stempel 147).
The image and concept of a glittering Las Vegas full of neon signs, advertising posters, sounds and movements goes hand in hand with an idyllic view of happiness. According to Jean Baudrillard, happiness — or the search for happiness — propels consumerism. As such, happiness is made measurable and material, meaning that it needs to be displayed, signified, and, ironically, cannot be within everyone’s reach. In the postmodern world, happiness depends on signs and stimuli which, in the case of One from the Heart, are made manifest in the super glittering neon signs, in the film’s original soundtrack5 in the mentioning of exotic holiday destinations (Bora Bora) and in the many entertainment options available. Las Vegas makes it possible to visit replicas and prototypes of several tourist destinations. Caesar’s Palace, the Sahara; the Dunes, the Riviera, the Aladdin, the Paris and the Luxor — with their architectural allusions to the destinations they wish to simulate — are examples of some of Las Vegas Strip casino resorts which propel(led)6 guests, looking to escape their daily routines, to exotic, though also entirely fictional and provisional, realities. By succumbing to the allure of these fake realities “we not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it” (Eco 46). The possibility of living in a fantasy world contributes to the negation of the real since, as we can see from Hank and Frannie’s relationship, reality is no fun.

5 This soundtrack is made up of 12 duet songs, all composed by Tom Waits specifically for this film and all performed by Waits, himself, and Crystal Gayle. The songs’ extradiegetic and paratextual quality resembles a musical stream-of-consciousness through which the viewers have access to the characters’ feelings and emotions, while simultaneously providing clues to future events. Despite One from the Heart’s failure at the box office, its soundtrack was nominated for an Academy Award for Original Music Score and it is, to this day, considered by several music critics one of the finest soundtrack collaborations in movie history (Jacobs 110-111).

6 The use of the parenthesis here is justified by the fact that some of these casino hotels no longer exist. Some of them have been imploded to make room for new and even more spectacular recreational constructions, thus providing evidence of Las Vegas as a city that thrives on transformation and reinvention.
Baudrilliard attributes this state of affairs to the strong influence that sign-values have in this day and age. Thus, as observed in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, the loss of spontaneous, symbolic human relations; the gradual replacement of ludic and combinatorial practices with cultural signs for culture as a symbolic system; the accomplishment of communion through technological rather than symbolic means; sexuality as a displayable commodity rather than as an expression of basic human sexual desire; and the substitution of a sense of communal cohesion by individualism (108,144-5), are all symptoms of a change in paradigm.

Both Hank and Frannie attempt to escape from reality in their search for their dream mate, but romance, as bright as it may seem, is but a stage of lights and colors. The immediate and staged happiness that they find with a trapeze artist, in the case of Hank, and with Ray, the piano player, in the case of Frannie, outshines Hank and Frannie’s relationship with each other because their relationship is the real thing and as such it cannot compete with the excitement and illusory attractiveness of a love affair. Hence, in *One from the Heart*, Las Vegas is the city of (non)-interpersonal relationships. Night time scenes dominate, thus allowing for the neon signs’ glitter to stand out while also stressing Las Vegas stage-like and alluring qualities, as well as a sense of loneliness that is intrinsic to the place.

The experience of a sense of apotheosis vs. a sense of loneliness that pervades the film is also made evident in music videos set in Las Vegas, such as “Viva Las Vegas!” (ZZTop, 1992), which glorifies the city’s exuberance, and “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking for” (U2, 1987) that displays the city’s alienating and dehumanizing effects. Yet, and as far as *One From the Heart* is concerned, even when all of Las Vegas stimuli fail to fill the individual’s void, there is always an image of paradise (in the shape of tourism brochures) to where one can escape (Bora Bora). The window of the Travel Agency where Frannie works, invariably summons images of idyllic holiday destinations (a case in point is precisely Bora Bora, which happens to be Frannie’s dream destination) and can, likewise, be interpreted as an alternative fake escape destination. Such is the case of Frannie for whom that window provides a space for evasion and escape, since Las Vegas escape options are limited for those who live there.

According to Robert Venturi and Denize Brown, the communicative structures of image rule over Las Vegas landscape. Buildings come second
Images, sounds and texts are Las Vegas background, allowing it to be perceived as a whole. The post-modern city symbols are intrinsically associated with communication. As observed by Humberto Eco:

Las Vegas … is focused on gambling and entertainment, its architecture is totally artificial, and it has been studied by Robert Venturi as a completely new phenomenon in city planning, a “message” city, entirely made up of signs, not a city like others, which communicate in order to function, but rather a city that functions in order to communicate (40).

In *One from the Heart* Coppola stresses the idea of Las Vegas as the “entertainment-city,” with surplus of images and stimuli, and by transforming the city in a stage where music is an ever present element. A prime example of this is the scene of Leila (Nastassja Kinski), a trapeze artist from a circus family, dancing inside a gigantic cocktail glass, thus decontextualising the object7 — removing it from its acknowledged utilitarian function as a drinking glass — and presenting it as a stage instead. Another instance of the film’s emphasis on the notion of Las Vegas as a city-stage, is Leila’s trapeze performance over a junkyard while Hank acts as maestro to an orchestra of scrap cars with the city’s neons as background. This anthropomorfic artifice sets the stage (pun intended) for one of the most remarkable “willing suspension of disbelief” moments in the film.

The constant presence of music in the film gives prominence to the idea of communication. For instance, “the disembodied voices of Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle on the soundtrack” work as a kind of inner speech that serves “both to contemplate the actions of the central characters and to advise them on further action” (Dika 184). With this in mind, it is hard to miss the similarities between Waits and Gayle’s songs and a Greek chorus as they are both responsible not only for controlling the atmosphere and the audience’s expectations, but also for establishing a deeper connection

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7 The decontextualization of objects and/or the hyperbolization of their dimensions is, in fact, one of the most notorious characteristics of Las Vegas. For instance, the massive size of the neon signs in relation to the buildings in which they are installed reflects this tendency. Another case in point is the smallness of the 24h-matrimonial chapels when compared to their neighboring cathedral-sized casinos.
between the characters and the audience. In fact, as established by Aristotle, “the chorus — … should be considered as one of the actors” (123) and so should One from the Heart’s soundtrack, seeing that it is well integrated and is a relevant character in the fabric of the film’s narrative. Moreover, one cannot fail to notice the influence of music videos on One from the Heart. Besides the fact that the soundtrack seems to “have the effect of making the film sometimes seem more like a series of music videos than a unified narrative” (Gaggi 82), Coppola also seems to be in tune with MTV’s influence on American popular culture by favoring visual effects and music videos’ specific visual imagery (Collins 167). This particular kind of visual imagery is a highly commercial, digitally manipulated, formula-driven cultural product — mainly targeted at young audiences — that depicts and equates contemporary Western life (meaning an idealized version of the American way of life) with fashion, brands, style, fun, music, marketing, city life and cinema. Furthermore, as American popular culture becomes more inundated with technology its impact becomes more significant and global.

Having said that, it is important to mention that the early 1980s saw the emergence of two major and extremely influential events in America’s media context — MTV, and cable TV, and a wider access to technology, including computers across the country. These interconnected events had immediate consequences in American pop culture as they allowed for “the pursuit of all-entertainment all the time” (Troy 128) while, competently, enacting their influential role as shopping-habit propellers and trend-setting prods amongst young people. As observed by Gil Troy “the line between advertising and programming blurred” (129). Adding to this, the establishment of the music video as a central and powerful force in the music industry and a sales boosting apparatus was also in harmony with the “Reagan Rule” that elevated “image over concrete reality” (Werner 2006, 272). This was not strange to Reagan, since he was a former Hollywood actor, a star system product himself and a master in “this changing universe, milking and shaping the cultural changes in general, and the new media realities in particular” (Troy 125). In fact, as pointed out by Jane Feuer, “Reagan was himself an image” (1).

Bearing in mind, one more time, the relationship between image and concrete reality while looking into Ray and Frannie’s dancing scene,
this particular sequence stands out as *One from the Heart’s* most striking moments. What starts as an indoor dance just between these two characters, rapidly acquires a dynamics of its own with the two of them coming to the streets and being joined by several other people dancing and celebrating the 4th of July. Even though this scene is highly staged, it follows a conventional formula used in musicals and music videos. For instance, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1984), Miami Sound Machine’s *Dr. Beat* (1984) and Lionel Ritchie’s *Dancing on the Ceiling* (1986), to mention just a few, are paradigmatic examples of this staged phenomenon. In all of these videos the viewers are made to witness an amorphous crowd and seemingly unrelated to the video’s main protagonists slowly joining them, as the songs gather momentum, in sometimes highly complex choreographies, culminating in an apotheotic finale. Following Coppola’s lead and encouraged by the advent of MTV, music video directors embraced the creative possibilities of computer technology by experimenting with new artistic options and using bolder plots. This wave of bolder, colorful and exciting music videos was instrumental in making them a successful format amongst young people and in boosting music sales. This life-is-a-party-and-everyone-can-join-in formula proved to be so popular with viewers that it was also adopted and used in favored TV series, for example *Fame*, where “utterly formulaic representations of actions” are presented as being “spontaneous and improvised” (Gaggi 81). In other words, the cultural is presented as natural.

Overall, *One from the Heart* is a cinematic product that manages to capture the mood of an America walking towards extreme simulation. Meaning, both America and its people are fiction, a hologram, and a film. In other words, they are a product of the entertainment industry. As suggested by Baudrillard “the whole country is cinematic” (Baudrillard 60). That is probably one of the major reasons for the film’s failure at the box-office. The audience failed to understand that the presumed lack

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8 Many were the cases in which the music video outshone the song that was due to promote. Such is the case of Cyndi Lauper’s *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* (1983), again, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1984), A-ha’s *Take On Me* (1985), and Peter Gabriel *Sledgehammer* (1986) which epitomize the experimental trend witnessed in 1980s’ music videos.
of content of *One from the Heart* was deliberate — or, better still, that “the content of the film is the absence of content in American life” (Gaggi 83). To end, by quoting again from Silvio Gaggi, “*One from the Heart*, so brilliantly bad, *is* a statement!” (82).

**Works cited**


**Filmography**

Coppola, Francis Ford. (dir.) *One from the Heart*, Zoetrope Studios, running time: 107 minutes, DVD, 1982.
**Abstract**

In the early 1980s the music video came to prominence thanks to a phenomenon that would change American pop culture irrevocably — MTV. Born out of the necessity to stimulate record sales in a recession ridden America, music videos’ impact on contemporary film, fashion and radio quickly became a reality. Based on this premise, we aim to analyze the alliance fostered by music videos and the film industry in order to develop a merchandizable version of the American Dream within a hyperreal setting — that of the city.

Taking a cue from Umberto Eco and Jean Braudillard, we will look into Francis Ford Coppola’s Las Vegas in *One from the Heart* (1982) so as to explore the notion of city as stage, as a hyperreal architectural construction whose constant flux and renovation aim to fill the historical void that has always haunted the USA. We shall also explore the innovative character of the film, visible in its theatre-like aesthetics and in its use of the soundtrack as a Greek chorus. The portrayal of Las Vegas as a city immersed in a soundtrack has led *One from the Heart* to launch a new cinematic approach to city portrayal which will then be propagated by music videos. Such an approach allows for a tighter viewer-involvement with a collective imagery which combines music, image, fashion and life-style. Lastly, emphasis will be given to the representation of Las Vegas as a city of overindulgence and sensory overstimulation which leads the characters to seek a formula for love and affection that has no real existence.

**Keywords**

Francis Ford Coppola; Las Vegas; hyperreality; city; music video

**Resumo**

Com o início dos anos 80 o vídeo musical ganhou destaque graças a um fenómeno que haveria de mudar irrevogavelmente a cultura popular americana — a MTV. Tendo surgido da necessidade de a indústria musical estimular o aumento de vendas numa América fragilizada por um período de recessão, o impacto dos
vídeos musicais no cinema contemporâneo, na moda e na rádio tornou-se uma realidade inegável. Com base neste argumento, será aqui explorada a aliança criada entre os vídeos musicais e o cinema com o propósito de desenvolver uma versão comercializável do Sonho Americano dentro de um cenário hiper-real — a cidade.

Tendo o trabalho de Umberto Eco e de Jean Braudillard sobre Las Vegas como fio condutor, será feita a análise da Las Vegas presente em *One from the Heart* (1982), de Francis Ford Coppola, a fim de examinar a noção de cidade enquanto palco, enquanto construção arquitetónica hiper-real cujo fluxo e renovação constantes têm por objectivo a supressão do vácuo histórico que, desde há muito, assola os Estados Unidos. Será igualmente explorado o carácter inovador deste filme em concreto, que se manifesta na sua estética teatral e no uso da banda sonora com uma função semelhante à de um coro grego. A representação de Las Vegas imersa numa banda sonora faz de *One from the Heart* um filme que inaugura uma nova abordagem cinemática à cidade que proliferará em vários videoclips e que intensificará o envolvimento dos(as) espectadores(as) com um imaginário massivo que agrega música, imagem, moda e estilo de vida. Por último, será dado destaque à representação de Las Vegas como uma cidade de excessos e de super-estimulação sensorial que impele as personagens a procurarem uma fórmula de amor e de afecto que, na realidade, não existe.

**Palavras Chave**

Francis Ford Coppola; Las Vegas; hiper-realidade; cidade; vídeo musical