

“home” permeates the accounts of family members as they struggle to rebuild their lives. In *Still Waiting*, we see the commitment to home as a powerful source of meaning and resilience for the family members, creating and reaffirming a sense of community, identity, and solidarity in the face of the chaos of disaster and recovery.

If *Still Waiting* asks why people would return to a devastated area marked by ruined homes and a dearth of community connections, its answer is clear: home isn’t just a dwelling and a place to live, it’s a source of meaning and group identity, and a symbol of security. Even Connie—who believes her relatives should leave behind the devastation of New Orleans and begin a new life elsewhere—can empathize with the longing for home because she understands the need for familiar routines and

social networks to “buoy you up.” The hope of reclaiming a life and culture that once existed is what draws family members back to St. Bernard Parish.

Images of residents attending family cook-outs, invoking their Creole heritage, participating in musical gatherings, and going to church are prominent in the documentary and serve as expressions of strength and resiliency. Over hot pots of seafood gumbo and boiled crabs, in fact, new bases of social solidarity and collective identity emerge among those who find themselves otherwise displaced from their former homes and communities.

Years after the storm, vestiges of Hurricane Katrina live on as initial feelings of hope and optimism have given way to disappointment with and cynicism about the rebuilding process. As

time passes, more and more Americans may treat the tales of discontent and frustration that emerge from New Orleans much as they do dispatches out of Darfur, Pakistan, and Iraq: We wish the residents well, but it’s their problem, not our’s anymore, and we have more important things to care about.

Yet as *Still Waiting* shows, the pains of Katrina should remind us, in a powerful illustration of C. Wright Mills’ sociological imagination, of how the “personal troubles” of losing a home and community are linked with the larger “public issues” of social policy and post-disaster rebuilding.

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who’s counting?

by jeffrey j. sallaz



21: *The Movie* (Columbia Pictures, 2008)

In film after film where it serves as a setting, Las Vegas remains a perpetual destination. Movie characters visit, but they never stay for long.

In American film, Las Vegas repeatedly serves as the endpoint for two kinds

of cinematic treks. The first we may call a quest for pleasure. In these journeys, the main characters (nearly always men, typically traveling in pairs) leave their ordinary lives behind and come to Vegas for a weekend of hedonism, a day or two of decadence.

The classic example of this genre is Terry Gilliam’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, based on the book by Hunter S. Thompson, in which the two protagonists take a drug-fueled road trip across the Mojave Desert in search of the American dream. Often, the pleasure-quest film ends with its main characters having some sort of epiphany and returning to their normal lives all the better for it. In the recent box-office hit *Knocked Up*, the two male leads drive to Vegas for a respite from their relationship troubles. After a night of hard partying on psychedelic mushrooms, they end up spent and tearful, and

return home with renewed devotion to their significant others.

But the protagonist of the pleasure-quest doesn’t have to leave the city a changed man. In fact he doesn’t have to leave it at all. Mike Figgis’s masterpiece *Leaving Las Vegas* is noteworthy precisely because of the irony inherent in its title. The main character comes to the city to escape his troubled and tortured past. Here he spends his days and nights in a bacchanalian haze, eventually drinking himself to death amidst the slot machines and blackjack tables. Perhaps puzzlingly, the protagonist at the center of the Vegas pleasure-quest rarely actually gambles. For him, placing bets is only one vice among many, and usually secondary to imbibing alcohol and womanizing.

A second sort of cinematic narrative features travelers who come to Vegas not to “let go” but to take con-

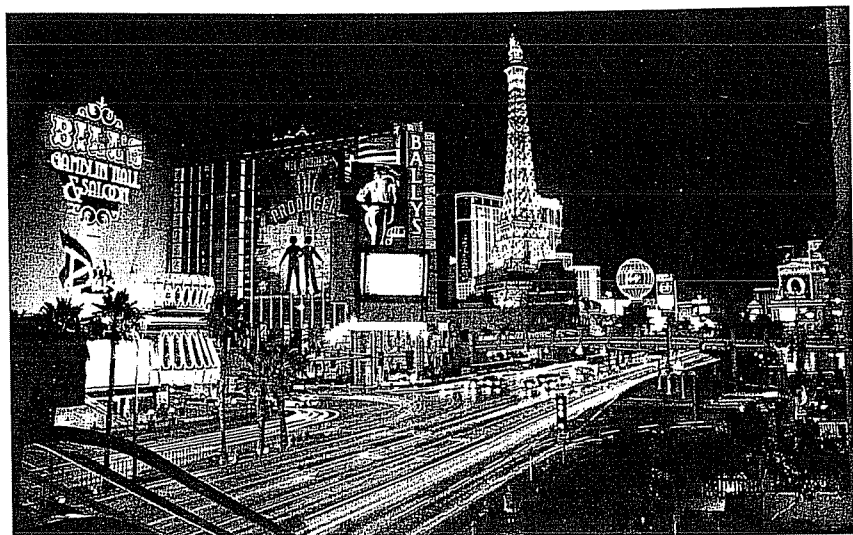


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"The Strip" in Las Vegas.

trol. The archetypical character here is the secret agent James Bond, whose missions often found him seated at a blackjack table (in such films as *Diamonds are Forever* and *Casino Royale*). Few viewers ever supposed that Bond ordered his famous (shaken, not stirred) martinis solely for the purpose of pleasure. No, they served an instrumental purpose, that of portraying to the table a certain image that allowed him to keep his cover.

Think, too, of the gang of conmen in the *Ocean's Eleven* films. For their ingenious schemes they pose as ordinary vacationers, but only to pilfer piles of money from the casino "bosses." The underlying lesson of these tales is that only by resisting the worldly temptations offered by the casino can you beat it at its own game.

Perhaps the most extreme example of the ascetic, hyper-rational gambler is the main character in *Rain Man*. An autistic savant, he is paired with his temperamental brother on a cross-country trip that finds them stranded and broke in Las Vegas. But *Rain Man* can "count cards" (that is, track the value of cards played during blackjack so as to reverse the house advantage). The autistic in *Rain Man* is the antithesis of the alcoholic in *Leaving Las Vegas*. The latter couldn't keep his feelings in check and lost everything. The former appeared

incapable of experiencing emotion, and so could keep the count during the heat of the action.

This brings us to the latest major studio release to use Las Vegas as a backdrop: *21: The Movie*. Loosely based on the true story (as told in Ben Mezrich's best-selling book *Bringing Down the House*), it tells the tale of a group of MIT students who won several million dollars by counting cards.

The film received lukewarm reviews from critics. Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*, for example, called it a for-

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mulaic film about risk-taking that itself took few risks. Several reviewers drew attention to the film's shameful "whitewashing" of its main character, Ben (played by the British actor Jim Sturgess, even though the student on which the book was based was Asian). Among filmgoers, however, *21* was a big hit. It debuted in theatres as the top movie in the country, and again achieved that status when released on DVD.

Although it fits the general outline of the Vegas road-trip movie, the film is not as formulaic as it at first appears. Protagonist Ben is a white working-class kid from Boston. Raised by a single mother, he struggles to make ends meet at a minimum-wage retail job. To make matters worse, Ben is a complete nerd—an MIT math whiz who spends weekends with his buddies tinkering with science projects. The sad state of their social lives is summarized by his best buddy: "We don't date." Ben, in short, is a poor schlep in need of both profit and pleasure.

This dilemma sets the plot in motion. In an opening scene, a college dean tells Ben that despite his impeccable grades and test scores, he will likely lose his Harvard Medical School scholarship to "a Korean immigrant who has only one leg." What's worse, he can't draw the attention of classmate Jill, the woman of his dreams. While she is stylish and beautiful, Ben slouches to and from class in a frumpy sweatshirt and tacky khakis. A potential solution to his woes comes in the form of an invitation to join a secret card-counting team organized by his math professor, Micky Rosa.

Card-counting isn't illegal in the United States, but it is, for obvious rea-

sons, frowned upon by casino bosses, and they have various ways to prevent it, most notably by monitoring the betting patterns of individual gamblers at the tables. Should a counter be discovered, he or she is permanently banned from the casino. As a consequence, card-counters today work in groups, communicating via hand signals and code phrases to conceal their activities. They don disguises and adopt pseudo-

nyms. They guzzle "tonic and lime" to give the impression they're betting such big sums merely because they're drunk. And so it is that Ben joins the MIT team to raise the \$300,000 he needs for Harvard but also, as Jill promises, to "have more fun than you've had in your entire life."

Team members spend their nights memorizing flashcards and perfecting their fictitious accents. Once deemed ready for "the show," they board a plane for Vegas. Of course, they could have easily flown, if not driven, to any of the scores of nearby locales (such as Atlantic City or Connecticut) that now offer casino gambling. The real-life MIT counters did. But none of these places carries the symbolic connotations of Las Vegas.

It's at this point that the film becomes both kinds of Vegas road trip movie. Ben's adventures are about abandoning the puritanism and penury of student life in Cambridge for the perks and pleasures of high-rolling in Sin City. He exchanges his khakis for a black Armani suit, his ten-speed for a stretch limo, and spends his Saturdays not at science fairs but in strip clubs. As well, though, Ben's hard work pays off, and he makes a killing at the tables. As the months go by, he steadily accumulates profits from his card-counting, winnings he stashes away in his dorm room to pay for "Harvard Med."

But the question arises, is it possible to remain perpetually both an entrepre-

neur and an epicurean? Herein lies the source of *21's* narrative tension. For eventually the champagne and lap dances catch up with Ben who, despite repeated admonitions from his mentor to "not give in to your emotions," does just this. During a night of drunkenness, Ben grows arrogant and depressed, forgets the count, and loses all of his hard-earned Harvard money. Of course, this being a mainstream Hollywood production, it all works out in the end. After being swindled by Professor Rosa, the card-counting students pull off an elaborate scam to double-cross him in return. Ben gets the girl, returns to Cambridge, and rides off into the sunset (and on to Harvard Med).

It's all very satisfying. But at the conclusion of *21*, I couldn't help but wonder exactly who was conning whom. Columbia Pictures certainly came out a winner by investing \$35 million in a film that has thus far grossed \$150 million (and counting). But I couldn't shake the feeling that Vegas casinos came out the biggest winner in the end.

In the film, the pit bosses are portrayed as largely incompetent, always one step behind the MIT team. They pin all their hopes on "modern facial-recognition software" to single out card-counters, with but a single "old-school" pit boss representing their last line of defense.

But casinos aren't really so helpless against card-counters. As part of my own ethnographic research on the casino industry, I worked as a dealer and conducted scores of interviews with casino managers throughout Nevada, and I was surprised to discover that they have at their disposal a simple, effective means of defense: shuffling machines.

These small contraptions automatically remix the deck after each hand, thereby completely eliminating the possibility of counting cards. Yet even today, less than half of all the blackjack tables in the state use them. Why? Quite simply, it's an issue of image.

Bosses believe letting dealers shuffle cards by hand attracts gamblers seeking a "classic" Vegas experience. The money casinos continuously win from such tourists outweighs that which they lose during an occasional run by organized card-counters. Stories of big wins by card-counters are in fact *encouraged* by the casinos, to stir the dreams of novice gamblers that they, too, can beat the odds.

In this sense, a piece of popular culture such as *21* is but a casino advertisement, one paid for, curiously, by moviegoers like ourselves. Now that's a good deal for the house.

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