

SKEPTICISM AND THE ORDINARY
From Burnt Norton To Las Vegas

ABSTRACT The premise of this article is that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* exemplifies a full-scale engagement with the implications of philosophical skepticism. Drawing on the philosopher Stanley Cavell's work on skepticism and the ordinary, I take up the classical questions of skepticism and bring them to bear directly on questions of language and architecture in that text. I argue that instead of light irony, complicity with the "culture industry," or the simple equation of architecture with communication, *Learning from Las Vegas* is fundamentally about the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" in the city.

*Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision,
 will not stay in place, will not stay still. Shrieking voices scolding,
 mocking, or merely chattering, always assail them. The
 Word in the desert is most attacked by voices of temptation.*

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *The Four Quartets*

— Challenging texts such as *Learning from Las Vegas* do not make reading easy. They are "difficult" to put it in Eliotian terms and are deceptive, as if calling forth a weak skepticism in response to their robust version. In fact, much of the criticism and commentary on *Learning from Las Vegas* from its initial publication in 1972 has circled around the question of skepticism without directly addressing its philosophical premises. At its furthest extreme skepticism manifests itself in nihilism: the radical denial of shared meaning altogether; the other extreme—to live without skepticism—would be to fall in love with the world.¹ Some critics took Venturi and Scott Brown's evaluation of the Las Vegas Strip as "almost all right," to mean simply *all* right. Other cultural critics, mostly from the perspectives of critical and postmodern theory,

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 Cavell, Stanley. 1991. *The Claim of Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 431 and 452.

would implicitly identify them with their full-blown nihilistic interpretations of America, Las Vegas and the “culture industry.” In between the two extremes, they were most often branded as liberal ironists embracing a witty, but ultimately innocuous and possibly reckless, cultural pessimism.² But I have a hunch that what made the book so infuriating is that it had more of the flavor of courting the extremes without occupying them or the

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The ironic/Ionic column in the Allen Memorial Museum, Oberlin College, is the exemplary image of their supposedly “playful” skepticism. Of course my parsing out of these three positions is a gross simplification of a range of critical responses that often overlapped.

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1993. “A Conversation . . . Walter Hopps and Edward Ruscha.” Ruscha, Edwards. *Romance With Liquids: Paintings 1966-1969*. New York: Rizzoli, 106. I am sure that many critics would rather use the word stupefaction rather than wonder to characterize their experience. In a sense this would not be incorrect, but as long as it acknowledged that stupefaction is *internal* to the experience of wonder. See Ronell, Avital. 2002. *Stupidity*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 111.

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Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 451, “Over and over, an apparent symmetry or asymmetry between skepticism with respect to the external world and skepticism with respect to other minds has collapsed, on further reflection, into its opposite.”

middle ground. This state of affairs is best captured in the graffiti that the “pop-artist” Ed Ruscha saw scrawled in the ruins of an abandoned hotel structure near Glassell Park in Los Angeles: “FUCK THE WORLD . . . AND FUCK YOU IF YOU DON’T LOVE IT.”³ I take this as a more prosaic formulation of the real stakes of skepticism as outlined by Stanley Cavell: that there are endless specific succumbings to the conditions of skepticism and endless specific recoveries from it, and between the temptations of excessive despair and false hope is a quest for the ordinary and its perspicuousness.

Simply stated, the *premise* of this essay is that the visual and textual arguments in *Learning from Las Vegas* exemplify a full-scale engagement with the implications of philosophical skepticism. I am by no means claiming that Venturi and Scott Brown “intended” to exemplify skepticism when they wrote *Learning from Las Vegas*, merely that the resultant book does so. I take my basic orientation from the two fundamental aspects of the threat of skepticism: the uncertainty of knowing the world out there and knowing other minds. These aspects of skepticism are not mutually exclusive—far from it. So-called other minds and external world skepticism often allegorize their respective commitments.⁴ Further, I take it that the approach to words in *Learning from Las Vegas* is allegorical of both external world and other minds skepticism. “As if,” as Cavell has put it, “to write toward self-knowledge is to

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war with words, to battle for the very weapons with which you fight.”⁵ A position also echoed in T.S. Eliot’s lines from the *Four Quartets* that ends the first part of *Learning from Las Vegas*: “That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings. The poetry does not matter...”⁶ Thus my core argument in this essay is as follows: In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi and Scott Brown explore the fact that we are constantly stumbling over our words, our visible language, in the face of imagining its ability to “word the world” and communicate with others.

Wonder, Disorientation, and Turning Things Around

Stanley Cavell, echoing Plato in his *Theaetetus*, has suggested that philosophy begins in wonder: “...it is philosophy’s power to cause wonder, or to stun—to take one aside—that decides who is to become a philosopher.”⁷

The English word wonder captures the connotations of both the pleasure of amazement and intellectual curiosity. These “wonderful” experiences are not merely one among many, but a kind of rebirth that can initiate a life-long love and labor. For example, Cavell talks about his own ecstatic experience learning to hear the near perfect pitch of music with Ernest Bloch at Berkeley before the “revelatory effect” of studying with the ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin at Harvard in 1955.⁸ Most interesting projects, not just philosophical ones, start in wonder. The art historian Michael Fried writes of being “knocked on his heels” by his first encounter with Anthony Caro’s sculpture.⁹ Fried’s experience captures another important dimension of wonder: the condition of being literally thrown off balance; a state of disorientation and “not knowing” that precedes the “a-ha” moment marking the fall into orientation, meaning and “learning from.” If bodily orientation is the phenomenological basis of meaning as such—think of being firm, upright, lowly, base, etc.—then one

5 /
Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 352.

6 /
Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 60. The passage is from the “East Coker” section of the *Four Quartets*. See Eliot, T.S. 1944. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber, 17.

7 /
Cavell, Stanley. 1994. *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 63.

8 /
Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 48-51, 55, 59.

9 /
Fried, Michael. 1998. “An Introduction to my Art Criticism.” *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 27-28.

must entertain the possibility that philosophical problems might also begin with disorientation. In the words of Wittgenstein: "A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."¹⁰ Or as Cavell has glossed this passage: "...one can take the idea of not knowing one's way about, of being lost, as the form specifically of the *beginning* or *appearance* of a philosophical problem."¹¹

One can't help wondering if Venturi and Scott Brown weren't "knocked on their heels" (or tipped over in their

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Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1976. *Philosophical Investigations*. G.E.M. Anscombe, translator. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, \$123.

11 |

Cavell, Stanley. 1989. "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture." *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 36.

12 |

Quoted in Brownlee, David. 2001. "Form and Content." In Brownlee, David B., David G. De Long, and Kathryn B. Hiesinger. *Out of the Ordinary*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 37. Venturi's first visit to Rome was another transformative moment.

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Venturi, Robert. 1966. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 23. Venturi borrowed this phraseology from the literary critic Cleanth Brook's comments on the writings of John Donne; Venturi et. al. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 31. The phrase "twin phenomena" is borrowed from Aldo van Eyck. My take on these passages differs significantly from what Charles Jencks has called postmodern "double coding." It should be noted that there is a close connection between wonder and mixed entities.

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Scott Brown, Denise. 1976. "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects." *Oppositions* 5, 103.

car) during their first visit to Las Vegas together in 1966. In fact, this is exactly the kind of event that Denise Scott Brown recounted in an interview: "We rode around from casino to casino, dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we were jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins."¹² This is an extraordinarily rich passage with its connotations of wonder, disorientation, and (dis)embodied aesthetic experience. In haste, critics often overlooked the *ambivalence* in this passage that, in the strict Freudian sense of the term, is defined as the simultaneous existence of both love and hate towards the same object. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* Venturi had characterized this kind of relationship as "both-and" rather than "either-or," and in *Learning from Las Vegas* it was termed "twin phenomenon" to suggest that what are considered polar opposites are really "inextricably intertwined at every level in the city."¹³ To my mind, there is a focused attempt in *Learning from Las Vegas* to delay the fall into orientation and meaning by extending this condition of ambivalence and disorientation (they often call it "withhold-

ing or deferring judgment"). As Denise Scott Brown affirmed in an article published in 1976: "We recommended learning (note, *learning*, not loving—at most we recommend a hate-love relationship) from Las Vegas..."¹⁴

Despite the italicized word learning, I think the key word

here is “from” as in *Learning from Las Vegas*. It functions much like the word abandonment, with its connotations

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Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 47. Also see Cavell, Stanley. 1995. “What Did Derrida Want of Austin?” *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 64, “I read Austin not as denying that I have to abandon my words, to create so many orphans, but as affirming that I am abandoned to them, as to thieves, or conspirators...” Here I am providing a paltry account of this word in Cavell’s lexicon which also encompasses connotations of enthusiasm, “forgetting ourselves,” leaving, relief, quitting, release, shunning, allowing, deliverance, trusting and suffering. Cavell, Stanley. 1980. *The Senses of Walden*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 136.

16 /

Scott Brown, Denise. 1965. “The Meaningful City.” *AIA Journal*, 29. I believe Kevin Lynch was also talking about something similar in his concept of “direction ambiguity” in relation to problems with the city’s imageability.

of both leaving and ecstasy; as if both were required, and not just once, in order to embrace learning as a twisting away from, and within, the ordinary. One might say we are abandoned *to* the ordinary.¹⁵ To return to Wittgenstein’s quote, we are seriously mistaken if we assume that disorientation is *solved* or brought to an *end* by finding the “right” way back. Right? Forward? Back? Which way? Disorientation is a condition to be undone, not solved.

In an early essay, significantly entitled “The Meaningful City,” Scott Brown diagnosed this condition of modern disorientation as urban *agnosia*: a condition “in which the individual perceives with his senses but cannot

give meaning to what he perceives.”¹⁶ Venturi and Scott Brown tackle this problematic in the opening pages of *Learning from Las Vegas* in their account of the disorientation experienced in the everyday car culture of the highway in post-war America:

A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what he already knew. He knew where he was. Today the crossroad is a cloverleaf. To turn left he must turn right, a contradiction poignantly evoked in the print by Allan D’Arcangelo. But the driver has not time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He relies on signs to guide him – enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.¹⁷

D’Arcangelo’s *The Trip* was “figure 1” in the article “A Significance for A&P Parking Lots Or Learning From Las Vegas” (1968), the precursor to the first part of *Learning from Las Vegas* (*figure 1*).¹⁸ The bold red arrow points left, but within its staff, a stencilled yellow symbol of a hand with an extended digit

points in the opposite direction. Here I am reminded of a passage in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* “...in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line

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Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 4.

18 /

Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1968. “A Significance for A & P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas.” *Architectural Forum*, fig. 1, 39.

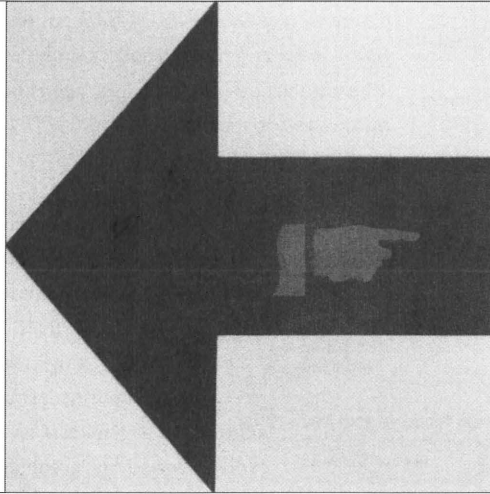


FIGURE 1 | Allan D'Arcangelo, *The Trip*, in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip.”¹⁹ Has the very act of “pointing” become an incoherent activity? Pointless? Do we rely on signs

only when we don’t know our way about?

19 | Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 185. Also see § 85.

20 | Scott Brown, “The Meaningful City,” 28.

21 | Cavell, Stanley. 2002. “Ending the Waiting Game: A reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*.” *Must We Mean What We Say*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 127. I take it that Cavell is suggesting philosophy resist the urge to overcome wonder through “knowledge.”

22 | Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, xi.

‘Can we be *certain* that signs will guide us

in the right direction, as opposed to abandoning us to the uncertain criteria for differentiating between being lost and being found? Signs can always point to the doubt that we assume they are meant to assuage.

Under such conditions we might heed

Scott Brown’s words of wisdom: “Slow

down—where do we go from here?”²⁰

Perhaps we should not be too precipitous

in rushing for a perspicuous solution. After all,

“genuine philosophy may begin in wonder but it continues in reluctance.”²¹ As Venturi noted in the preface to *Learning from Las Vegas*: “we think the more directions that architecture takes at this point, the better.”²² A passage that suggests we need to lose

ourselves before we can find ourselves; an acknowledgement that loss is constitutive of finding a way in and for architecture. Las Vegas is the place that exemplifies the desire to *risk* being lost as internal to the human condition—to be at a loss, to lose, maybe even to be a loser. The sign architecture of Las Vegas beckons us to lose ourselves for a while.

Babble On

The architectural historian Vincent Scully once suggested that the power of Venturi's craft was his ability to

transcend abstract formal manipulation and deal with meaning itself.²³ I am not sure what “meaning itself” might mean, but there sure was a preoccupation around this time with *Meaning in Architecture* to take the title of a well-known book published in 1970.²⁴ But in the dense signscape of Las Vegas it is more a matter of the surfeit of meaning; that is to say, Las Vegas is saturated with meaning, too meaning-ful, and thus on the very abyss of meaninglessness. Peter Blake suggested in his polemical book 1 (1964) that in order to counteract the stiff competition of advertising “that every bit of the billboard space must be made to work hard.”²⁵ I take it that

that is another way of saying that every bit of the poster space must “mean.” Of course, this underscores the dilemma of language in commodity culture, in which the desire to make every word mean what it says is confronted with the vacuity and emptiness of what this effort is often put.

But what Peter Blake clearly overlooks in his polemical book is that this “working hard” can never cleave apart the “serious” communicative task from what the ordinary language philosopher John Austin calls the “etiologies of language.”²⁶ The merit of *Learning from Las Vegas* is that it clearly demonstrates that the signscape of Las Vegas is merely the hyperbolization of the fact that *all* utterances are vulnerable to deception and insincerity. As Venturi noted: “Manipulation is not the monopoly of

23 /
Scully, Vincent. 1969. *American Architecture and Urbanism*. New York: Praeger, 260.

24 /
Jencks, Charles, and George Baird, editors. 1970. *Meaning in Architecture*. New York: Braziller Inc.

25 /
Blake, Peter. 1964. *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 12.

26 /
Cavell, “What Did Derrida Want of Austin?,” 56-58.

27 /
Venturi, Robert and Denise Scott Brown. 1971. “Ugly and Ordinary Architecture or the Decorated Shed.” *Architectural Forum*, 53.

crass commercialism.”²⁷ Any drive to demarcate the “manipulative city of kitsch” (the words are Kenneth Frampton’s) from what Socrates in the *Republic* calls “our city of words”—the ideal rather than the actual city—is a deception in its own right.²⁸

28 | Plato, 1945. *The Republic of Plato*. Francis MacDonald Cornford, translator. London: Oxford University Press, Book IX, 591. Also see Cavell, Stanley, 1990. “Introduction: Staying the Course.” *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1-32.

29 | Poirier, Richard. May 20, 1967. “T.S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste.” *New Republic*, 21. In its simplest terms, de-creative refers to the fact that Eliot works with the given urban materials at hand. Significantly, throughout the essay Poirier stresses Eliot’s “skepticism about his own poetic enterprise.”

30 | Reese, Teresa. 1980. “Rude Graphics, or Learning to Love Las Vegas.” *Print*, 34.5, 45.

31 | Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 56. The quote is taken from August Heckscher’s *The Public Happiness* (1962).

Venturi and Scott Brown avoid the “bad utopian” drive to quarantine these false alternatives into their separate domains; a move that Peter Blake rushes into with his naive juxtaposition of the image of a “chaotic” commercial main street with the pristine neo-classical order of the University of Virginia. I can imagine Venturi and Scott Brown insisting that *this* is “our city,” both the city as built and “our city of words” on the page we are reading. We are already participating in both its actual and eventual existence in our very response to the text in front of us. It is hardly surprising then that

Venturi ends his first book, *Complexity and*

Contradiction in Architecture, by roundly criticizing these very images.

The task of the critic of “kulchur” is not to carve out meaning from chaos but to undo meaning. This “de-creative” impulse, as the literary critic Richard Poirier characterized T. S. Eliot’s enterprise in an essay quoted in *Learning from Las Vegas*, is one response taken in the text.²⁹ But a “de-creative” impulse might just as well involve modes of overloading *as* those of draining. As Steven Izenour noted: “If we have any philosophy of [exhibition] design at all it’s one of a kind of overload; we walk a thin line when it comes to boggling people’s minds by offering lots of choices through juxtaposition—and maybe sometimes we fall over.”³⁰ Contrary to Scully’s claim, one might posit that Venturi and Scott Brown were not in fear of chaos, but of naked meaning. As Venturi put it: “Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives...force.”³¹

The reader encounters a direct tarrying with the very possibility of the communication enterprise in a sequence of astonishing images in *Learning from Las Vegas* under

the section entitled "Symbol in Space before form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System." Images 3-6 are a sequence of small cropped photographs of Las Vegas signs at night that produce the following "sentence": "Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin - Ask Us Any-Thing, Vacancy, Gas" (*figure 2*).³² The neon signs are literally translated into the above-mentioned sentence on the adjacent page. In the third part of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi returns to these signs suggesting that they are not only Pop Art but also pop literature. No doubt this sentence is reminiscent of the so-called pop literature of Tom Wolfe, or of other examples of 'found poetry.' But then is Eliot's writing pop literature, with its mix of "Sweeney and Latin" as Scott Brown put it? Surely there is more going on here than *merely* pop literature. Is this sentence an acknowledgment that all "our" words and sentences were never solely "ours" to begin with? Under such conditions how we can mean what we say becomes pressing.

Could we not read the "Vacancy" sign in bright orange neon, and the barely discernible unlit "No" directly above it, ready to be activated at a moment's notice, as emblematic of the tarrying with the plenitude or voidness of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas*? These are the two major voices I hear in the text (there are others): one taking an extreme skeptical stance in its erasure of context and the denial of shared meaning; and

the other, equally insistent, arguing for the recovery of context and meaning.³³ For example, in constructing the "grammatical" sentence out of the neon signs there has been a radical insertion of "context" into the discontinuous and paratactic word/images: a comma here, a dash there, the omission of "Nevada" in the first image, a period to put an end to it all.³⁴ It is as if the Las Vegas "Strip" in *Learning from Las Vegas* is not only about *that* burlesque show, but also about "stripping" criteria for meaning and context in order to explore the very conditions of possibility for communication as such. One might say that Venturi and Scott

32 /
Venturi et. al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 5.
There are other examples of such neon sentences in Venturi and Scott Brown's work.

33 /
Here I am drawing on Cavell's frequent references to the multiple voices in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Richard Poirier also refers to the multiple voices in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "The Literature of Waste," 20.

34 /
Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 112, "I was registering my sense of skepticism's work as precisely removing our access to context, to the before and after, the ins and outs, of an expression."



FIGURE 2 | *Welcome To Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin—Ask Us Anything, Vacancy, Gas.*

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

Brown are “strippers” in a melodrama of the self in a struggle with words. In the words of Venturi: “I am an exhibitionist: I go around exposing my doubts.”³⁵

It has always struck me that the neon sentence looks like one of those clichéd ransom letters seen in old movies or magazines where the letters and words are ripped and

pieced together from different typefaces and print media. Are we common criminals that need to steal our language back, or have we always already had it stolen from us—willingly? Are we victims of meaning? Are Venturi and Scott Brown suggesting, in the spirit of T. S. Eliot, that architecture is a mug’s game, a rogue’s gallery? In the words of Eliot: “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal.”³⁶ Or do these sequence of images read more like Adorno’s characterization of the telegram with its “mutilated language condensed to carry the maximum information combined with the urgency of delivery [that] imparts the shock of immediate domination in the form of immediate horror.”³⁷ Adorno’s passage on the telegram

is reminiscent of Venturi’s aphorism about Las Vegas: “The city of signs spewing the vital if vulgar iconography of now—*terribilità* verging on *orribilità*.”³⁸ But Venturi and Scott Brown’s comment from another article also needs to be taken into consideration: “Themes for today should be specific, immediate and urgent, like a letter

35 /
Venturi, Robert. 1996. “Mal Mots: Aphorisms—Sweet and Sour—By an Anti-Hero Architect.” *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 299.

36 /
Eliot, T.S. 1951 “Philip Massinger.” *Selected Essays*. London: Faber, 206.

37 /
Adorno, Theodore W. 2001. “The Schema of Mass Culture.” In Bernstein, J.M., editor. *The Culture Industry*. London: Routledge, 96.

38 /
Venturi. “A Series of Responses for VIA, the Journal of the School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania.” *Iconography and Electronics*, 150.

39 /
Scott Brown, Denise and Robert Venturi. 1969. “The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976.” *The Architectural Forum*, 66.

from the front.”³⁹ Sometimes that letter sends bad news, sometimes it conveys longing for love and home, sometimes it is a message of despair...or hope. Sometimes it is marked “return to sender.”

Can we find what we need or want in this kind of environment? Venturi and Scott Brown seem to suggest that

we can without too much struggle: “How is it that in spite of ‘noise’ from competing signs we do in fact find what we want on the strip?”⁴⁰ I am sure the “noise” that Venturi and Scott Brown refer to in their Socratic question alludes to the title of Tom Wolfe’s famous essay, “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!!”⁴¹ Despite the appearance that Venturi and Scott Brown want to make a sharp differentiation between noise and unhindered communication, this bifurcation is undone even before one opens the book. The difficulties in parsing out chatter from “meaningful” communication—the fact that there are no strict criteria for differentiating them—is immediately encountered in the wonderful

glassine dust jacket that covered the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* (figure 3).⁴²

The jacket consists of slogans/section headings from the book printed in large black classical font that continues over onto the back cover. The title *Learning from Las Vegas* on the second line is identified with red lettering and is thus picked out from the “black noise” of the rest of the text. The attached color reproduction of the famous “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” image, the gold stamped title LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS [all in caps], and the names of the authors are found on the cloth cover, and can be seen through the semi-opaque dust jacket. The large gold lettering of *Learning from Las Vegas* is overlaid by the black lettering on the dust cover creating a palimpsest of sorts.⁴³ Although the title in red is picked out from the surrounding typeface it is in turn challenged by the gold embossed title seen through the layer of black lettering. If the title is supposed to point

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Venturi et. al., *Learning From Las Vegas*, 4.

41 |
Wolfe, Tom. 1966. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. London: Jonathan Cape, 3-28. Significantly, Heidegger described the everyday as “noise.”

42 |
In most readily available copies of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* the dust jacket has been removed or destroyed. On “chatter” see Fenves, Peter. 1993. “Chatter”: *Language and History in Kierkegaard*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. On Venturi and Scott Brown’s dissatisfaction with the design of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* see Michael Golec’s essay “Doing it Deadpan.”

43 |
The lettering on the sides of the Tanya image not only frames it but also literally begins to invade its gold border along the right hand margin.

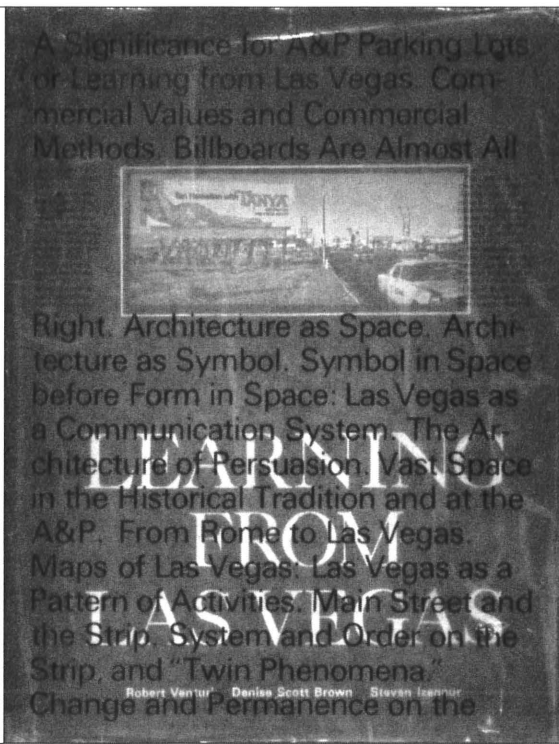


FIGURE 3 | *Glassine Dust Jacket, Learning from Las Vegas.*

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

to a literal “scene of instruction,” a “Learning from...,” it seems to be undermined by its own doubling or “contradiction.” The title is itself a repetitive slogan no different from the surrounding slogans/section headings.

44 | Venturi, *Iconography and Electronics*, 322.

The cover erases context; it is a litany of one-liners divorced from any “thick” ex-

planatory before and after. This erasure of context is not restricted to the mere cover of a much richer interior text; it is basic to the very conditions of the business of practicing architecture. As Venturi noted: “We architects can travel 3,000 miles for a three-quarter-hour interview where we have to be sloganeers and showmen rather than thinkers and doers.”⁴⁴

Commentators have often criticized the choice of the “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” image as the emblematic frontispiece to the text as a whole. As Neil Leach has so bluntly put it: “a tanned bikini-clad figure is used to promote a suntan lotion, in a poster that blatantly exploits female sexuality.”⁴⁵ But can we in all credulity assume that Venturi and Scott Brown were oblivious to the fact that instruction is of a piece with provocation? In a book that traffics in commodified words and images they don’t have a clue to their price? What they cost? The Tanya image, however, begins to look more critical in light of the constant project of “stripping” away criteria in *Learning from Las Vegas*, such that we can’t be sure of identifying any scene of instruction, or any scene of instruction we would want to identify with.

There is a striking image in Scott Brown and Venturi’s essay “The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976” (1969) that brings the Tanya billboard into the constellation of issues I am talking about.⁴⁶ It consists of schematic rectangular buildings with comic book-like speech balloons/large signs “tethered” to them or near them (more on tethering and speech balloons later). The signs read “EXIT,” “PROCESS,” “LOVE & LEARN,” “SOUVENIR.”⁴⁷

Although the LOVE & LEARN sign is referred to as such in the text of the article, what we see and hear in this image is “LOVE & LEAR.” The “N” is occluded by the rectangular sign that reads “SOUVENIR.” Are we to couple love and learn, love and (King) Lear, or love and leer? Should we “learn from” or “leer at” the billboard architecture of the “strip.” The often abrupt, even precipitous, movements between the plenitude

and paucity of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas* is exemplified in this image, just as the bikini-clad image of Tanya adorning the front cover of the book provides a striking contrast to Venturi and Scott Brown’s loving and learning together in Las Vegas. Both “profane and profound messages” are found in the city.⁴⁸ Sometimes they are separated by a mere hair’s breadth.

⁴⁵ /
Leach, Neil. 1999. *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 4.

⁴⁶ /
Scott Brown and Venturi, “The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976,” 69.

⁴⁷ /
The “r” in “Souvenir” is also cut off by the image’s outer frame.

⁴⁸ /
Scott Brown, Denise and Robert Venturi. 1973. “Highway.” *Modulus* 9, 12.

One of the primary critiques of modernism that *Learning from Las Vegas* was engaged in, as Frederic Jameson clearly noted, was the dialectic between inside and outside and the assumption that the outside expressed the interior.⁴⁹ Let's call this the modernist drive for

"expressive transparency." In Las Vegas the "false fronts," contrasts in styles ("Moorish in front and Tudor behind"), and the exaggerated separation of interior space from the external environment provide counter-examples to the modernist organic building which was designed from the inside out with an eye to consistency and legibility, but has now

manifested its twisted logic in post-war architecture where the "expressive aim has distorted the whole."

How does this drive for expressive transparency link up to skepticism about "other minds"? Simply put, skepticism about other minds is also fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the inner and the outer, transparency and opacity. The possibility of skepticism arises in the potential gap between the indirect ways in which I know your thoughts and the assumed immediate intuition in which they are revealed to you.⁵⁰ The tarrying with the skeptical dilemma about knowing other minds, articulated by the difficulties of expressive transparency, is worked out in the famous contrast between the "duck" and "decorated shed" in *Learning from Las Vegas*. The expressionistic relationship between interior and exterior is exemplified by the architectural duck, and is contrasted to their radical disjunction in the decorated shed. The duck in *Learning from Las Vegas* is a sign of the death throws of expressionist transparency pushed to its limits; the self qua architecture caught between the nightmare of suffocating privacy and one of public betrayal.⁵¹ With the duck, the entire building becomes an ornament to its own communicative impasse.

The decorated shed, on the other hand, attempts to enact a certain "screened unknowingness" that acknowledges that muteness and unadulterated meaning are false alter-

49 / Jameson, Frederic. 1988. "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology." *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986*. Volume 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 59.

50 / Carrier, David. 2000. *The Aesthetics of Comics*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 30.

51 / Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 351-2.

natives. I take it that the speech balloon/large sign in the decorated shed images—the sign (reading “Eat”) that separates the car from the building—is key to this ethical claim and intimately connected to skepticism about other minds. David Carrier has brilliantly suggested that comic book speech balloons attempt to overcome the skepticism of other minds by revealing another (fictional) person’s thoughts displayed transparently to the reader.⁵² But one could just as easily argue that sophisticated uses of speech balloons (and sophisticated cartoons) are merely another manifestation of the skeptical dilemma and not a fantasy about its overcoming.

Although one has to wait until the end of the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* to encounter speech balloons in their cartoon form in an image from the “Learning from Levittown” studio, they are clearly evident as literal

balloons in the famous images of the decorated shed.⁵³ In the versions of the decorated shed leading up to and including the one published in *Learning from Las Vegas*, the quivering line of the pole carrying the “eat” sign looks more like a string attached to a balloon than a solid supporting structure. The speech balloon is literally untethered from its source, the architecture itself, and placed slightly in front of or farther away from the shed-like structure. Who or what, if

anyone or anything, is speaking here? As Carrier notes: “the balloon must be attached to something, whether person or alien, capable of thinking. Car tires go “Screech” and bombs “Boom!” but only beings capable of thought, like the great Saul Steinberg’s chair dreaming of being a rocking horse, can have balloons attached to them.”⁵⁴ It is as if the “voice” is separated from its body thus undermining any claim to expressive transparency. According to Carrier it is also paramount that the “things” or characters in the fictional scene do not acknowledge the speech balloons as speech balloons.⁵⁵ If I am not mistaken, the little poolings of ink in the eye-like

52 /

Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 73-4.

53 /

Denise Scott Brown had written about the use of the comic strip form and speech balloons in her commentary on Archigram’s pamphlet number four. See Brown, Denise Scott. July 1968. “Little Magazines in Architecture and Urbanism.” *AIP Journal*, 228.

54 /

Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 32-33.

55 /

Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 29-30.

building windows of earlier renditions of the duck and decorated shed images look remarkably like tiny pupils looking up at the separation of language from its physical body.⁵⁶ The speech balloon comes between us and

other minds; a process exemplified by the sign physically separating the car from the building. Is this an acknowledgment of the struggle for meaning with words that necessarily separate us and bind us together? Is it a demand that we take responsibility for what comes between us? For what we are willing to ingest or expel? Sometimes what we “eat” — or speak — nourishes us; sometimes it leaves us unsatisfied, hungering for something else.

It should be clear that it is manifestly inaccurate to claim, as some critics have, that Venturi and Scott Brown are reviving a kind of *architecture parlante*; a desire that each stone might speak and directly express the inner nature of the building.⁵⁷ Their practice is radically not logocentric, and an *architecture parlante* is eminently so. Paul de Man has defined logocentrism as “the unmediated presence of the self to its own voice as opposed to the reflective distance that separates this self from the written word”⁵⁸ How far is the “self” separated from the written word, if not its own voice in those words? One always wonders if these balloon signs could untether and yank the words air born, away from us, as they ascend in their unbearable

lightness. Nevertheless we are still *tethered* to those words; a connection that Cavell interprets as meaning “that my words fly from me *and* stick to me.”⁵⁹ Could one imagine purposefully bursting those balloons, or the balloons just bursting of their own accord because of rising too high? Is that a “Pop” architecture that might be worth thinking about?⁶⁰ Where would these words take their fall?

56 /

Here I am thinking of the duck and decorated shed image in “A Significance for A & P Parking Lots or Learning from Las Vegas,” fig. 2, 39.

57 /

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux is usually the architect drawn upon to characterize this position. Detlef Mertins has succinctly analyzed the basic contours of an *architecture parlante* as follows: “...eighteenth-century critiques of rhetoric, theatricality, and allegory sparked formal experiments in architecture that sought to eliminate the use of conventions or applied signs in favor of the direct expression of the inner nature of a building.” Mertins, Detlef. 1996. “The Shells of Architectural Thought.” In Hejduk’s *Chronotope*. K. Michael Hays, editor. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 32.

58 /

de Man, Paul. 1983. “The Rhetoric of Blindness.” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 114. Venturi and Scott Brown are still interested in the voice, or better yet the pitch of architecture, a matter I return to towards the end of this essay.

59 /

Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 123.

60 /

It is interesting to note that Colin Rowe had the following to say about Venturi’s Yale Mathematics building: “It is thus we may have the feeling, after protracted contemplation of Venturi’s project, that we are in the presence of a distended balloon, that something is about to burst...” Rowe, Colin. 1976. “Robert Venturi and the Yale Mathematics Building.” *Oppositions* 6, 17.

Fallen Words

I like to imagine them crash landing across pages twenty and twenty one of the original version of *Learning from Las Vegas* (figure 4).⁶¹ On these pages we encounter an as-

61 /
Due to the economizing of images in the second edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the fallout there is limited to one small image instead of a giant two-page spread.

62 /
Cavell, "Declining Decline," 34.

63 /
I realize that my language of stumbling suggests walking rather than the experience of Las Vegas through the mediation of the car that is stressed in *Learning from Las Vegas*. However, if one pays attention to the allegorical dimensions of the text as exemplifying the struggle with language it can allow us to explore many of the physical dimensions of this encounter that are overlooked when its manifest content is overemphasized. Thus, I am suggesting we should literally pay attention to the "underwriting" of *Learning from Las Vegas*. In Derridean terms we might characterize this stumbling as a "pas-de-sens;" however, I do not think that quite captures what is going on in these pages.

64 /
Freud, Sigmund. 1963. "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)." *Three Case Histories*. New York: Collier Books, 48.

tonishing map of the Las Vegas strip that shows "every written word seen from the road." These signs are not seen in their vertical position, standing for something, but as if all the words on the strip had fallen to the ground too weak to stand on their own; too weak to compete with each other or for our attention; or, as if the words were straining under their burden to "mean" and had escaped their upright constraints scattering on the ground. Thrown out on the street, so to speak. Perhaps we need to be, in the words of Cavell, "...looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads."⁶² Of course that is assuming we are coming to the scene after the fact, otherwise looking beneath our feet might be a dangerous endeavor indeed!

We might stumble or trip over these scattered words.⁶³ Who knows, maybe Venturi and

Scott Brown might want them there – consciously or unconsciously – precisely because of that risk. I like to think of their "ambivalence" in terms of a particularly revealing "symbolic and compulsive act" from Freud's analysis of the Rat Man:

One day, when his lady was due to go to the country, he [the rat man] took a walk, in the course of which his foot knocked against a stone. He kicked the stone out of the way, because, he reflected, his lady might shortly pass along this road, she might come to grief. Twenty minutes or so later, the Rat Man thought what he had done absurd, and he walked over to the stone, picked it up, and replaced it in the middle of the road.⁶⁴

A more literal example of this stumbling might be Venturi and Scott Brown's Franklin Court restoration on the excavated site of Benjamin Franklin's home in Philadelphia. The excerpts from Franklin's letters and household records describing the house were inscribed in the rough paving stones underneath the bare structural

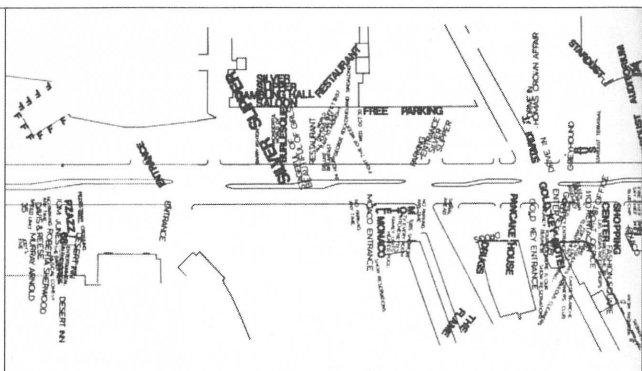


FIGURE 4 | Map of Las Vegas showing every writing word seen from the road.

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

frame of the house. Here a passage from Baudelaire seems to strike the right tone: “Stumbling over words as

65 | Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 164. The passage is from Baudelaire’s “Le Soleil” from *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

66 | Descartes, René. 1971. “Second Meditation.” *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach, translators and editors. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 73.

67 | Cavell, Stanley. 1981. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 78. I am not taking this as Wittgenstein’s final say in the manner. It is, I assume, a grammatical joke, and thus it runs deep and is taken up again in various sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

over cobblestones, colliding now and then with long-dreamed-of verses.”⁶⁵ It is as if wording the world—the literal tagging of word or phrase to some particular “block” of experience—is also our stumbling block, our collision with “long-dreamed of verses.”

Even Descartes’ dream of a philosophical “bedrock” is also uneven when it comes to words—even when just thinking about them: “But it is surprising how prone my mind is to errors. Although I am considering these points within myself silently and without speaking, yet I stumble over words and am almost deceived by ordinary language.”⁶⁶

Or is it more in the vein of Wittgenstein’s dumb, brutal and deliberate “bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language”?⁶⁷ I guess “understanding” is thick headed—one certainly hopes so for its sake. Cavell sums it up best: “The capacity for understanding is the same as the capacity for misunderstanding, as the capacities for walking

and talking are the same as the capacities for stumbling and stammering.”⁶⁸

68 |

Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 111.

69 |

O'Hara, Frank. 1995. "Biotherm (For Bill Berkson)." *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Donald Allen, editor. Berkeley: University of California Press, 444.

70 |

Gottdiener, M et. al. 1999. *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 67.

71 |

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1969. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. R.J. Hollingdale, translator. New York: Penguin Classics, 45-6.

Venturi and Scott Brown do not come down on either side of the possibility or impossibility of wording the world: neither for communication nor for “vapid sub-communication.” The following line from the poet Frank O’Hara captures their enterprise quite nicely: “I am guarding it from mess and message.”⁶⁹ This is reminiscent of one of Venturi’s oft cited aphorisms: “mess is more.” It could be taken as a silly reworking of Mies Van der Rohe’s “less is more.”

I prefer to read it as a slightly more terse version of O’Hara’s passage.

Blinking Signs and the Question of the “Last Man”

One can’t avoid the blinking, flashing lights of Las Vegas. They are everywhere: in the streets, in the casinos, in the airports. Here is how one author has described it: “they’re all moving—flickering, twitching, blinking; turning on and off; running up and down and across; shooting across space and back again; starting at the bottom, speeding to the top, and exploding.”⁷⁰ I take this “blinking” to be exemplary of the full-blown tarrying with skepticism in *Learning from Las Vegas*. It is the hyper-American version of Nietzsche’s “Last Man” who makes his dramatic appearance in the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche’s passage on the “Last Man” is worth quoting at length:

Must one first shatter their ears to teach them to hear with their eyes? Must one rumble like drums and Lenten preachers? Or do they believe only those who stammer? They have something of which they are proud. What is it called that makes them proud? They call it culture, it distinguishes them from the goatherds. Therefore they dislike hearing the word “contempt” spoken of them. So I shall speak to their pride. So I shall speak to them of the most contemptible man: and that is the last man... I tell you: one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos in you. Alas! The time is coming when man will give birth to no more stars. Alas! The time of the most contemptible man is coming, the man who can no longer despise himself. Behold! I shall show you the *last man*. What is Love? What is Creation? What is Longing? What is a Star? thus asks the last man and blinks... “We have discovered happiness,” say the Last Men and blink.⁷¹

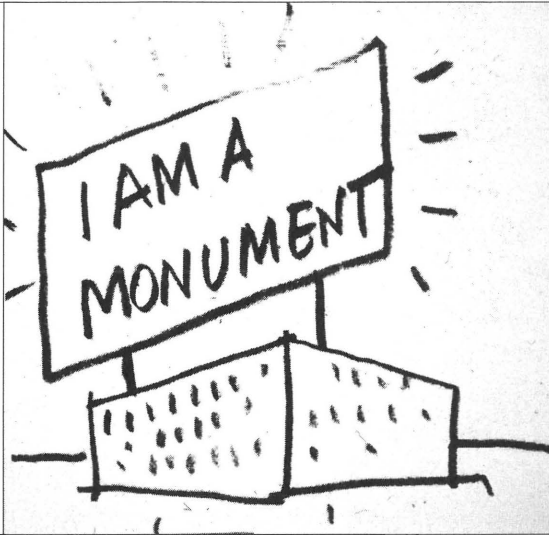


FIGURE 5 | *I am a Monument.*

© Robert Venturi et al. *Learning from Las Vegas*. MIT Press.

Is the emptiness of the Last Man emblemized by Venturi and Scott Brown's ugly, ordinary and dumb conventional building with a "blinking sign on top saying I AM A MONUMENT" (figure 5)?⁷²

Adorno's version of Nietzsche's "no more dancing stars" takes us back to Las Vegas: "The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night

with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death."⁷³

Or think of Eliot's "London Tube" passage from his *Four Quartets*: "Only a flicker over the strained time-ridden faces, distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning..."⁷⁴ I take it

that the images in *Learning from Las Vegas* of the automaton-like men and women pulling the levers on the slot machines on Freemont Street are an instantiation of something like Eliot's phrase (or Walter Benjamin's writings on gambling for that matter).

⁷² | Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 99.
Tom Wolfe characterized their entire enterprise as "Venturi's Big Wink."
See Wolfe, Tom. 1981. *From Bauhaus to our House*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 114.

⁷³ | Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," 96.

⁷⁴ | Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, 10.

What I am trying to lead up to is the following: if the eruption of blinking, flashing lights in Las Vegas is the counterpart of the last man's blinking eye, then can one really avoid the vacant bliss captured in the eyes of those men who have discovered happiness and "love the

world"? What would it take to fall in love with the world? Descartes' way to avoid all sensory deception was the following: "I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, withdraw all my senses."⁷⁵ This did not work for the psychotic Daniel Schreber, who had quite a different understanding of what he called, like Descartes, "seeing with the mind's eye": "I see such events even with my eyes closed and where sound is concerned would hear them

as in the case of the "voices," even if it were possible to seal my ears hermetically against all other sounds."⁷⁶ And remember that Descartes could still stumble over ordinary words by just thinking about them. We can close our eyes and try to make our dissatisfaction and doubt go away, but in the process we are avoiding the world we actually live in. In the words of Denise Scott Brown: "...if activities which appear to be 'dysfunctional' continue to exist, they must obviously be functional for someone, ergo closing one's eyes and ordering them to go away won't remove them."⁷⁷ But there is a further dilemma: in shutting our eyes we are closing ourselves off from the skepticism that marks our disenchantment with the world—and our enchantment with it.

Eyes shut. Eyes Open. Both extremes are untenable. Think of the game children play of staring into each other's eyes until one "gives in" and blinks. In this contest the blinking—the brief closing of the eye—is an acknowledgment of defeat. But, do we really know who is the winner and the loser in this "infantile" game? After all, isn't the ability to keep one's eyes open at all times monstrous? Think of the opening of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* in which Alex de Large stares out at us without blinking, a fact accentuated by the false

75 /
Descartes, "Third Meditation," *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, 76.

76 /
Sass, Louis. 1994. *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber, and the Schizophrenic Mind*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 43.

77 /
Scott Brown, Denise. 1969. "On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35.3, 185.



FIGURE 5 | *Alex de Large's Eye, Stanley Kubrick, A Clockwork Orange.*

eyelash over one eye. And what about the Ludovico treatment to which Alex is subjected? Doctors Brodsky and Branum clamp the lidlocks on Alex and force him to “viddie nasty bits of ol’ ultra-violence” on the screen while an assistant lubricates his “glassies” at various intervals. I see this as an allegory and pharmakon for Alex’s own monstrousness (and others as well). What can one make of the fact that the blinking sign “I AM A MONUMENT” shares a striking family resemblance with Alex’s exaggerated open eye (*figure 6*)? Inhuman? The wide-eyed wonder of a baby?

Blinking is not an *open* or *shut* case. It is the tone or rhythm of the “blinking” that counts. I take this rhythm to be encapsulated in the many alternations of night and day images that are ubiquitous in *Learning from Las Vegas*. One might say that this diurnality, the ordinary, is something to be achieved over and over again. It is a gamble that would risk both enchantment and disenchantment when at dawn the lights go on blinking in the very first

light of day—and die out only to begin again. It is the sequence of night and day, the extraordinary possibilities latent in the ordinary, which marks out the contours of our commitment to engage with these possibilities. Architecture is never simply “enlited” by the bright lights of advertising as Baudrillard has argued. In the light of day, the contours of a fuller life creep into view (that fuller view might be creepy as well, but that is ours to deal with).⁷⁸

Venturi and Scott Brown seem to be arguing that we need to be responsive to our environment which requires repeated acts of looking and acknowledging. At times we need to see this blinking “...as a wince, and connect the wince with something in the world that there is to be winced at...”⁷⁹ At times we might follow the lead of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said:

When I converse with a profound mind...or have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty I drink water...; no! but I am first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light.⁸⁰

Venturi and Scott Brown do not sit on the fence: they put their pulse on the rhythm of the skeptical dilemma that does not call for easy solutions, despair, unadulterated ecstasy or nihilistic pessimism. The rhythm is interesting enough. What I find *ethically* seductive in *Learning from Las Vegas* is the emphasis placed on how we acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge our responsiveness, and hence our responsibility, to the actual environment we live in now and to the eventual one that will emerge from it. To paraphrase Vincent Scully’s introduction to *Complexity and Contradiction* which could be an even more appropriate introduction to *Learning from Las Vegas*: “This is not an easy book, and is not for those who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes.”⁸¹

78 /
Sometimes it is difficult to make out these contours when the sun sets every hour in the Caesar’s Forum Shopping Mall.

79 /
Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 354,

80 /
Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1990.
“Experience.” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*. New York: Bantam Books, 239.

81 /
Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 11. Scully’s passage is as follows: “This is not an easy book. It requires professional commitment and close visual attention, and is not for those architects who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes.”

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