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Are You Game?

“Tis a reckless Debowch of a Game”: Chance and Resistance in Thomas Pynchon’s Novels

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"'Tis a reckless Debowch of a Game": Chance and Resistance in Thomas Pynchon's Novels

Bastien Meresse

- 1 Although the moralism of Puritan ministers sternly reminded their flocks to refrain from wasting their earnings on rash bets, it was in the American West that individuals were first allowed to gamble in plain sight. It does not exactly come as a surprise, according to Hal Rothman, if one bears in mind that the entire southwestern economy was itself a gamble: "Grounded in speculative ventures, easy credit, and cheap paper money, [...] participating in such an economic environment could be irresistible, as it offered the prospect of making a fast fortune out of nothing. But it required a gambler's sensibility." (Rothman 663) In his memoir *Positively Fifth Street: Murders, Cheetahs and Binion's World Series of Poker* (2003), James McManus explains that the frontiersman's urge to seize his chance is reflected in the nation's overall attitude towards gambling. The writer, also a professional poker player, acknowledges the gambling spirit which accompanied pioneers, well before the roulette wheels and faro tables came to represent the country's fascination for tales of loss and luck:

In America, the story begins rather late but it picks up steam — and big bucks — in a hurry. From Puritan whist tables, Mississippi riverboats, and Gold Rush saloons to Wall Street, Las Vegas, and internet gambling sites, the ways we've [...] explored our vast continent have echoed, and been echoed by, our risk-loving acumen. (Manus 11-2)

- 2 The nature of the American frontier, it seemed, attracted risk capital. It prompted many a risk-loving investor to plunge on the market, settler and land speculator alike. Government-sanctioned lotteries, after all, were used by many frontier towns and colonial authorities to raise funds for public works projects¹ as well as to encourage the sale of vacant land.² No wonder, then, that the frontier created a pattern of leisure which would gain far-reaching cultural significance. Correspondingly, one of the most distinctive features of the frontier in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997, hereafter *MD*) and *Against the Day* (2006, hereafter *AD*) is the proliferation of gaming clubs on its

very edge, where an unregulated market economy underwrites a culture of chance. Author0000-00-00T00:00:00AReversely, risky gameplay remains the mainspring of entrepreneurial expansion for those who wish to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. When Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, the two famed British surveyors, set up camp, gaming parlors sprout up overnight on their end of the line, and cheats, suckers, and coterie of prostitutes flock in. As Mason and Dixon carve out their line in the Philadelphia area, "the first structure to go up would be a Tavern — the second another, Tavern" (MD 650) while their nightly encampment lengthens "to a suburbs dedicated to high (as some would say, low) living" (477) with "gaming, corn whiskey, Women able to put up with a heap of uncompensated overtime". Over the North Mountain, even before the first men have chosen their tract of land, the first noticeable activity is when "the Cards come out, and Chap-books and Dice and Bottles" (587). During their last transit in Delaware, the ocean-crossing surveyors project their dreams for the future, hoping that the Visto is soon lined with "Pleasure-Grounds and Pensioner's Home, with ev'rything an Itinerant come to Rest might ask, Taverns, Music-Halls, Gaming Rooms and a Population ever changing of Practitioners of Comfort" (712).

- 3 Similarly, enumerating some of the genre conventions of the dime-novel westerns of the late 19th century, Pynchon's eulogy of the Old West in *Against the Day* carries it to the mining boomtowns of Telluride and Leadville in the mountains of Colorado where the nation gives itself over to a full-throttle economic expansion moved by speculative enterprises. Pynchon never forgets gambling-focused impulses fashioned the economy of the nation: crowded with a honky-tonk contingent of crooked gamblers, shiftier prospectors, and oil drillers all looking for a lucky strike, the parlor houses of these recreational cities are built on "hopes corroded to fragments — overnight whiskey, daughters of slaves, rigged faro games, the ladies who work on the line" (AD 95), invisible fragments just as adjuvant to the building of a capitalist order as the alabaster temples of commerce touted during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 mentioned in the early pages of the novel.
- 4 The first occurrence of the word "Visto" in *Mason & Dixon* is not concomitant with the demarcation line that will become informally known as the border between the free states and the slave states. It pertains to a gaming hall known as the Pearl of Sumatra where "a Visto of gaming tables may be made out" (MD 24) with seamen reveling in cockfights and drunken card games. This word dispersion of the Visto is of interest, for in all the occurrences I cited, it is quickly populated by invisible communities of players and con artists. In this very process of lexical fragmentation, the margin of the frontier thus intersects with another one, that of an underworld insulated from the world outside — the gaming hall. The location itself does not lend it itself to an easy definition. It is not the ubiquitous coffee-house frequented by itinerants, such as The Blue Jamaican, The Flower-de-Luce, The Restless Bee, The All-Nations-Coffee-House, whose success is dependent on the slave trade.³ It is not the New York tavern either, shorn of danger and subversion with its "rooms where Smoke is prohibited" (365) — consequently marking an onslaught of cultural cleanliness that resonates with Michael Bloomberg's decision to enforce an indoor smoking ban in 2002.⁴ Rather, I am referring to such gaming houses as those run by the mucilaginous Mr. and Mrs. Edgewise, whose "skills in Legerdemain" and "diverting repertoire of conjuring tricks with Playing-Cards, Dice, Coins, Herbs, Liquids in Flasks, Gentlemen's Watches, [...] Beetles and Bugs"

typify a conspicuous location. Such strains of carnivalesque possibilities provide Pynchon with a narrative space for revelry and reversal, as opposed to the hyper-productivity expounded by the Age of Reason.

- 5 *Mason & Dixon* offers a voluminously detailed revision of times past when America was still a zany territory inhabited by dwarf-like spirits, automaton ducks, and creatures of local lore. Well before the upheaval wrought by the transcontinental railroads, it was yet to be chartered by the Royal Society and its men of science in the Age of Reason that birthed a mathematical construct, an absolute line, onto a landscape that knew nothing of Euclid. The text sheds light on the way the dark heart of Enlightenment cartography achieves a victory of sorts as the mapmakers continue their westward progress through the "green fecund Continent" (57), caught up as they are in advancing the imperial process and superimposing a rectilinear narrative over indigenous others.⁵ All attempts to map hopelessly point to the pervasive growth of capitalism. While Enlightenment sensibilities and sinister conglomerates such as the British and Dutch East India Companies enforces division onto the shrinking age-old land, it will be my contention that gaming clubs — ranging from taverns in *Mason & Dixon* to casinos and gambling dens in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973, hereafter *GR*), *Against the Day* (2006), and *Inherent Vice* (2009, hereafter *IV*) — can be recognized as counter-sites where otherwise dispersed groups of people momentarily gather in order to gain freedom from the ruling few. Striking an echo with the general 18th-century abhorrence for excess,⁶ it is indeed tempting to see how these locations offer an alternative to the sovereignty of global trade. With the text alluding to Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand" (411) — a famous metaphor for a benevolent *laissez-faire* economy that mystically guides markets — I would like to argue that in Pynchon's "tale of licensed and unlicensed economies" (Thomas 42), conspicuous tricks to block the game played by the marketplace become a necessary mode of resistance in the face of a Author0000-00-00T00:00:00Aplenty-flushed adversity which threatens to hold sway over the American continent.

Gaming Clubs as Heterotopian Spaces

- 6 Providing a salient site for spaces of "wish and desire, of the hypothetical and the counterfactual, of speculation and possibility" (Mc Hale 44), *Mason & Dixon* shifts into a counternarrative vision of what early America could have been⁷ before the frontier blazed through the land, its primeval wilderness still unplotted by enlightened rationality. Such oddly sensitive openings, figured in the mood of the subjunctive, with its non-realized possibilities or, as Cherrycoke puts it, "Might-it-bes, and If-it-weres, — not to mention What-was-thats" (*MD* 618), carry a great weight in my understanding of how illicit enclaves such as gambling dens eventually force a model of fiction by embedding and replicating interiors, in a similar fashion to how inset narrated spaces pack into the novel even more complex narrative story-worlds.
- 7 The smoke-filled gaming clubs that throb from midnight till noon provide readers with such an example of untamed realms nested one level down, while the outside world collapses into certainty and reason. In the Pearl of Sumatra public house in Portsmouth, or in the forgotten recesses of Castle Lepton in America, the interior volume of space is turned upside down, or as Brian McHale gathers, it "impossibly exceeds its exterior bounding surfaces [...] and encloses a space of labyrinthine

complexity, as though containing an entire microworld" (McHale 57). The intersection of a real location with an incompatible space where disparate and conflicting interests thrive tellingly calls to mind Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, in which the French theorist sets to identify features of a range of socio-cultural spaces that behave in a different kind of way from most other spaces, acting as enclosed worlds within worlds, mirroring what is outside but at the same time converting it into something utterly different. While utopias are unreal places, heterotopias are oppositional locations. Foucault establishes that in contemporary society heterotopias enclose some form of deviance, that is, subjects or behaviors inconsistent with the prevailing social norm, "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (Foucault 25).

- 8 The scope of Foucault's understanding of heterotopian locations — museums, libraries, fairgrounds, vacation villages, cemeteries, ships, asylums, nursing homes, barracks, prisons — is far reaching and incorporates additional counter-sites as new technologies and modes of consumption emerge. I would argue that casinos and gaming parlors fall into the category of a "heterotopia of deviation". Hosting a multitude of possible, the composite quality of heterotopia enables Pynchon to stretch the familiar envelope of experience as dingy gambling dens, run-down casinos, or generally speaking underworld gaming parlors are turned inside-out in order to form placeless places, or rather counter-sites in which "all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 17).
- 9 Most heterotopias rely on a system of exclusive inclusion or inclusive exclusion, contingent upon a mechanism of clandestine invisibility and secretive closure vis-à-vis public space:⁸ with their system of "deceptive entries and illusive exits, [...] walls that appear as doors, and windows that lead to nowhere" (Dumm 40-1), such liberal zones are connected to, and yet set apart from, the everyday world. I would note that casinos and gaming halls that have a pressing need for concealment because they are either illicit play grounds or outlawed establishments have similarly limited points of entry⁹ which Pynchon seeks to exploit in order to create areas unobserved and unregulated by authorities. It is only after providing "some password and security hassle at the door" (GR 713) that Pig Bodine is allowed entry into a stable that conceals "a brightly lit and busy combination bar, opium den, cabaret, casino and house of ill repute, all its rooms swarming [...] at a noise level the house's silent walls seal off completely from the outside". This sustained sense of in-betweenness comes to the fore in the depiction of a sporting establishment situated on the Mexican border, itself a liminal space where fugitives and outlaws drift across national borders, with "walkways in from their street [...] covered with corrugated snow-shed roofing" (AD 225). The place is an impossibly large location that encloses "an icehouse and a billiard parlor, a wine room, a lunch and eating corner, gambling saloons and taquerias, [...] a sunken chamber almost like a natatorium at some hot-springs resort". As such, it is reminiscent of the Pearl of Sumatra in *Mason & Dixon*, from which stems a sense of transiency among gamblers and punters alike, shifting from one room to another as if the place was not bounded by walls:

They go out a backdoor, into the innyard. A leafless tree arches in the light of a single Lanthorn set above a taut gathering of card-players, their secret breathing visible for all to try to read. [...] Sailors, mouths ajar, lope by in the lanes. Sailors in Slouch-Hats, Sailors with Queues, puffing on Pipes, eating Potatoes, some who'll be going back to the Ship, and some who won't, from old sea-wretches with too many

Explosions in their Lives, to Child-Midshipmen who have yet to hear their first, passing in and out the Doors of Ale-Drapers, Naval Tailors, Sweet-shops, Gaming-Lairs... [...]

Beyond this, a Visto of gaming tables may be made out, and further back a rickety Labyrinth of Rooms for sleeping or debauchery, all receding like headlands into a mist. [...]

Beneath the swaying Gamester, the general pace of the Room keeps profitably hectic. From the labyrinth in back come assorted sounds of greater and lesser Ecstasy, along with percussions upon Flesh, laughter more or less feign'd, [...] calls for Bitter and Three-Threads rising ever hopeful, like ariettas in the shadow'd Wilderness of Rooms where the Lamps are fewer, and the movements deeper with at least one more Grade of Intent... (MD 20-5)

- 10 Paradoxically nested within limited volumes, these insulated projections which the Age of Reason seems unable to pinpoint are characterized by forms of modality and uncertainty that question their existence ("secret breathing visible for all to try to read", "may be made out", "greater and lesser Ecstasy", "more or less feign'd", "at least one more Grade"), but they also promise and yet occlude the possibility of depth, leaving out the narrator to gaze through opaque landscapes that prevent the eye from actually getting a full perspective ("in the light of a single Lanthorn", "puffing on pipes", "further back [...] receding like headlands into a mist", "where the Lamps are fewer"). While Pynchon completes the topology of these off-the-grid enclaves by weaving in the possibility of in-betweenness and transition ("passing in and out the Doors"), this plural unfolding of space underscores an aspect of the novel's carnivalesque aesthetic, to the extent that it produces an inverted mirror image of the American "wilderness" that used to lay untamed above.

- 11 By contrasting these heterotopian spaces to the mundane monotony of the Age of Reason, and thus suggesting simultaneously brighter and darker worlds, the text produces gaming environments that lead to glimpses of otherworldly glove-like geographies. A mourning Mason reminisces one of "these terrible unending four-door Farces" (185) that he used to enjoy with his wife Rebekah and his friend Bradley, whose deathbed in Greenwich he is on his way to visit. He is raptured out into a sensual world overrun by revenants and phantom visits from beyond:

The indoor environment quickly became impossible to live in. That strange Parlor-Game commencing, Rebekah and I moving out of the Observatory, down to Feather Row, trudging up and down that hill at all Hours, [...] presently we're together as a foursome, boating upon the River, playing at Cards upon Nights of Cloud or Storm, Pope Joan, Piquet, Rebekah's sweet Voice, Susannah's hands never touch'd by Sunlight, impossible not to gaze at, [...] and the Heavens wheel on meantime.

- 12 All measure of time is lost, clocks stop ticking. Without giving the reader further notice, the narrative shifts to the present tense as if the wayward world of games tore down the fabric of time-space: upon entering, that dizzying emporium of noise, movement and color, Pynchon's gamblers are propelled into a timeless world that is insulated from the flow of everyday life inside it.
- 13 Unlike the world above that can be thoroughly zoned, Pynchon's heterotopian gaming parlors are the ground for uncertainty and undecidability. Yet, this heightened sense of indeterminacy does not preclude the possibility to glimpse topological forms or arrangements, the ambiguity of which can only stymie any attempt to map them out. The casinos that Doc Sportello explores in *Inherent Vice* further evidence the fickle topology of such spaces. While Doc makes his way at the Nine of Diamonds through "a

complicated path through the casino, toward the deeper region slotplayers avoid in the belief that machines closer to the street pay off better" (IV 230), he also happens to drift through "the seedy vastness of the main gaming floor" (236) at the Kismet Lounge or a "vast indeterminate space" below the desert outside and he eventually gets lost in "the back regions of the underlit casino" (242). Although it never indulges in representing the magic landscape of nickel-in-the-slot machines, crap tables, spinning wheels and other paraphernalia of play, the text emphasizes the transitional nature of the casino, as Doc spots Mickey Wolfmann escorted out by Special Agents, "as if being ferried between worlds" (243). While Pynchon would rather insist on delineating the interstitial otherness of the casino, by placing emphasis on the accessibility and impenetrability of such a liminal space, it is also noteworthy that the unglamorous gaming hall mirrors the American continent above, by producing a "lopsided" (236) version of its own oceanic and terrestrial patches of unbridled wilderness. Such a doubling of space can be traced out as Doc's investigation into the Kismet — an Ottoman word for "fate" which unmistakably likens its occupancy with the Puritan sojourn in the wilderness — reveals an anamorphic landscape which mirrors the howling darkness above, "all dry desert and scuffed beaverboard" (241). It does not take long for Pynchon to displace the desert imagery and to imagine the oceanic expanses of land on which the casino is set afloat: soon, Doc tries to find his way "through a labyrinth that was slowly sinking into the ocean", a representational overlay of land and water portended by an earlier description of the cigarette-burnt carpeting whose "allover effect was of wind on the surface of a lake" (236).

- 14 What I would like to further discuss, however, is not so much the sea imagery that briefly emerges from this scene than the oblique seafaring narrative that presents the casino, in a text fraught with allusions to maritime law, as a ship that detaches itself from the earth in order to provide a sanctuary to its occupants from the unrest of the outside world. To elaborate Foucault's dictum, if the ship is "the heterotopia *par excellence*" (Foucault 27),¹⁰ it is because it expresses the desire for a space completely autonomous from every other space, apart from the world onshore. Locked in a struggle with the order that defines it, the gaming parlor might be envisioned as Pynchon's own alternative site that simultaneously represents order, contests it and inverts it — an epistemological apparatus that stretches and dissolves space in its representational possibilities. Vessels, in Pynchon's fiction, bear much resemblance to Herman Melville's "city afloat" or "garrisoned town" with their anti-Author0000-00-00T00:00:00Aeconomical experiments. The sky-city of the Chums of Chance paired up with the Wandering Sisterhood of the Sodality of Ætheronauts in *Against the Day* immediately comes to mind: the airship community they form blurs together the present and the future in the name of utopian desire, less a place of desire fulfilled than a place for posing the demands of desire.
- 15 Such elusive and volatile spaces as the casino both foster a sense of fraternity and cater to a community of workaday regulars such as "grill cooks, tire salesmen, house framers, eye doctors, stick-men and change girls and other black-and-whites off shift from ritzier rooms where they weren't allowed to play" (IV 236). Along with the gambling den that fulsomely conjures up "soldiers, sailors, tricks, winners, losers, conjurors, dealers, dopers, voyeurs, homosexuals, fetishists, spies and folks looking for company" (GR 713) in *Gravity's Rainbow* or the "dimly illicit refuge for secret lives" (AD 225) located on the Mexican border in *Against the Day*, it is in such counter-geographies that the disenfranchised mingle, provoking the ire of moralists bent on defending

social hierarchy. The presence of those very same individuals that either new modes of global capitalism or the Age of Reason seek to discard or to see "bleach'd away" (MD 35) poses a challenge to established laws and social control. From professional cheats practiced in the various techniques of card-shaping to honest players being relieved of their money, the clandestine goings-on in these halls make the operation of chance an economy bound to succumb to market forces.

"Many Christians believe gaming to be sin" (MD 422) – from idleness to leisure

- 16 The flourishing of gambling during the colonial period did not prevent prominent Congregational ministers from wryly pouring a stream of invective from their pulpits. In the wake of Increase Mather who would call gambling a "heinously sinful" activity, early leaders preached against lotteries as productive of nothing and damned gamblers for blatantly disregarding the temporary stewardship of the Lord's gifts. Although a national movement to stamp out gambling began in the 19th century, in particular on Mississippi paddle-wheel steamers and in cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, which had become the nation's informal gambling capitals, sharps and suckers who engaged in gambling activities flagrantly embodied resistance to the Protestant ethic of self-mastery, thus signifying, as Jackson Lears demonstrates, a "cross-class male resistance to the encroachments of evangelical rationality — on the bourgeois reverence for discipline labor" (Lears 113). Following into the 20th century, the morality pendulum swung back in such a way that commercial gambling shifted from, Gerda Reith writes, "a disruptive and morally dubious activity [... which] encapsulated an orientation to rational economic enterprise that opposed the ideology of hard work, abstinence and reward" to "a mainstream feature of the high street, enjoyed by large numbers of consumers and promoted by governments and commercial enterprises alike" (Reith 316).
- 17 In the new capitalist economy, the shadow of the Puritan abhorrence of squandering wealth has finally succumbed to the widespread commodification of games of chance, sold by business and purchased by the consumer. Dovetailing snugly with Reith's argument that "gambling can be seen as an arena in which a non-capitalist disregard for money prevails" (146), Pynchonian novels set in the 19th and 20th centuries consider the notion that the duplicitous waves of capitalist enterprise have overseen the gradual re-organization of hitherto unproductive gaming sites into a disciplined production system that ultimately provides controllable yields: idleness, it seems, is never safe from being converted into a form of work in its own right by the leisure industry.¹¹
- 18 "He mark'd the cards. The Dice were of cunningly lacquer'd Iron, the playing-surface magnetickally fiddl'd, — Damme, he owes us twenty pounds, — more! What are we suppos'd to do, live upon Roots? 'twas the Royal Society's, belay that, the King's own money!" (MD 423): with wigs almost askew and hats pulled over faces in despair, Mason's squandering of royal funds at a game of dice closely resembles the raucous assemblage of men gathered around a gaming table in William Hogarth's *The Gaming House* from *A Rake's Progress* (1733) (Figure 1). The appeal of this scene, I believe, is its emphasis on the allure of cheating. Between chance and control, the romance of cheating permeates the lives of Pynchonian characters, whereby gamblers experience their wager as an opportunity to challenge the rigid ordering of the world. For "fraud is

the element in which we all fly" (AD 755), asserts Madame Eskimoff, a medium trained in the reading of Tarot cards in *Against the Day*. In a novel bookended by scenes of flight, one of which consists in flying "toward grace" (1220) as the novel's balloonists opt for an anarchical airborne community aboard their ship, the medium's assertion neatly ties up deception with redemption. The only way to escape closure and preterition might be through swift card-shuffling and thimble-rigging; that said, my point will be that the card table or the dice in hand themselves, because of their lack of purpose in Pynchon's works, are enough to harbor in a temporal oblivion or a destruction of time otherwise routinized by industrial labor, stock exchanges, and factory floors.

Figure 1: William Hogarth, 'Ruin'd at a gaming table', *A Rake's Progress*, plate 6, 1735

© The Trustees of the British Museum. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1856-0712-37

- 19 Therefore, it is worth glancing at characters who transgressively engage with gambling as a means to dissent from the compulsion to productive action and time-tracking, or, in the words of Inger H. Dalsgaard, "the gospel of industriousness" that permeates the ideology Pynchon's fiction seeks to warn us against. Occurrences of gameplay in his fiction showcase an inclination for unproductive production which may achieve to restore vitality to revolutionary politics, or at least actions that may question the status quo. Masters of idleness underpin the dissenting need for laboring classes to indulge in unproductive gameplay in order to elude the totalizing system engineered by the capitalist few, from "gamblers and fugitives from the wide, well-lit streets and whatever these might have required as appropriate behavior" (AD 870) to "dervishes, gamblers, and hasheesh smokers getting into the usual trouble" (927), or warnings addressed to the Chums of Chance to "beware even the Tarot cards the Gypsies set out for money or idle divertissement" (926). Instead of joining the cohorts of slaves that plutocrats send underground in the mine fields of Colorado or Alp Mountains, a leisure-

seeking Reef Traverse drags his heels in the gambling resorts of the French Riviera. Oddly enough, growing into the prototypical Pynchonian figure of the slacker, the sluggish dawdler appears capable of protest through torpidity, and casually evades the capitalist regulation of time, "picking up modest sums at the tables [... and] pursuing the life of the flaneur forever" (952). Reef's escape from work harks back to a slower world of indeterminacy, showcasing an unwitting protest against the local clock of hours and the universal clock of progress which supervise the labor process of the rising capitalist production system in the late 19th century: the next step in Reef's insurgent trajectory, the text immediately highlights, is "to go out and blow something up" (Author0000-00-00T00:00:00AREF), joining forces with anarchist bombers hoping to attack the local bourgeoisie.

- 20 Thus, Pynchon intently links deviant gaming sites with the resistance to the discipline of capitalist productivity in their refusal to equate labor, time, and money. Gambling houses, casinos, and fairgrounds are not only sites of risk-taking play surrounded by related activities, such as prostitution, but also locations where disruptive social forces such as organized crime have historically been at play, intersecting with Walter Benjamin's discourse on the materialist form of gambling within industrial capitalism. If idle aimlessness can be recognized as the most effective form of resistance in the age of manufacture, then card-playing represents a desperate attempt at subverting the market. Although Benjamin's foray into the subversive potential of idleness is brief, his scattered speculations in the *Müßiggang* file do provide crucial insight into understanding idleness in materialist terms and strike an echo with Pynchon's views on the nefarious history of sloth in the American mind.¹² In his unfinished collection of archives *Arcades Project*, Benjamin examined the pointless toil of the worker. Associating the labor of Sisyphus with the burden of work, which "like rocks, always keeps falling back on the worn-out laborer" (Benjamin 1982: 106 [D2a,4]), he took an interest in the way the gambler's repeating gestures with cards and dice mirror the repeating gestures of a man tending a machine. In its prosaic and unchanging operations, the relation of the factory laborer to the production line is not different from the relation of the gambler to the turn of cards:

[Gambling] certainly does not lack the futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something which is inherent in the activity of a wage slave in a factory. Gambling even contains the workman's gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. [...] The drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is devoid of substance. (Benjamin 1969: 177)

- 21 In *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996), Graeme Gilloch rephrases as such the unsuspected interplay between capitalism and sloth in Benjamin's work:

Gambling is the economic basis of idling, the disdainful refusal to submit oneself to the rigors of labor and the debasement of the market. [...] Gambling purports to contain elements that are profoundly antagonistic to the central tenets of modern industrial capitalism (Gilloch 158)

- 22 In this regard, moments of idle card-playing abound in Pynchon's novels, sometimes coded in the writer's most deadpan narratives, striving to escape any connection to work whatsoever. After setting up camp, the axmen that clear up the path of the Mason-Dixon line idle long hours away in "the fragrant noontide so quiet you may hear the shuffling of Playing-Cards" (MD 452); the surveyors themselves fall for "Drink, Smoak and Jollification" (327) as they step into *The Indian Queen*, somewhere in

Maryland, finding "merry pretext to gather, gossip, swap quids and quos, play whist" while they consult and examine their watches "for Productivity each of their waking Moments, as closely as some do their Consciences, unable to leave quite behind them the Species of Time peculiar to that City".

- 23 Graeme Gilloch acknowledges the predilection of the gambler to negate the productivity of the assembly line. However, he also underlines that casinos belong to a series of architectural structures which are coeval with industrial capitalism. Weaving into his demonstration Benjamin's idea that the gestures of the gambler at the gaming table replicate in his leisure his activity of gambling on the stock market during the day, Gilloch discusses how gambling is a sort of ritual that has taken on a new guise in the exchange economy of capitalism, whereby the web of capitalist relations has turned us all into gamblers:

The gambler as financial speculator does not resist capitalist prescriptions, but rather fundamentally embodies them. [...] Capitalism formalizes the activity of the gambler and his desire to make money simply from money through the institution of the stock-market. (Gilloch 159)

- 24 Even the most trained of Pynchon's hustlers, I would now like to argue, have integrated patterns of optimized capitalist production.

Towards the Commodification of Gambling?

- 25 Pynchon anticipates in his novels the attention of late capitalism to new areas for capitalization, overseeing both the commodification of idleness and the standardized formulation of what is now recognized as modern casino games.¹³ In this light, stripped of their political potential, gambling, and more generally chance, typify a mode of consumption that can be unlimitedly bought and sold as just another type of commodity stored in the gradually sanitized dreamworld of gambling resorts and themed casinos. Pynchon depicts the recreational city of Telluride as a townscape, characterized by frontier ruggedness and entrepreneurial individualism on the outside, while concealing its growing dependence on the commodification of leisure activities, a degraded version of the capitalist ecstasies and industrial order epitomized by the glimmering temples of White City earlier in the novel during the Columbian Exhibition: "Telluride was in the nature of an outing to a depraved amusement resort, whose electric lighting at night in its extreme and unmerciful whiteness produced a dream-silvered rogues' district of nonstop poker games, erotic practices in back-lot shanties, Chinese opium dens most of the Chinese in town had the sense to stay away from" (AD 100) As Doc Sportello roams around the Kismet in *Inherent Vice*, it is brought to his attention that rash bets are expected from him in order to prolong his stay: "And without meanin to pry or nothin, I notice you're not playing, just sort of wandering around, meanin you're either some deep guy, mysterious master of intrigue, or one more jaded sharp looking for a bargain." (IV 236) Though the Kismet Casino seems to provide a safe space from the excesses of capitalist enterprise in Las Vegas, it is made clear to Doc that he can start immersing himself in the world of the casino only if he complies with the rules that police the system of entry and exit I mentioned earlier. There lies the contractual obligation of the casino, for Doc can only stay if he agrees to try his luck and part with his cash. "It is in this action," Gerda Reith writes, "that order and regularity emerge out of the sensory maelstrom of the casino floor" (Reith 119):

rituals that used to escape the commodification of games eventually succumb to the encroachment of profits maximization, allowing Pynchon to depict the organization of the casino floor as an industrial playground or financial system in its own right. Mindlessly making themselves available for diverse regimes of consumption, cruise ship tourists are for instance indifferently scheduled to participate in "shopping tours at Mexican maquiladora outlets [and] gambling-addiction indulgence at the casinos of State, California" (*Bleeding Edge* 15).

- 26 These shifts set the tone for additional diversions in Pynchon's narratives of capital accumulation — diversions not only imagined capitalist economies that seek to enact changes in the nature of games of chance, but also by individuals. In spite of Pynchon's focus on unsuspected forms of insurgency, it is not an isolated occurrence in his novels that gamblers stray away from the initial devising of games of chance as a subversive attempt to escape from work discipline, and thus turn gambling into an operative mode of being that brings to mind the concept of "casino capitalism" raised by Susan Strange. The critic argues that because of the unstable globalized financial systems of the 1970s and 1980s, we are, to some extent, legitimate gamblers in a culture ambivalent about its deep dependency on chance.¹⁴ From hapless dotcom entrepreneurs to more fortunate slave owners or powerful monarchs bidding human lives, the world of Pynchon's novels is run by interest rates, mathematical odds that fluctuate widely and wildly and thus let sheer luck determine the lives of its characters. In *Against the Day*, the heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary asks to rent out a slaughter-house district to shoot Hungarian workers, conflating the *games* played for recreative purposes with the *game* or quarry pursued by the hunter.
- 27 In *Mason & Dixon*, the masters of ironworks, who operate an industry that relies on the slave trade to produce their weapons, revel in the gaming halls of Castle Lepton, investing the profits generated from their gruesome venture into the "Paradise of Chance" hidden in the lower levels of the castle, where the surveyors are faced with "an E-O Wheel big as a Roundabout, Lottery Balls in Cages ever a-spin, Billiards and Baccarat, Bezique and Games whose Knaves and Queens live [...and] whose Table is the wide World" (MD 421). The mapmakers are quickly bamboozled by Lord Lepton, in a raucous scene I evoked earlier, as Reverend Cherrycoke discusses the rights and wrongs of gambling and applies the same doctrine to expanding ventures and entrepreneurs walking away with many times their original investment after they have brought suckers to their rigged table. Lamenting their losses at the games of chance played in Lord Lepton's gambling den, both men agree to resort to cheating where necessary to beat the entrepreneurial manipulations of America's finest swindlers. From a broader perspective, it could be argued that, for Pynchon, the incorporation of gambling techniques spells out an urge to block the legerdemain of capitalism, famously embodied by the "Invisible Hand" of Adam Smith.
- 28 Present since the country's inception, gambling thus becomes in Pynchon's novels a structuring principle that insinuates itself into the fabric of existence, whereby chances to reverse the odds in favor of capitalism can only be obtained through the same risk assessment strategy as that applied by capitalism. While Reef Traverse starts off his adult life as "another itinerant gambler, [...] the sort who's content with a modest jackpot he never expected to win" (AD 377), he eventually employs mining skills learned in the Rockies as a contract worker in the Alps, where he encounters an elite culture of gambling and "what with card games in the changing rooms and the

platoons of ladies who gathered each shift's end at the tunnel entrances, [...] there was no shortage of work" (733). Interestingly enough, that same line of work does not prove as fruitful for his sister Lake, a world-weary suburban housewife who places "her wagers at the Universal Dream Casino, as to which of them should bring her through, and which lead her irreversibly astray" (1185). Bound to a commodity economy where the culture industry of Hollywood intersects with organized crime, Reef's sister diverts gambling as a last resort to balance her failed attempt at gaining control over life after she got married with her father's murderer, Deuce, whose very name is used as a euphemism for the devil in expressions of annoyance but also recalls, in card-gaming parlance, the playing card with the highest value in German card games. For the young woman, whose marriage "was coming more and more to resemble a kitchen-table poker game [in which] she valued her forgiveness at not much more than some medium-size chip" (532), abandoning herself to the binarity of chance — simple as a toss of coin, either you win, either you lose — may actually be preferable to the control of her own fate.

- 29 Overwhelmed by the fetishized dreamworld of commodities that she has been seeking since her first encounter with White City, Dally Rideout's incoherent experience in the department store is similarly expressed through a gambling metaphor which suggests that the world is repeatedly encountered for the first time, whereby she attempts to rearrange the hand that has been dealt to her to her own advantage: "None of it hung together, the details were like cards tossed on the table of the day that upon inspection could not be arranged into a playable hand." (390) Such metaphorical slips, which used to structure the existence of unattached men on the fringes of settlement, evidence the insinuation of the culture of chance into language. Equating the activities of bookmakers with those of investment brokers who wager with human lives as they would pick bets, gambling tactics resistantly emerge as a necessity to stall losses and to hedge against the games of chance operated by speculative markets and commodity economies: as long as the "Invisible Hand" of the market works its legerdemain, it will be necessary for Pynchonian swindlers to go for a bluff and hope for a trump to materialize, or for a luckier hand somehow to be dealt instead.
- 30 Pynchon's novels ultimately negotiate the mutation of the affinity between frontier society and gambling: with the well-policed growth of legal gambling in the 20th and 21st centuries, the natural-born gamblers and crooked card-sharps who were a celebrated feature of American life have become an extinct species of the culture of chance that powered the westward expansion of the country. Nonetheless, with Pynchon casting his gamblers onto globalized financial markets in his fiction, a closer look at Walter Benjamin's work demonstrates how far the gambler has come from the magic formula by which sameness and repetition would suddenly be disrupted. Listing the gambler, along with artist and lover, as part of a type of adventurers who seek an experience that stands outside the ordinary chain of events in a life, Benjamin's discussion on the figure of the gambler goes beyond the gap between the gambler's desire to win and the conditions that permanently undermined its satisfactory attainment: "The wager is a means of conferring shock value on events, of loosing them from the contexts of experience" (Benjamin 1982: 513 [013,5]) By constantly framing the passage of time within the wish to heroically give a fatal blow to chance, the experience of the gambler desperately seeks to confront fate, or as Graeme Gilloch

phrases it, "to discover the unknowable, to predict the unforeseeable, to bring about the uncontrollable" (Gilloch 160).

- 31 It is that distinct feeling of elation or thrill which Benjamin's gambler feels as he hopes to cheat on fate. Recognizing the interplay between erotic longing and wagering impulses, Benjamin alternately compares the throw of a single silver ball to "an autoerotic satisfaction, wherein betting is foreplay, winning is orgasm, and losing is ejaculation" (Benjamin 1982: 511 [O11a,1]) and "a joyous embrace returned to the full, [...] words of love from a woman altogether satisfied by her man" (882 <g°,1>). The gamblers who wager their way through the late-capitalist world, I would like to suggest further, no longer chase after the thrill that comes with heightened risk or a distinctly erotic excitation.¹⁵ In Pynchon's fiction, risk is integrated into the productive apparatus and consequently stripped of its sensual halo. As shown in *Vineland* (1990), where televised games of chance insinuate into the characters' consciousness, all that is left to do is to watch other gamblers spin the Wheel of Fortune as letter-turner extraordinaire Vanna White cheers on the Wheel and flips over letters one by one on the blank word puzzle, her suggestive touch as close as it gets to the sublime frisson of play.

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NOTES

1. The practice of raising revenue for public and private purposes by means of lottery began with the Virginia Company in 1616 — so vital were these lotteries to the continued existence of the early colony that Captain John Smith referred to them in 1621 as "the reall and substantiall food" by which Virginia had grown and flourished (Milikan 10).
2. Between 1804 and 1833, Georgia held public lotteries on a periodic basis to distribute the huge expanses of land between the Oconee and Chattahoochee River. Land lotteries are estimated to account for roughly three-fifths of western Georgia. In *Lotteries in Colonial America*, Neal Milikan suggests that "colonial lotteries became a part of this consumer revolution as colonists had the opportunity to become an "adventurer" and risk a small sum of money in the hopes of winning a valuable prize." (Milikan 3)
3. As shown by Sean Carswell in *Occupy Pynchon* (2013), Mason and Dixon overindulge in commodities such as caffeine and "show their complicity with systems of global trade, [...] by literally being addicted to the products of a global consumer culture" (Carswell 55), although claims can be made that the preference for bean-roasted beverages both helped support and undermine the colonial enterprise. See Colin A. Clarke's paper, "Food and Sacrament in *Mason & Dixon*", in which Clarke encapsulates the dual nature of coffee as both a luxury commodity and a drink which spurred the colonists' growing dissatisfaction with tea taxes: "The overwhelming abundance of coffeehouses, in every neighborhood and on multiple corners throughout the city, becomes an obvious reference to twentieth-century trends in caffeine consumption and commentary on the expansion of Starbucks and other chains during the 1990s, as well as a reminder that coffee in the twentieth century is produced by workers who often receive almost as little profit from it as did the slaves and peasant workers of the eighteenth century." (Clarke 88)
4. Pynchon engages with similar concerns about hygienist doctrines in *Bleeding Edge* (2013), as the real estate industry keeps the city in an orderly state by cleansing districts and sweeping workers' history under the rug.

5. Correspondingly, David Seed notes that *Mason & Dixon* "demonstrates a post-colonial alertness to mapping as a culturally inflected exercise, an exercise in territorial appropriation where the first casualties to be displaced are the native Americans" (Seed 99).
6. In the *Age of Chance* (1999), Gerda Reith explains that the Enlightenment's crackdown on gambling essentially concerned the poor who were thought more fit to get bankrupted at the gaming table than the rich who could still gather at private house parties, assembly rooms, gentlemen's clubs and spa resorts: "In the eighteenth century, a flurry of legislation removed gambling even further from the reach of the poor by imposing taxes on gaming instruments: sixpence on a pack of cards and five shillings on a pair of dice. [...] This was followed by another statute which outlawed specific games and, while penalizing the owners of public gaming houses, excused the play of the rich. [...] As well as disrupting the health of the individual player, gambling was feared to disrupt the well-being of the social order." (Reith 68)
7. See Brian McHale's insight in "Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space", in which he underscores the narrative model of Pynchon's novel in the wake of Gerald Prince's narratological conception of the disnarrated in an eponymous article published in *Style*. In his short study, Prince provides a theoretical framework to understand events that do not happen but are referred to in narratives: "I am thus referring to alethic expressions of impossibility or unrealized possibility, deontic expressions of observed prohibition, epistemic expressions of ignorance, ontologic expressions of nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations, errors and lies, and so forth." (Prince 3)
8. In his lecture, Foucault spells out a fifth principle that pertains to the initiation of people into the third space, meaning they are not simply available for anyone to enter or exit as they please.
9. Gerda Reith's depiction of illegal gaming clubs in 18th-century Britain closely resembles the restricted access system of Foucault's examples: "These clandestine houses often had four or five doors separating them from the outside world. Grilles, secret passages and watchdogs made the gaming room deep in the interior inaccessible to all but the initiated." (Reith 69)
10. Foucault explains that the boat came to assume such importance in the cultural landscape of the modern age because its symbolic disquiet represents the experience which must be placed outside the realm of reason: "The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [...] but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination." (Foucault 22)
11. In Benjamin's view, leisure is profoundly different from idleness: while idleness, or *mussigang*, escapes co-optation into the homogenizing process of modern life, leisure, or *musse*, is the by-product of new industrial modes of production, which, at the dawn of the 20th century, coalesce with surplus wages, the culture industry, the commodification of art, and mass audiences.
12. See Pynchon's investigation of sloth in his article "Nearer, My Couch To Thee", for the *New York Times Book Review*, in which he argues that sloth shifted from a religious transgression to a secular one against clock time.
13. Gerda Reith envisions this commodification of games as the institutionalized result of a process that started in the 17th century: "The global expansion of the industry, accelerated by the influence of technology and the impact of sophisticated communication systems, its increasing popularity as a mass leisure activity and its incorporation into state fiscal policy looks set to change centuries of condemnation, bringing gambling into the fold of 'legitimate' business enterprise." (Reith 86)

14. "The Western financial system is rapidly coming to resemble nothing as much as a vast casino. Every day games are played in this casino that involve sums of money so large that they cannot be imagined. At night the games go on at the other side of the world. In the towering office blocks that dominate all the great cities of the world, rooms are full of chain-smoking young men all playing these games. Their eyes are fixed on computer screens flickering with changing prices. They play by intercontinental telephone or by tapping electronic machines. They are just like the gamblers in casinos watching the clicking spin of a silver ball on a roulette wheel and putting their chips on red or black, odd numbers or even ones." (Strange 1)

15. Robyn Marasco writes that for Benjamin, "the seasoned gambler kisses his hand, merging involuntary reflex with the final concession to fate. [...] Surrender is expressed erotically, as a kiss" (Marasco 10).

ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to consider games — and more particularly card games and gambling — as an American form of resistance in Thomas Pynchon's novels. As opposed to *agôn*, a category of games that Roger Caillois delineates in *Man, Play and Games* (1958) as "a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions," *alea* encompasses games of chance which are "a strict negation of controlled effort, [...] efficacious resort to skill, power, and calculation, and self-control; respect for the rules; the desire to test oneself under conditions of equality." It will be my contention that *alea*, in Pynchon's novels, offers the possibility of an alternative world and becomes a necessary mode of resistance in the face of a plenty-flushed adversity which threatens to hold sway over the American continent. For Pynchon's players, more often than not cheaters and fraudsters, use such games of chance to fulfil their longing for emancipation and flight, at a time in history when the American continent is about to be mapped by the abstractions of colonial companies and Enlightenment science. Gaming clubs — ranging from taverns in *Mason & Dixon* to casinos and gambling dens in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Against the Day* (2006), and *Inherent Vice* (2009) — can be recognized as heterotopian sites where otherwise dispersed groups of people momentarily gather in order to gain freedom from the ruling few. Although the moralism of Puritan ministers sternly reminded their flocks to refrain from wasting their earnings on rash bets, gambling can thus be envisioned as a way to escape from the hyper-productivity expounded by modernity, intersecting with Walter Benjamin's discourse on the materialist form of gambling within industrial capitalism. Following Gerda Reith's and Susan Strange's arguments in *The Age of Chance* (1999) and *Casino Capitalism* (1986), I will further argue that, in the new capitalist economy, Pynchon anticipates in his novels the attention of late capitalism to new areas for capitalization, overseeing both the commodification of idleness and the insinuation into the fabric of existence of the same risk assessment strategy as that applied by capitalism.

Cet article propose d'envisager le jeu — et plus particulièrement les jeux de cartes et d'argent — comme une forme de résistance proprement américaine dans les romans de Thomas Pynchon. À l'inverse de l'*agôn*, groupe de jeux que Roger Caillois définit dans *Les jeux et les hommes* (1967) comme « un combat où l'égalité des chances est artificiellement créée pour que les antagonistes s'affrontent dans des conditions idéales, » l'*aléa* du jeu de hasard, parce qu'il « constitue la négation stricte d'un effort contrôlé, [...] le recours à l'adresse, à la puissance, au calcul ; le

respect de la règle ; le désir de se mesurer à armes égales, » est imaginé par le romancier comme un monde alternatif qui offre un espace de liberté. Le joueur, souvent tricheur et fraudeur chez Pynchon, peut déverser son désir de dépassement et d’échappée des normes sociales qui ordonnent l’Amérique, au moment où le continent s’apprête à basculer dans les cartes des Lumières et des grandes compagnies coloniales. Cet article propose examiner d’abord la façon dont les terrains de jeu — casinos, auberges, tripots — s’organisent autour du concept d’hétérotopie. Avec des règles qui leur sont propres, en contrepoint des cartographies officielles, ces espaces marginaux recentrent sur la carte du monde, le temps d’une partie, le joueur dont le comportement est déviant par rapport à la norme exigée. Le jeu d’argent, oiseux et nécessairement dissident aux yeux de la morale puritaine, devient alors une façon d’échapper à la rationalisation économique du monde : à travers l’étude de la modernité industrielle esquissée par Walter Benjamin, nous montrons comment le joueur *dé-joue* les désirs de productivité du capital. A la lumière des thèses de Gerda Reith dans *The Age of Chance* (1999) et Susan Strange dans *Casino Capitalism* (1986), cet article s’intéresse enfin à la marchandisation du hasard par le capital : tandis que l’intersection entre la technologie et le jeu crée de nouveaux types d’environnement contrôlés par l’industrie du divertissement, le personnage pynchonien est aux prises avec un marché mondial, où la finance, erratique et imprévisible, s’est transformée en vaste jeu de hasard.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Pynchon Thomas, littérature américaine, jeu, capitalisme

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