



## Angles

New Perspectives on the Anglophone World

11 | 2020

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Julie Assouly

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/angles/2697>

DOI: 10.4000/angles.2697

ISSN: 2274-2042

### Publisher

Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

### Electronic reference

Julie Assouly, “Gambling and women don’t mix”: Female Gamblers and the American Dream in Film”, *Angles* [Online], 11 | 2020, Online since 01 November 2020, connection on 07 June 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/angles/2697> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.2697>

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# “Gambling and women don’t mix”: Female Gamblers and the American Dream in Film

Julie Assouly

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- 1 Louis Malle described one of his American films, *Atlantic City* (1980), as a metaphor of the US.<sup>1</sup> His film is not a gambling film *per se*, but it relates the improbable encounter of a wannabe female croupier, Sally (Susan Sarandon) embodying the future, and a declining gangster, Lou (Burt Lancaster) embodying the past, witnessing together the reshaping of the city after it became the second American city to legalize casinos in 1976. In this film, institutionalized gambling represents a hope for renewal in a transitory period (the 1970s-80s) after the myth of the American Dream had been intensely questioned by the Counterculture that also collapsed in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 The metaphor of gambling was soon exploited in films for its instant life-changing potential, the possibility to transform one’s life with a stroke of luck (e.g. lottery films) or to lose it to addiction and debt (e.g. gambling dramas). But few studies consider female characters in American gambling films,<sup>3</sup> probably because a majority of them take place in traditionally masculine environments (e.g. casinos, underground game-houses), and focus on strategic games such as poker that traditionally exclude women. As Ballin (George McCready) tells Johnny (Glenn Ford) before hiring him in *Gilda* (Vidor 1946), “Gambling and women don’t mix,” they are a source of distraction for the gambler and the businessman alike – in the film, they operate a thriving illegal casino in Argentina until *Gilda* (Rita Hayworth) bewitches them.
- 3 In his overview of compulsive gambling in film, Jeffrey Dement (1999) considers two categories of gambling films, the “responsible” ones and the “irresponsible ones,” laying stress on the moral message conveyed by these films; dwelling on his preliminary study and exhaustive list of films, Turner, Fritz and Masood (2007) emphasize the “distortions” in portrayals of gamblers and gambling in American films, regardless of their genres; Egerer and Rantala (2015) examine self-control as a determining element that makes gambling “cool” in films; and Aaron Duncan (2015)

“explores the rise and increased acceptance of gambling in America, particularly the growth of the game of poker, as a means for examining changes to the American dream and the risk society.” (1) His thorough analysis is not limited to films and focuses mainly on poker.

- 4 The focus of this paper is American gambling films with a female lead or central character, specifically *Gambling Lady* (Mayo 1934), *The Lady Gambles* (Gordon 1949), *Casino* (Scorsese 1995), *Even Money* (Rydell 2007) and *Molly’s Game* (Sorkin 2017). Other female-led films will be referred to: *Play Girl* (Enright 1932), *Gilda* (Vidor 1946), *Hazard* (Marshall 1948) and *House of Games* (Mamet 1987). This article aims to establish how lead female characters in American gambling films participate in a reevaluation of the myth of the American Dream. Such reevaluation is usually the focus of films dealing with all sorts of gambling practices, as long as winning is a way to ultimately achieve social, financial, sentimental or moral improvement. In Duncan’s study, gambling in films exposes different facets of the American Dream, with a predilection for economic gain (e.g. the myth of the self-made man). Yet, gambling being a very masculine activity, as demonstrated by many researchers including Erving Goffman (1967), one may wonder how Hollywood has dealt with women’s approach to gambling as male territory. Although the proportion of female gamblers today almost equates that of male ones (Bowden-Jones and Prever 2017: 53), most American films still represent gambling as a male activity, relegating women to stereotypical roles that I will put into three categories: good luck charms/helpers (e.g. *The Cooler*, Kramer 2003; 21, Lukedic 2008), trouble-makers (e.g. *Casino*, *Gilda*) or purveyors of moral standards (*Rounders*, Dahl 1998); *The Cincinnati Kid*, Jewison 1966). Conversely, women in lead roles are more likely to embody addicts (*The Lady Gambles*; *Even Money*), rare professional gamblers (*Gambling Lady*) or entrepreneurs/professionals (*Atlantic City*; *Molly’s Game*) thus contesting masculine hegemony and offering a possibility to promote gender equality through their depiction of gambling on screen.
- 5 Nevertheless, would it be rational to contend that the “female gaze” could replace the “male gaze” (in Laura Mulvey’s terms) in these typically masculine films? Are there gambling films immune to gender *clichés* and stereotypes based on recycled die-hard social constructs? This article will first consider gambling through the lens of the American Dream as male territory, historically and sociologically, to draw a parallel with American films; I will then focus on the Great Depression era as a prolific period promoting strong female characters including gamblers. I will then consider the female compulsive gambler as portrayed in *The Lady Gambles* and *Even Money* as another character type and will then study the attraction/repulsion dichotomy underlying gambling films, with the particular scope of female characters trapped in a golden cage. Finally, I will explore the possibility of gambling as a capitalist venture open to women, as depicted recently in *Molly’s Game*, based on the true story of poker game organizer Molly Bloom.

## Gambling and the American Dream Through History and Films: A male-oriented business

- 6 Connecting films, gambling and the myth of the American Dream may seem like stating the obvious. Hollywood is a great manufacturer of myths and gambling a tantalizing way to make easy money; unsurprisingly, gamblers are a fixture of many film genres,

celebrating or condemning gambling seen either as a demonstration of wit and self-control or as a weakness. Gambling was already present in America during the colonial era and continued to develop throughout the foundation of the United States; card games and dice were brought to America by European settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Duncan 2015: 7), but gambling was already popular among some native tribes (Thompson 2015: xxv). Throughout history, moral and political questions have influenced the way public opinion tolerated or despised gamblers. The idea of institutionalized or state-controlled gambling emerged when the rebels in the American Colonies were looking for a way to fund the costly revolution in 1776 and created a lottery (Millikan 2011), establishing the legitimacy of this game when, a century earlier, the first Puritan communities considered gambling as a sin and the possession of cards and dice was forbidden in homes (Rose 1992: 85). Far from having gained respectability, gambling was soon associated with other evils, namely prostitution, alcoholism and corruption and the new republic soon adopted anti-gambling laws as early as 1835 – in some states, anti-gambling societies formed lynch mobs to rid themselves of gamblers (e.g Vicksburg in 1835, see Berg 2011: 30-1). By 1910, legal gambling had disappeared save for horse bets in Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona (Duncan 2015: 11). In his overview of the history of gambling in the United States, Nelson Rose established three waves of legal gambling: one during the colonial era, as mentioned before; a second during the Civil War and westward expansion;<sup>4</sup> and a third during the Great Depression when Nevada re-legalized casino gambling in 1931 which, incidentally, is the period that saw the development of gambling films (Dement 173-177). Legalized gambling has kept progressing since then, with more casinos opening and the democratization of state lotteries and betting parlors, and finally the invention of the Internet and the blooming of betting or gaming platforms (Barker & Britz 2000).

- 7 According to studies about gambling and gambling addiction, the historical and social dimensions of gambling conditioned its development in the United States: the lowering of religious standards and the strengthening of capitalist liberalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century played a major part in its democratization (McMillan 1996: 6), along with periods of financial strain that could be eased by state lotteries and legal bets (Rose 1992: 96). Today, in the United States, as in other capitalist countries, the question is less a moral than a legal one: whether gambling is a legitimate or a questionable way to achieve upward mobility does not really matter as long as it is done within a legal framework (Cosgrave 1992: 9).<sup>5</sup> The gradual acceptance of gambling regardless of gender is acknowledged by recent studies (Schaffer and al. 1997; Volberg 2003; Rask and Petry 2017). "Before the increased accessibility of casinos and lotteries, gambling options involved mainly the male-dominated spheres of sports, cards, and racing (Ladd and Petry 2002). Therefore, women were arguably less likely to develop gambling problems than they might be today." (Grant and Kim, 2004: 99) This explains why Hollywood films about gambling are traditionally largely men-driven films. Female characters are not absent from gambling films, but as in most masculine genres (e.g. westerns), they are generally reduced to *clichés*. Duncan exposed the 'good' and 'bad girl' *clichés* in classical westerns and concluded that, in this genre, strong female characters where, in fact, women with masculine qualities (75). I would like to contend that, in gambling dramas other than westerns, female characters are similarly reduced to *clichéd* categories such as the good luck charms or the supportive women, the trouble-makers or the purveyors of moral standards. In that respect, the two

characters played by Barbara Stanwyck fifteen years apart in *Gambling Lady* (1934) and *The Lady Gambles* (1949) are exceptions to the rule, as she embodies two character-types that were until then largely masculine parts: the card shark and the compulsive gambler.

## ***Play Girl, Gambling Lady: Gambling women in films from the Great Depression era***

- 8 Stanwyck was part of strong actors (alongside Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn or Claudette Colbert) who became very popular in the 1930s, participating in “a decade’s worth of Hollywood productions about women who broke the rules, beat the odds and survived.” (Smyth 66) The rise of strong female characters is particularly visible in traditionally male-oriented films, such as gambling films, with at least two examples, *Play Girl* (Enright 1932) and *Gambling Lady*. Yet, however progressive — these pre-code films pictured women as strong and independent —, they convey a paradoxical message as regards gender constructs. In *Play Girl*, Buster (Loretta Young) is a hard-working independent woman who wants to do something with her life without getting married; yet after falling for a gambler, she becomes pregnant and accepts to marry him. She then becomes one of the *clichéd* characters listed above: she doesn’t accept gambling as a real profession and pushes her husband to find a real job. As he continues gambling, she throws him out and ends up on her own, pregnant and unemployed. She then decides to follow her instinct and bets against the odds on a horse called Baby Mine, who makes her win twice. Yet, from a strong, bold girl (as suggested by the title), she turns into a vulnerable prey, alone in a betting parlor, forced to deal with a dishonest bookie. As she is about to get robbed by him, her husband comes back to save her. The film displays a behavior that is in keeping with pre-code, Great Depression strong female characters, yet its judgement on gambling, although not moralistic, follows the gender construct that gambling is a male activity, a viewpoint which will inform most gambling films from then on. Loretta Young does not play a gambler or an addict, but a girl striving to survive who plays on a hunch, one of the enduring *clichés* attached to female gambling: women don’t understand professional or strategic gambling.
- 9 *Gambling Lady* does the opposite. It remarkably implies that women can be responsible and gifted professional card sharks. Stanwyck, who took a three-week training to learn how to play and shuffle cards like a professional (Wilson 388), is convincing in the part of Jennifer “Lady” Lee. She found a way of acting that both gave her credibility as a professional player (self-control, self-assurance, dexterity), without sacrificing her femininity — her wardrobe was “extensive and lavish” (Wilson 388), which guaranteed her success with a high-class suitor, the son of a judge, who secures her social ascent. She is nonetheless financially independent and scrupulously keeps tracks of what she earns and loses. Lady is a combination of the wit, resourcefulness and resilience necessary to survive the Depression era as represented in films before the enforcement of the Hays code; her street credibility does not prevent her from playing by the rules, and gambling professionally does not make her immoral.<sup>6</sup>
- 10 Ultimately, the two films represent gambling as an acceptable way to earn a living. In *Play Girl*, the husband, after spending several months in New Orleans, comes back with enough money from his gambling activity to take care of his family; and, in *Gambling Lady*, Lady is fully accepted by high society despite her modest background and

unconventional occupation. Both women are happily married, and the two films' happy endings display a loving family portrait, the reflection of the American Dream that, in James Truslow Adams' terms:

is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (32)

- 11 Adams's original text was about equal opportunity and merit, but in the collective unconscious, the myth of the American Dream is often reduced to financial success and upward mobility. In his text, Adams dreaded American society's shift towards materialism and consumerism in the 1930s. If the two films display a moral ending, they also show American society's consumerism: through the crowded department store where Buster works in *Play Girl*, and in the rich circles in which Lady operates in *Gambling Lady*. Yet, what makes the female characters happy is not money but love, and gambling as a moral evil eventually becomes marginalized although it was central to the plots. This shift in moral standards concerning gambling in the 1930s was probably influenced by "The 1931 Nevada 'Wide Open Gambling Bill' [that] started the modern era of legalized gambling in the US." (Barker & Britz 26) However, the gradual democratization of gambling was unequal, as it depended on state legislations. It did not visibly impact women on- and off-screen, making *Gambling Lady* a durable exception. The enforcement of the Hays Code did not allow such female gambler characters to develop, instead, a more morally-charged type emerged: the female compulsive gambler.

## The Female Addict: From *The Lady Gambles* to *Even Money*

- 12 The 1940s brought the female gambler back to the screens with a notable difference: the Motion Picture and Production Code, or 'Hays Code', that was pushed through the Senate by Republicans supporting its creator, William Hays. It was enforced from July 1, 1934 to 1968, banning most notably blasphemy, unmotivated violence, coarse language, mixed marriages, and sexual content from Hollywood productions.
- 13 *Hazard* (Marshall 1948) introduces Paulette Goddard as Helen, a compulsive gambler who has spent her inheritance gambling in underground houses. She has also lost her freedom cutting cards with her creditor, a dishonest gambler who wants to marry her by force. She then spends the whole film running away from the detective hired to bring her back to honor her lost bet, until she falls in love with him. Neither original nor interesting, this film depicts gambling as immoral, vain and dirty, far from the glamour of *Gambling Lady*'s high society gamblers. Goddard's character is constantly on the run and ends up in jail alongside prostitutes after being caught playing dice with men in a seedy hotel room. The film portrays the female addict as dishonest, unreliable and self-destructive, until the resilient detective rescues her from a life of misery by proposing to her. The following year, in 1949, the release of *The Lady Gambles* marked a turning point in Hollywood's depiction of female addiction to gambling, a subject that was rarely (if ever) covered seriously before; it was in line with Billy Wilder's Oscar-winning *The Lost Weekend* (1945) about alcoholism, that may have inspired a series of films on addiction in the following decade,<sup>7</sup> all featuring male addicts. Long before that,

however, a film like *The Pace that Killed* (O’Connor 1935) — based on a 1928 silent film —, boldly depicted a woman’s addiction to cocaine after she fell for a drug dealer whom she ends up killing; and the better-known *Reefer Madness* (Gasnier 1936) delivered a (much parodied) portrait of male and female addiction to marijuana. All of these films have in common what Dement calls a “responsible” approach to addiction, as they ultimately serve as a warning against drugs. Gambling is an addiction that has been dealt with in an “irresponsible” way because of its recreational dimension.

- 14 *The Lady Gambles* has the effect of a government-funded film, warning vulnerable women about the dangers of gambling addiction. Barbara Stanwyck plays a happily married middle-class reporter, Joan, staying in a hotel/casino in Las Vegas while her husband is writing an article on the Hoover Dam. She becomes addicted to gambling almost overnight after being seduced and invited to play for free by the casino owner. She is quickly drawn into an infernal downward spiral, leading her to betray and leave her husband twice, to becoming involved in criminal activities with mobsters who eventually leave her behind because she is so addicted that she jeopardizes their business. In the film, her addiction is a disease that is not compatible with business, and the fact that the addict is a woman makes matters worse (‘Gambling and women don’t mix’). Gambling films usually deal with one or the other aspect of the question, but the two can never be combined successfully; addiction and compulsive gambling inevitably lead to ruin, but a professional attitude toward gambling, poise and reflection, turn the gambler into an entrepreneur, an architect of the American Dream.
- 15 Early on in the film, Joan is shown begging the manager of the casino for money. Before long, she is so deep in debt that she can no longer hope to find an easy way to settle them. Pawning her camera, she bursts into tears pathetically begging the old pawnbroker for more money, then rushes to the casino. The contrast between her elegant fashion style and manners and the place is emphasized as she walks into the crowded, smoky and noisy casino. She’s making her way through a predominantly male crowd, shot from a high angle.

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- 16 She chooses a craps table and settles on one edge, surrounded by frantic men in grey suits which contrast sharply with her white, classy blouse and overcoat. Handing in the bills to the croupier with no further hesitation, she picks up the dice and glances at the carpet, both soothed and fascinated, as if the contact of the dice on her hands were her “fix”. First, she hesitates and explains that she is new to the game as the croupier and avid players invite her to throw the dice. A quick dissolve on a pile of chips and two pairs of dice suggest a temporal ellipsis. The oblique high-angle shot reveals only a woman’s hands rubbing the dice with energy; slowly tilting up, the camera then settles on Joan’s conquering attitude and bewitched glance as she frantically throws the dice across the carpet; she is a different woman. The camera faces her from the other end of the carpet, she is staring at the dice with devilish eyes, waiting for the verdict, surrounded by a herd of excited men. This famous sequence bears a sexual connotation particular to table games that were considered unsuitable for unaccompanied women with Joan’s social background at the end of the 1940s, when casinos were still very masculine places, especially at night. Joan wins and can’t stop playing; she has taken off her coat and picks up the dice revealing her bare arms. “One more time! Just one more

time!" she begs as the camera is zooming in on her white teeth, completing the sexual innuendo that reaches an apex when a man standing behind her very close tells her, "Kiss them lady!", with a disturbing grin. Her expression changes for a second, she considers doing it but instead she throws the dice even harder than before; a seven, she wins again, close to ecstasy, her conquering eyes make her look possessed. Picking up the dice, blowing on them, and rubbing them between her hands, she now has her ritual, like regular gamblers. The sequence ends with a dissolve suggesting a long night of gambling which marks a point of no return for Joan; now that she has experienced the thrill and power of winning, she is no longer "curious about" but "addicted to" gambling. The kind of sexual connotation conveyed in dice-throwing sequences is specific to female gamblers, and can be found in many films, and even more glamorously and evocatively so in *Gilda* (1946), in which Rita Hayworth is filmed as an object of desire, and, fifty years later, in *Casino* (1995), with equally attractive Sharon Stone. But the craps sequence in *The Lady Gambles* conveys something the two other films don't: addiction, a disease that makes even responsible people lose control. In fact, this sequence echoes the opening sequence of the film, shot in a dark back alley where a bunch of men are playing dice for money on the asphalt. Joan is the only woman, and she's caught helping a man rig the game. He escapes and she gets caught by two angry gamblers who beat her up until she collapses on the pavement. This first sequence sets the tone of the film, especially as her husband, in the hospital, explains that he hasn't seen Joan in two years and tells a skeptical doctor that she is sick and needs help.

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- 17 Gambling is related to the sociology of risk, strictly speaking, it refers to "financial transactions — the staking of money, or an item of economic value, on the certain outcome of a future event." (McMillen 6) Risk-taking is what provokes the thrill of gambling. In his seminal essay, *Where the action is* (1967), Erving Goffman relates gambling to "action": "a term that points to something lively but is itself now almost dead" (149). It refers to the essence of risk-taking, with all the excitement, the positive or/and negative consequences it may imply, and gambling being the epitome of action. Goffman considers action as intrinsically masculine (e.g. action movies), what he calls "the cult of masculinity" in the same article, although it goes beyond gambling, and he establishes four components that appear as essential to the gambler: "courage, gameness, integrity and composure" (229)— with the last one, controlling one's emotions, being the most important.<sup>8</sup> But risk-taking was proven to be detrimental to women in the 1950s, as a study concluded that women who took chances were less popular than others (Tuddenham 1952). In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, countless studies also established risk-taking as a masculine trait and stereotyped women as more risk-averse.<sup>9</sup> Most studies conducted in the United States from 1972 to 1994 showed that men gambled more than women. This may explain why, in spite of the legalization and global acceptance of gambling in American society (85% of Americans find gambling acceptable — AGA 2013), surveys about gambling preferences by gender invariably show that women still gamble less frequently than men (all games included), win and lose less money, and prefer non-strategic games such as bingo, slot machines and lotteries (Potenza, Maciejewski and Mazure 2006). These social constructs have



endured in popular culture although questionable and sometimes "unsubstantiated" (Philips Wilson 71), and films have largely contributed to perpetuate these *clichés* that are only beginning to be debunked as demonstrated by the all-women cast sequel of the *Ocean's* franchise *Ocean's 8* (Ross 2018), or *Molly's Game*, which I will discuss below.

- 18 As with *The Lady Gambles*, sixty years later, *Even Money* (Rydell 2007) focuses on the evils of gambling through an ensemble narration with multiple plots. The main story is of a middle-aged writer, Carolyn (Kim Basinger), who becomes addicted to gambling. Married to a college professor of English and mother of a thirteen-year-old daughter, she is slowly drifting away from her home. Built like a noir detective story that starts with a murder, the film undertakes an anti-gambling stance. A close-up on an old wrinkled woman shot from the side, wearing aviator mirrored sunglasses and a leopard printed cow-boy hat, smoking while playing a slot machine inaugurates the first casino sequence. Facing her is an old sick man with a Stetson, breathing through a respirator, painfully putting coins in a slot machine. The lateral tracking shot reveals another old lady playing blackjack on a machine, and a few rows away from her, in the middle of what looks like a room full of machines, a blond woman shot from the back is frenetically pulling the lever of a slot machine. The camera focuses on her frustrated face as she loses repeatedly; an extreme close up emphasizes her left eye closed in despair behind her square glasses; most of her face is hidden behind the machine which is virtually swallowing her. Her face appears more clearly; unlike the other players, she is a middle-aged classic-looking woman, the prototype of the white middle-class mother. In that respect, she recalls Joan; yet, this casino is no longer a place of excitement full of action men, but a gloomy, secluded place with tacky multicolor neon lights and a crowd of elderly people. After losing money for several hours, she goes home to her bourgeois life, she lies to her family about gambling, pretending to be writing while she suffers from writer's block. Carolyn seems unsatisfied with all aspects of her life: her job, her marriage and her recreational life that has turned her into an addict, although she had no apparent reason to become one (she has money, a house, a family, security and love). Like Joan, she is initiated to an action (strategic) game, blackjack, and becomes addicted, eventually losing all the family savings. Like Joan, she will return to the casino until she loses everything, including her loving family that she has completely forsaken. The movie plays on two aggravating factors: the husband (Ray Liotta) is very nice and trusting — so irreproachable that she resents him for his perfection; and her teenage daughter, although not a rebel, is visibly becoming more interested in boys and sex, and needs her mother's attention. As a rule, gambling addiction is made even more difficult to bear for women because of the "social expectation of gender" (Barker & Britz 145); the addicted woman not only loses money but also destroys her family and loses her social status. "Females are expected to serve as the cohesive agent within the family structure — forgiving transgressions and committing few." (Barker & Britz 145) Contrary to men who often gamble to earn money in films, women like Carolyn and Joan start gambling for fun; both admit that it "amuses" them, reinforcing the idea of women being occasional, non-strategic gamblers or "escape gamblers" (Barker & Britz 145) — yet they get trapped all the same. The trap in both films relies on the magnetic attraction to the casino, a place of deception where the two women can be someone else, combined with their dissatisfaction with a boring life. Addiction to gambling becomes the negation of the American Dream as it leads to complete loss, be it material possessions or family support, other people's respect and one's self-esteem, for men and women alike.

## Trapped in a Gilded Cage: The attraction/repulsion dichotomy

- 19 The gilded world of casinos is alluring, bright and shiny, as exemplified by Scorsese in a subtle slow-motion take at the end of *Casino*’s half-hour-long introductory part, when an equally shiny Ginger (Sharon Stone), wearing a sequin dress that would make any woman look bad, is creating a fuss. Tossing chips in the air with a classy attitude and a bright smile, she is getting a crowd of avid players to kneel around her as if she were a queen. As stated by Sam (Robert De Niro) in the introduction, “The casino was our morality carwash. It does for us what Lourdes does for the crippled.” Sam and Ginger are king and queen within the casino’s microcosm, it is what feeds them and legitimizes them; outside of it, they lose their shine. In the film, there is a clear discrepancy between the scenes shot inside and outside the casino. Inside, the two characters look bright, lively and glamorous; outside, they become everyday people, cursing and arguing. Everything in casino films is meant to convey the idea that life doesn’t exist outside of the casino, particularly in Las Vegas which is surrounded by desert. Ginger and Sam don’t have a life outside of the casino because Las Vegas is a transitory place for tourists and millionaires; it offers no possibility to create a durable social circle, as most people come and go. Casino films, and gambling films in general, adopt a centripetal spatial configuration that conveys seclusion and stagnation often materialized through an overwhelming use of high-angle shots and bird-eye views dismissing everything going on outside of the game table. Equally important is the use of close and extreme-close shots that emphasize inner feelings (mostly stress, or bluff) and tend to deglamorize the players by revealing their flaws; finally, most of these films are shot indoors, and outdoor sequences scarcely display any horizon, in keeping with the protagonist’s limited future. In *The Cooler* (Kramer 2003), Bernie (a character from the old days, when casinos hired people with the jinx to make customers lose) wants to leave Las Vegas for a place where “you can tell night from day”, he says, because he can no longer breathe in Vegas.
- 20 The character of Ginger in *Casino* fits the *cliché* of the gold-digger and the troublemaker: she is a professional working in casinos, as Sam explains in voice-over, describing her routine as a very professional act that never fails to make her win, without even playing. Gambling is not her weakness but her ex-boyfriend and the decadent life that surrounds casinos are — alcohol, drugs, expensive outfits, jewelry. She reluctantly marries Sam for luxury, yet she is still attached to her ex-boyfriend (as Gilda, still attracted to Johnny, marries Ballin for his social position). Gambling is an apt metaphor for her life: she is a winner as long as she remains free to play her own game, and becomes a loser when she settles down and gets everything she wants without earning it. This is what relates gambling to the American Dream: risking everything, building a strategy, and winning, eventually, like an entrepreneur. Characters like Ginger seem to abide by the principle that there is nothing rewarding in succeeding effortlessly.<sup>10</sup> Casinos are temples of consumerism and lust, yet the “gambling holes” of the low-life gamblers are equally attractive because they are dark, seedy and mysterious.
- 21 In *House of Games* and *The Gambler*, the main protagonists have a compulsion — to steal for one, to play for the other — that has nothing to do with their social status, as both are well-off intellectuals. However, they are curious about this underground world and

navigate among low-life, limited characters who entertain them for a while but fail to give them what they want, risking all in a self-destructive impulse. The theme of self-destruction was already central to *The Lady Gambles*, as Joan, the addicted reporter, proved incapable to refrain her compulsions to play (which was also the case of Helen in *Hazard*). She is like Maggie (Lindsay Crouse) in *House of Games*, the psychologist specialized in addiction who is caught at her own game. Women are depicted as easy preys in this highly masculine environment; at some point, they all end up bullied by a man. Ginger is brutalized by her ex and her husband, Gilda is slapped by Johnny, Molly (Jessica Chastain) beaten up by the mob, just like Nathalie "lady chance" (Maria Bello) in *The Cooler* and Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *Hard Eight* (P.T. Anderson 1996). In that respect, the gambling world echoes the gender inequalities of the business world: women have a chance to succeed (they often outwit or manipulate male characters), but they suffer from a power differential that makes their success virtually impossible. These films also often demonstrate how compassion and a tendency to display emotions make women improbable gamblers but easy targets, which explains the scarcity of female gamblers in gambling films.

Figure 1: *Tricheur à l'as de carreau* (1635) by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652)



Louvre Museum. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La\\_Tour\\_Le\\_Tricheur\\_Louvre\\_RF1972-8.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_Tour_Le_Tricheur_Louvre_RF1972-8.jpg)

- 22 Historically, gambling is not an exclusively male activity. In Europe, court gambling did not only involve male players, as shown in paintings, notably *Tricheur à l'as de carreau* (1635) by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652) (Figure 1). The gambling circles of 19<sup>th</sup>-century European high society are also well depicted as a non-gender-determined microcosm in *The Gambler* (1866) by Fiodor Dostoievski and William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844) adapted on screen by Stanley Kubrick as *Barry Lyndon* (1975). Although not a film on gambling, a key sequence in *Barry Lyndon* focuses on male and female players engaging in social circles where seducers can spot vulnerable, rich targets, as penniless Redmond Barry (Ryan O'Neal) seduces the

countess of Lyndon (Marisa Berenson) to easily gain a title and a fortune. The dishonest transaction will seal the countess's downfall and the curse of *Barry Lyndon*. The film exploits the theme of upward mobility through gambling, and reestablishes gambling as an old European tradition reminding the American viewer that, before becoming a motif of the western or gangster films, card games were also related to the aristocracy. They led to the same traps (addiction, debts, cheating) and had the same goals (making easy money and reaching select circles), and, above all, professional gamblers were already attractive and self-assured, particularly when they won. Female gamblers already had more to lose than men. The countess of Lyndon is yet another female gambler who lost her freedom gambling with her life and ended up trapped in a golden cage (like Gilda and Ginger). These women are objectified by men and possessed physically by the male protagonist as gambling wins, while visually they are seen through, and displayed for, the men's eyes or the "male gaze", to borrow Laura Mulvey's terms.

- 23 In her feminist analysis of *Gilda*, Mary Ann Doane described gambling as "the conflation of economics, risk and desire" (99), a highly masculine combination that unsurprisingly establishes gender relations as the film's central issue. In the same article, she interprets one of the key sentences of the film, "Gambling and women don't mix", which "negates the feminine":

Within a capitalist patriarchy, gambling and women do not mix because both demand full concentration (they "use up" energy), both are risky, and both entail high stakes. The gambler's desire for money and his desire for women are incompatible precisely because the money and the woman are substitutable objects within essentially the same system and logic of exchange. (99)

- 24 Such logic is what motivates poker game organizer, Molly Bloom, a beautiful and clever woman who made a fortune exploiting male poker players without ever becoming a player herself.

## Gambling as a Capitalist Venture Open to Women: *Molly's Game*

- 25 Gambling, particularly poker and blackjack, have gained in popularity in the last three decades owing to the development of online poker games and popular stars advertising their interest in this game (e.g. Leonardo Di Caprio, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, among others), which translates into films that consider it as a capitalist venture (e.g. *Even Money's* bookmakers), or even a scientific experiment (e.g. 21), that eclipses the traditional Mafia/indebted player plot, and illustrates what could be a new phase in films about gambling. The exclusive and glamorous aspect of gambling that was already at play in *Barry Lyndon* is reevaluated in *Molly's Game* which offers a combination of glamour, seduction, excitement, and cold capitalist entrepreneurship... controlled by a woman.

Gambling has been associated historically with hegemonic masculinity. Thorstein Veblen (1953) suggests that the men of the ruling classes historically displayed social superiority and wealth through conspicuous consumption of leisure activities. As a cultural practice, gambling was an activity of privileged males in male-dominated spaces (Randall 1998). Gambling was a means of demonstrating an ideal masculinity, in which men displayed wealth and put it at risk, while upholding the semblance of control (concealing vulnerability and emotions) through strategy,

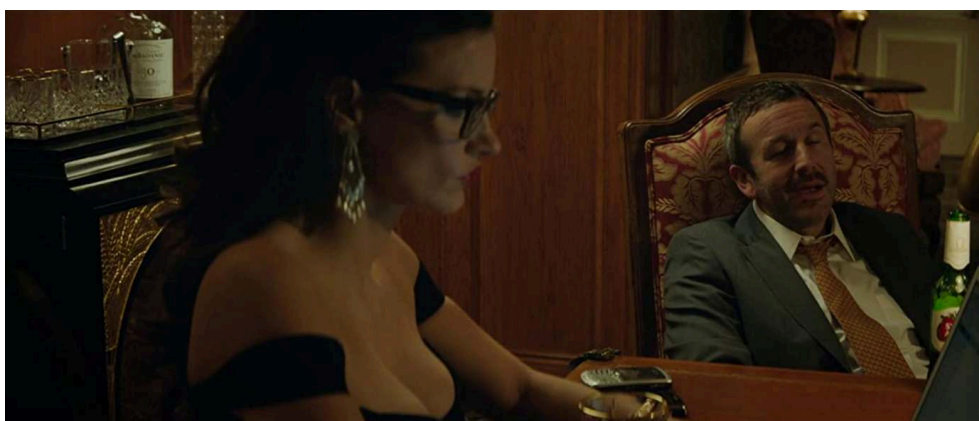
odds, and probability (Morton 2003). As such, the accumulation of capital (and statistical procedures to ensure it) has permeated Western capitalist masculinity from the gambling tables to Wall Street (David 1962, Fienberg 1992). (Phillips and Wilson, 2009: 70-1)

- 26 Following that logic, Molly Bloom, who is constantly studying gamblers to analyze their behavior and evaluate the risks for her business, endeavors to exploit rich and powerful men's attraction to gambling. Setting aside her moral judgement, she approaches it as a capitalist venture, considering legal and technical factors before human ones. *Molly's Game* is based on the true story of a professional skier, Molly Bloom, who, after her career was cut short by an accident, became a millionaire by creating an exclusive circle of poker games without being a player herself. Contrary to traditional poker films, *Molly's Game* focuses on the organizer of the games, a young scrupulous female entrepreneur abiding by the law – until she breaks it. The film refers to a historical paradox that has pushed professional gamblers to question the anti-gambling laws in the past: restricting gambling “competes with US belief in economic liberalism and maximization of profit.” (Duncan 8) In the film, however, Molly is not arrested for earning a living thanks to poker games, but for enabling members of the Russian mafia to play at her table without questioning the origin of their money, making her an accomplice in money laundering.
- 27 Molly's strength is to create a select poker game with millionaires and celebrities, imposing high standards in five-star hotels, with beautiful hostesses (who are not prostitutes). Like Ginger, she is a professional who makes money with games without playing. She explains:
- My game had a tricky ecosystem. These guys could buy anything. But in this room, you couldn't buy your win, you couldn't buy me, you couldn't buy the girls, you couldn't buy a seat in this game. There's nothing so sweet as a win you have to work for.
- 28 Molly applies her entrepreneur spirit to the game, but everything falls apart when she starts accepting Russian mobsters at the table, and Italian gangsters find out they are not getting a cut in her lucrative game. The film then switches from a glamorous and chic atmosphere to raw violence, as she is brutally beaten up by an old-school Mafia henchman. Molly's life had already started to fall apart before that turning point, however, when at the height of her success, as she explains in voice-over, she was running six games a week and had become addicted to all sorts of drugs that could create artificial nights and days for her disoriented body and mind. Gambling became a business that consumed her life. In that respect, Molly is a character that transcends the gender barriers usually at play in gambling movies, as she controls the game, the players and has no personal life, like the male casino managers.
- 29 Many gambling films at some point include a lecture of sorts from the main protagonist, explaining how the system works from the entrepreneur's (professional) viewpoint. Famously, *Casino's* didactic introductory part shows all aspects of casino work, from the bottom to the top of the pyramid and the “eye in the sky”, commented by Sam and Nicky (Joe Pesci) in voice-over. It may have set a precedent that gave way to variations in *Hard Eight* as Sidney's routine is methodically transmitted to John as a family recipe; or in *Rounders* (Dahl 1998) as Mike is explaining in voice-over that poker is not a game of chance but requires skill, practice and discipline. In *Molly's Game*, during a particularly tense game, an animation appears on screen in the fashion of a game broadcast on TV, and Molly starts explaining the strategy of the players and the

probabilities in voice-over, demonstrating her deep understanding of the game, debunking enduring *clichés* about women at odds with strategic games. More interestingly, the film debunks the masculine hegemony at play in most gambling films by choosing to use Molly's own voice, and therefore her point of view. The use of a voice-over in gambling films is a common device that relates them to film noir, but even in films with a female lead actor, the voice was invariably that of a man, depriving the main character of her "female gaze" (e.g. Johnny's voice in *Gilda*; the husband's voice in *The Lady Gambles*; Sam and Nick's voices in *Casino*).

- 30 The voice-over of the (male) detective that opens *Even Money* in a noir fashion also closes it, offering its theory on gambling being closely tied to consumer society, pushing people to always want more of everything: "But you can't have your dream without laying something on the line. The key is not to risk what you can't afford to lose." Gambling, as a means to fulfill a dream, requires a sacrifice. Most films involving female gamblers overemphasize that risk because women seem to be more stigmatized than men (e.g. in *The Lady Gambles*, Joan is treated like a prostitute by the detective because she was caught gambling; in *Even Money*, in addition to being a liar, Carolyn is a bad wife and mother). The use of a masculine voice-over always casts a gender-oriented judgement on these female characters. *Molly's Game*'s bold choice of a female voice-over to tell the story of a woman in a managerial position denotes a remarkable change of focus, offering a "female gaze" on gambling and the American Dream — without, however, giving up on male's "visual pleasure" (e.g. Chastain's glamorous outfits and provocative cleavage) ingrained in Hollywood films (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Jessica Chastain and Chris O'Dowd in *Molly's Game* (2017)



Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4209788/mediaviewer/rm166638081>

## Conclusion

- 31 A diachronic approach to the representation of female lead characters in gambling dramas reveals enduring *clichés* that emerged in early American society (e.g. gambling was soon considered as a male activity; risk-taking is intrinsically masculine; strategic games are male territory...) and spread through popular culture. Female characters in most gambling films are thus sidelined and stereotyped. These *clichés* are the foundation of long-standing social constructs that have been the focus of sociological and medical research. However, scientific data regarding a gender analysis of female

gambling habits and addiction in the United States is still scarce. Similarly, the representation of female gamblers on screen remains marginal.

- 32 In films, women are usually portrayed as reckless players, favoring games of chance over strategic ones, with a preference for roulette or dice in the classical era (*The Lady Gambles*, *Gilda*), and more recently on slot machines (*Even Money*). They play on a hunch, as in *Play Girl*, instead of calculating the risks. Very few female professional gamblers are represented in films other than westerns, and even this particularly prolific genre which often portrays games (mainly poker), is more inclined to display prostitutes in saloons than women gamblers. The ideology behind the representation of female gamblers is strongly informed by moral standards, particularly during the classical era, with a strong influence of the legal and political frameworks at the time of release. The gradual legalization of gambling played a part in how they were represented on screen in pre-code films (*Gambling Lady*). The enforcement of the Hays code in 1934 may have given way to the reemergence of the female gambler as an addict in post-World War Two films (*Hazard*, *The Lady Gambles*) heralding a reevaluation of moral standards that developed in the 1950s.
- 33 Relating female gamblers and the myth of the American Dream in films exposes a gender differential in the way success and loss are depicted on screen. Female gamblers appear in turn as determined and therefore threatening, victimized, humiliated, irresponsible, objectified and bullied in the masculine microcosm of gambling. They are often deprived of the fulfillment of their share of the American Dream, constrained by gender expectations that make them bigger losers than men.
- 34 In the post-Weinstein context, however, it is hard to deny that a reevaluation, and even a reshaping of some enduring sexist clichés through films is giving more credit to female characters in traditionally male-dominated genres like superhero films (*Wonder Woman*, Patty Jenkins 2017; *Black Widow*, Cate Shortland 2021), heist films (*The Widows*, McQueen 2018), and gambling films (*Ocean's 8*, *Molly's Game*) involving female overachievers, symbolically reclaiming the "female gaze," despite the fact that few of these films were made by female directors.

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## NOTES

1. In François Olivier Lefevre, "Atlantic City," 15 April 2005, on DVDclassik.com. In an interview, Louis Malle said: "On voulait combiner l'ancien et le nouveau [...] Le personnage de Burt Lancaster [...] représentait le passé et le personnage de Susan Sarandon, qui habitait le même immeuble, représentait ces gens venus de toute l'Amérique, avec leurs rêves[...] C'est bien évidemment une métaphore de l'Amérique même."
2. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by Hunter S. Thompson (1971) focuses on the failure of the 1960s Counterculture and the collapse of the American Dream as the two protagonists undergo a trip to Las Vegas, the temple of consumption and the supposed symbol of American success that they decry while experiencing trips with acid and other drugs.
3. I consider gambling films as a group of films whose main subject is gambling and/or casinos, which excludes films with gambling sequences (e.g. *Casino Royale*, *My Darling Clementine*). I also exclude here comedies about gambling (e.g. *Maverick*) that would deserve a specific treatment.
4. Legal gambling contributed to funding reconstruction in the southern states and the construction of the western states (Rose 1992: 96).
5. "Gambling activities are no longer discursively constructed in religious or moral terms, but in economic, consumerist, and medical terms. It is not that moral discourse around gambling has disappeared; rather, the discourse now centers on the individual's self-governance in relation to gambling."
6. Scholars disagree on whether the film is really pre or post-code. Technically, it came out before the enforcement of the code, yet, to Dan Callahan "*Gambling Lady* is Stanwyck's first real post-code movie, and a chill of compulsory virtue affects her performance right away." (2012: 58)
7. *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger 1955) on addiction to heroine, *Bigger than Life* (Ray 1956) on addiction to cortisone, *Monkey on my Back* (De Toth 1957) on addiction to opioids.
8. Goffman's study was later praised for destigmatizing gambling, as it is said to have lifted "gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it and renders possible a consideration of its meaning which is freed from a priori associations of a negative kind." (Downes and al. 1976:17)
9. Yet they were criticized for using male-oriented questions (e.g. about military decisions).
10. It might explain the behavior of rich, self-destructive protagonists, that may just be self-loathing rich, like Axel/Jim in *The Gambler* (Reisz 1974), and its remake (Toback 2014).

## ABSTRACTS

A metaphorical expression of the myth of the American Dream, gambling — institutionalized in casinos or illegal in underground circles — soon became a fixture of masculine film genres such as westerns and gangster films. As a rule, gambling movies, regardless of their genre, are male-driven films, leaving only secondary parts to female protagonists who usually fall into three categories: good luck charms/helpers (*The Cooler*, 21), trouble-makers (*Casino*, *Gilda*) or purveyors of moral standards (*Rounders*, *The Cincinnati Kid*). Conversely, in gambling films featuring women in lead roles, actors are more likely to embody addicts (*The Lady Gambles*, *Even Money*), entrepreneurs/professionals (*Atlantic City*, *Molly's Game*) and — more rarely — professional gamblers (*Gambling Lady*), thus contesting the masculine hegemony usually at play in this type of

film. Through a diachronic approach based on sociological and historical facts, this article proposes to consider how female-driven gambling films may offer a possibility for female lead actors to reclaim the ‘male gaze’ and somehow reestablish a form of gender equality by portraying tough, smart, pragmatic women in a traditionally masculine environment. Achieving the American Dream or wasting their lives to addiction, these women contradict enduring *clichés* conveyed by Hollywood and informed by the Hays code during the classical era.

Qu’ils soient légaux dans les casinos ou clandestins dans les tripots, les jeux d’argent sont devenus l’une des métaphores du rêve américain, figurant régulièrement dans des films de genres traditionnellement masculins tels que les westerns ou les films de gangsters. En règle générale, les films de jeux, quel que soit leur genre d’affiliation, ont un premier rôle masculin, les personnages féminins n’occupant que des rôles secondaires que l’on peut classer dans trois catégories : les porte-bonheurs/adjuvants (*The Cooler*, 21), les scandaleuses (*Casino*, *Gilda*) ou les garantes de valeurs morales (*Rounders*, *The Cincinnati Kid*). À l’inverse, dans les films de jeux offrant le premier rôle à une femme, les actrices tendent à interpréter des rôles de joueuses compulsives (*The Lady Gambles*, *Even Money*), de femmes d’affaires/professionnelles (*Atlantic City*, *Molly’s Game*) et (plus rarement) des joueuses professionnelles (*Gambling Lady*) contestant ainsi l’hégémonie masculine à l’œuvre dans ces films. À travers une approche diachronique fondée sur des faits sociologiques et historiques, cet article propose de s’intéresser à la façon dont les films de jeux incluant un premier rôle féminin, offrent la possibilité aux actrices de se réapproprier le « regard masculin » (male gaze) et d’une certaine manière de rétablir une forme d’égalité des genres en incarnant des femmes fortes, intelligentes et pragmatiques dans un environnement traditionnellement masculin. Qu’elles réalisent leur rêve américain ou succombent à l’addiction, ces femmes contredisent les clichés persistants véhiculés par Hollywood sous l’influence du code Hays pendant la période classique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** films de jeux, joueuse, casino, addiction, poker, rêve américain, genre, risque, Hollywood, *Gambling Lady*, *Lady Gambles (The)*, *Molly’s Game*, *Even Money*, *Play Girl*

**Keywords:** gambling films, female gambler, casino, addiction, poker, American Dream, gender, risk, Hollywood, *Gambling Lady*, *Lady Gambles (The)*, *Molly’s Game*, *Even Money*, *Play Girl*

## AUTHOR

### JULIE ASSOULY

Julie Assouly is an Associate Professor of American and Film Studies. She teaches American history, politics and film history and theory at the English Department of Université d’Artois (Arras). She is also the editor of “Série Cinéma” at Artois Presses Université. She has published *L’Amérique des frères Coen* (CNRS, [2012] 2015) and articles on the Coen brothers, Steven Spielberg and Wes Anderson. Her next book, to be published with CNRS Éditions in 2021, is entitled *Wes Anderson, cinéaste transatlantique*, and explores, among other issues, the influence of the French New Wave on Wes Anderson and American “smart cinema”. Contact: julie.assouly [at] univ-artois.fr