

Examining Paul Auster's The Music of Chance alongside Jean Baudrillard's theory of chance and seduction, this essay suggests that rapid growth of the gaming industry is a symptom of late capitalism. The co-dependence of capitalism and its preferred game is seen here as a confrontation between two antagonistic orders of satisfaction and exchange.

The Game of Late Capitalism: Gambling and Ideology in *The Music of Chance*

EYAL DOTAN

Gambling is not a new phenomenon in the history of humankind, nor is the belief in luck or the power of chance. Yet, only with the arrival of capitalism did fortune games reach the dimensions of a "social epidemic," constantly in the center of fervent public debates. While in the past three hundred years, gambling has been repeatedly prohibited in different countries throughout the world, since the sixties many Western countries have begun a process of legalization that has been accompanied by an unprecedented increase in the gambling industry. *The International Gaming & Wagering Business* magazine writes that the 1996 gross revenue from commercial games in the United States (my main concern here) reached \$586.5 billion. In comparison, the total sum in 1983 was only \$163 billion and in 1974 the sum was a mere \$17.3 billion (Abt et al. 224, 241). One out of every ten dollars that consumers spend on leisure now goes to commercial games. Gaming-entertainment is now legal in 48 states, and in 1995 there were approximately 154 million visits to casinos. Gaming can currently be found anywhere from the most remote Indian reservations, through luxurious Las Vegas hotels, to casino boats sailing along the Mississippi.

One cannot simply dismiss the relation between the rapid growth of the gaming industry and late capitalism as

mere coincidence, yet there is a need to elaborate their specific relation. One possible framework for exploring this relation is provided by the view of the gaming industry as a “symptom” of late capitalism: does the socio-economic matrix of late capitalism provide fertile ground for the flourishing of fortune games? As with every symptom, we could reverse the dependency question: how does the economical regime of late capitalism depend on an entertainment industry based in chance? In order to grapple with this question I offer a reading of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of seduction and chance along with Paul Auster’s celebrated novel *The Music of Chance* (1990), the story of four poker players who gather one fatal evening for a game. The relevance of Baudrillard to our question lies in his concept of capital and late capitalism in general, as modeled on games of chance. Baudrillard’s concept resonates with Auster’s novel in a way that suggests one possible analysis of the symptomatic phenomenon of gambling. The analysis also suggests a link (however hostile) between Baudrillard’s account of late capitalism and contemporary Marxist thought. This essay uses *The Music of Chance* as a “playground” in which this hostile encounter between the two theories is re-examined and made concrete.

The *Music of Chance* tells the story of the last year and a half of the life of Nashe, a Boston fireman who decides to leave his family, work and friends after his father bequeaths him a huge amount of money acquired through speculation on the stock exchange. Nashe buys a new red Saab and embarks upon a frantic trip throughout the States, spending all of his inheritance on hotels, gasoline, food, and gambling of all kinds. Finally, he is left with a mere \$14,000. All seems lost, and then, on a desolate side road he decides to give a lift to a young man, named Pozzi. Pozzi is a professional poker player on his way to a poker game with two eccentric millionaires. The chances are that Pozzi will win fifty thousand dollars off the two millionaires, if only he can find an initial sum to enter the game. In hope of sharing the profits, Nashe decides to give Pozzi the rest of his money. The two millionaires, Flower and Stone, are former hard day laborers who used to buy a lottery ticket every week. One day they won the big prize of 27 million dollars. This money enabled them to make more, mainly through speculations, and now they are just looking to be entertained.

A description of the evening at the millionaires’ house, a gigantic and remote mansion in Pennsylvania, is the crux of the book, and the poker game itself spreads out over a substantial number of pages. At the end of

the game Nashe and Pozzi lose all their money, as well as Nashe's car, and are left with a ten thousand dollar debt. The two millionaires refuse to waive the right to their winnings and will not let Nashe and Pozzi leave the mansion before the debt is fully paid. But they do offer Nashe and Pozzi a deal: in order to repay their debt they will have to build a wall from ten thousand stones, which are the remains of a decrepit 15th-century Irish castle purchased by the millionaires. Nashe and Pozzi realize that they will have to build the wall in an authentic 15th-century manner, that is by hand, and even worse, that they cannot escape the mansion or establish any contact with the outside world. One night Pozzi decides to escape through a crack in the surrounding fence but Nashe finds him the next day, in front of the trailer, dying. Unable to take him to a hospital, Nashe is forced to let Murks, the work manager, take care of Pozzi. He never hears from Pozzi again. A few weeks later, Nashe completes the wall-building task and goes to celebrate his release with Murks at a local bar. At the end of the evening he drives back to the mansion in the red Saab now owned by Murks. He accelerates to 90 mph. When Murks, frightened, suddenly shuts off the radio, Nashe loses his concentration as a car approaches them. Unable to avoid the crash, Nashe steps on the gas and drives straight to their death.

The most significant characteristic of Paul Auster's novels (as well as their film adaptations) is their nearly obsessive concern with chance, coincidence, and the gift of luck. In the novels, chance receives the status of a nearly cosmic force which shapes and directs the lives of the characters and the development of the plot. However, only in *The Music of Chance* are the social and economical implications of chance intertwined with two specific forms of exchange: speculations and gambling. Nashe's crazy journey across the country is made possible by the fortune his father made on the stock exchange. When he realizes that his trip is about to end due to a shortage of cash, Nashe decides to raise some new capital through the poker game which results in slavery. For his part, Pozzi is a professional gambler who began his career, the novel implies, because of his identification with his father who was imprisoned for trying to sell shares in a non-existent company. The two eccentric millionaires win their initial capital from the lottery, increasing it to monstrous proportions through investments in Eurodollars, Junk bonds, superconductors, and real estate. As we know, all the specific monetary practices in which the characters participate involve chance, and entail a certain transformation of money, causing it to lose its everyday characteristics. In gambling

and in speculations, money becomes more fluid, more abstract, and more *playful*. The lottery, for example, which brings the two millionaires their initial capital, is a system through which the players' capital is redistributed according to the principle of pure and arbitrary exchange and not according to criteria of labor, skills, or production. Without stretching the analogy, one could argue that the stock exchange and the fictitious capital on which it feeds, functions according to similar principles. In *The Music of Chance*, however, these abstract exchanges take on another form, more playful and mysterious, as is demonstrated in the frenzied interference of the number *seven* in the lives of the characters. Tim Woods points out that the number "seven" in the novel does not merely quantify the world (146). Neither does it remain in the realm of signification. The number seven suggests strange analogies between remote and unrelated situations; it also functions according to its own, particular logic: *the logic of winners*.

Seven years before the poker game, Nashe met a stranger who convinced him to apply for a fireman position. Nashe passed the tests successfully and received the job. The two millionaires' lottery win, which drastically changed their lives, also occurred *seven* years prior to the game. Two days before the poker game Nashe and Pozzi checked into the Plaza hotel, and "they were given rooms on the *seventh* floor ("Lucky *seven*," as Pozzi remarked in the elevator)" (38). Encounters with the number seven do, indeed, seem to involve good luck, although not for Nashe and Pozzi. *Seven* was one of the winning numbers in the millionaires' lottery ticket. The poker game that the four characters play is open poker with *seven* cards from beginning to end, and it is in this game that Nashe and Pozzi lose all their money. The most critical moment in the game, in which the number seven brings the catastrophe to a close, is the final bet between the two sets of partners. It is the simplest of all bets: each player draws a card from the deck, and the winner is the one who gets the highest card. Flower draws a *seven*, which is a relatively low card. But Nashe draws a mere four. To this Flower responds, "'A four!' [. . .] 'A four! you couldn't even beat my seven'" (104). These instances, and many others not mentioned here, lead us to believe that not only the speculation of capital, but the realm of numbers in general, mysteriously organizes the characters' capital flow, and also, to a great extent, their destiny.

In conjunction with the disturbance of the monetary order as represented in the novel, similar disturbances take place on the level of signification. This is illustrated through the peculiar literal realization of metaphors and similes, as well as through the ironic mirroring of signifiers. Take, for example, the "*wall*." The signifier of a wall appears in the

first part of the novel mainly within metaphorical contexts. At this stage, neither the reader nor Nashe or Pozzi anticipates the arrival of an actual, literal wall, the wall that the two will be forced to build. Yet when this task of building materializes in the second part of the novel, the reader is disturbed by the thought that perhaps someone within this fictional world is telling cruel joke, is taking the characters' utterances too seriously. Thus, when Nashe first entertains the idea of participating in the poker game with Pozzi, he thinks of Pozzi in the following terms: "At that point, Pozzi was simply a means to an end, the hole in the *wall* that would get him from one side to the other" (36; emphasis mine). When Pozzi explains the logic of poker before the game begins, he tells Nashe: "the important thing was to remain inscrutable, to build a *wall* around yourself and not let anyone in" (63), not knowing that this was the exact strategy that the two millionaires would use against him later on. In a reverse instance, Pozzi thinks all along that his father was killed in Vietnam, but when he finally meets him, his father claims that he survived the war by escaping the prisoner camp through a tunnel dug under the camp's *wall*. Pozzi later realizes that his father was bluffing, yet eventually he assumes the same tactic himself, digs a tunnel under the mansion fence, tries to escape captivity, and apparently dies. During their first encounter, when Nashe tells Pozzi that he left his job as a fireman thanks to a large sum of money he unexpectedly received, Pozzi asks, "You win the Irish Sweepstakes or something?" (62) As we may recall, the wall that the two are forced to build originates from an Irish castle. The millionaires set the game entrance fee at ten thousand dollars, which is also the number of stones from which the wall will be constructed. Flower and Stone talk about the wall before the game begins, and while Pozzi sarcastically suggests building it for them, Nashe says, "a dollar for every stone in your *wall*." At the end of the game, when Nashe and Pozzi find themselves owing the millionaires ten thousand dollars, Stone states with satisfaction, "Ten thousand dollars. It looks like we've hit the magic number again" (104).

As shown in the examples given thus far, the world of *The Music of Chance* seems peaceful, realistic, and intelligible at first, until certain flickers of mystery, and the strange logic of repetition and capital flow, set in. It is difficult to divine an order that guides the number seven, or to detect any reason behind the simile "wall." Auster's poetics of chance abounds in coincidence, transparent analogies, and symbolism, all of which constantly multiply, rendering significance difficult to decipher. His is a world in which objects rule in devious ways, and people and events are led through internal relations of pre-destination and fatality.

In a striking manner, this poetics resonates with another critical discourse which thinks the relations between chance, money and signification—that of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, especially in his *Seduction*, and “Simulacra and Simulations.” The most critical point of convergence between the two authors is that of their portrait of chance. For both Auster and Baudrillard, chance is clearly not modernity’s physical, statistical concept; nor is it theology’s fate, governed by omniscient divinity. Rather, chance, for these authors, is a more complicated phenomenon: a force which renders things and events seductively interconnected and devoid of the certain meaning for which we long. In fact, “chance” is not chance at all, but something totally different, described by Baudrillard as what comes to life when we find ourselves trapped in a huge game, in a universe full of symbolic chain reactions and empty vertiginous catastrophes. Indeed, “[games . . .] question the reality of chance as an objective law and replace it with an inter-connected, propitious, duel, agonistic and non-contingent universe [. . .] a universe of seduction” (*Seduction* 144).

What Baudrillard describes here, in a way that recalls Auster’s universe, is a *pataphysics* of the world (to use Alfred Jarry’s term, one which Baudrillard adopts). Unlike metaphysics, pataphysics is a broken narrative, written from the perspective of the object and not of the subject; a “philosophy” for which what Baudrillard calls “fatal and banal strategies of the objects,” always tend toward hyperbole, the ironic, the ecstatic and “finally”—the catastrophic. This picture of the world, characterized by Douglas Kellner as a “semiological imaginary” (51), can be seen as an extension of the logic and the order of the game that, supposedly embraces all reality. This replacement of the “social” with the game and its arbitrary rules results in a collapse of meaning and reason. Thus, the strange occurrences in *The Music of Chance*, occurrences which do not comply with any known law, not even with the law of signification, and which leave us bewildered, can now be explained as belonging to the “logic” of rules and games: “the Law is part of the world of representation [. . .] it is a text, and falls under the influence of meaning and referentiality” (*Seduction* 132). Here, “one does not decipher the rules, nor derive pleasure from their comprehension—only their observance matters, and the resulting giddiness” (132). Indeed, the number seven is an object in a strictly Baudrillardian sense: “when the object fails to reveal a rule of the game, the strategy of the object becomes ironic” (174).

So if the fictional world of *The Music of Chance* resembles a game, a huge and incomprehensible game of “chance,” more than any other known

social order, perhaps we can suggest now why strange “objects” such as the number seven and the “wall” might establish the notion of a mysterious and *ironic* fate. As Baudrillard says: “The game’s recurrence proceeds directly from fate [. . .] as a form of ritual incantation—a form of a ceremonial where the signs, because they are so violently attracted to each other, no longer leave any room for meaning, and can only duplicate themselves” (148).

This “violent attraction” of meaning yields resistance. Pozzi, for instance, states in despair: “Assholes [. . .] The whole world is run by assholes” (135). Pozzi thinks he knows exactly what is lurking behind “fate”: the pair of millionaires, to whom he is enslaved after the game. Nashe, on the other hand, tries to remain rational by believing in ordinary causality. Yet, toward the end he chooses to imagine reality in the form of “The Mysterious Barricades,” the famous work by Couperin. “As far as he [Nashe] was concerned,” the narrator states, “the barricades stood for the wall he was building in the meadow, but that was quite another thing from knowing what they meant” (181). To a certain extent Nashe is in the same position as we are when reading *The Music of Chance*. Everything alludes to everything, everything relates to everything, yet, in the *last instance*, no coherence is achieved. This should come as no surprise, however, because according to Auster and Baudrillard, the replacement of known social orders and law-governed paradigms with the universe of games, does not mean we can discern any rules. Rules, in the games of chance of which Auster and Baudrillard are speaking, are incomprehensible because they are themselves interwound with chance.

It is no wonder then that, like Nashe, we too face a *wall*.

What is this wall? Is this wall indeed an effect of the transformation of known and stable laws (of signification, of economy) into the empty rules of the game? Let us leave Baudrillard for a moment, and examine briefly how a Marxist thinker like David Harvey grapples with these questions. Take for example the deceiving “monetary devil” represented in *The Music of Chance* and in many other novels written in the last decade. Following the analysis of Harvey, one could “speculate” that its appearances are a clear symptom of the postmodern era—a way to come to terms with “extra”-textual reality. Harvey asserts that the early seventies were the turning point in the development of capitalism. From this point on, an acute crisis occurred in the modes of representing monetary value (297). For the first time in history, the world economy broke free of its dependence on productive activity (production of goods, supplying

services, military strength, etc.), and its reliance on precious metals such as gold. The world started relying upon immaterial forms of money, such as international speculations, especially in currencies, in different stock-exchange centers. The value of the dollar, for example, which was the global exchange medium, was no longer estimated according to its value in gold or according to the United States' productive and political strength, but instead according to its relation relative to other currencies in the global market. An economy once based upon tangible assets was transformed into the abstract and arbitrary realm of signs. In agreement with Baudrillard, Harvey claims that the crisis in monetary representation generated a "postmodern" crisis in cultural representation: the shift to a culture governed mainly by simulacra, images, and signifiers, in which the "real" is not real anymore (300-03).

Although Harvey's analysis endorses Baudrillardian vocabulary, he nevertheless refuses to surrender completely to a "metaphysics" of simulacra. In the last instance, one finds in Harvey's work as well as in that of other Marxist thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, exploited labor, productive forces, and material base (although this "base" is no longer conceived within a naive realism). In other words, we can pinpoint here a *first* split between Baudrillard's version of postmodernism and Harvey's or Jameson's version: for Baudrillard, there was never a *real* relation attached to linguistic value, but only the illusion (or better still, the simulation) of such a relation. For him, the "postmodern" disturbance of the symbolic order was already inscribed at the beginning in the signifying systems that constitute our world. The recognition of simulation was only a matter of time.

What is of interest for us here, however, is not a dispute over different ontologies, but Harvey's and Jameson's ("Cognitive" 354; *Postmodernism* 260-78) eagerness to position even the highest forms of financial abstraction (such as fictitious capital) in relation to systems of meaning and social justice. This approach is enabled, as Laurence Harris clearly demonstrates, because even fictitious capital is dependent in the last instance on production capital, and thus on labor (30). This insistence on questions of justice and labor constitutes a *second* split with Baudrillard's totally different picture of *capital*, a picture which challenges all the basic concepts of Marxism, and especially those of value and ethics. According to Baudrillard: "Capital doesn't give a damn about the idea of social contract which is imputed to it: it is a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing else [. . .] it is a sorcery of the social relation, it is a *challenge* to *society* and should be responded to as such ("Simulacra" 174).

Surprisingly, Baudrillard does not find speculations to be the true playing ground for this form of capital. Rather, it is in gambling that capital reveals its true *seductive* nature: “in games [of chance] money is *seduced*, deflected from its truth. Having been cut off from the law of equivalence (it ‘burns’) and the law of representation, money is no longer a sign or representation once transformed into a stake. And a stake is not something one invests. As an investment, money takes the form of capital, but as a stake it appears in the form of a challenge” (*Seduction* 139). Therefore, although there are many similarities between fictitious capital and seduced capital—the centrality of chance, the element of risk, the inclination toward abstraction—they are totally different with respect to their forms, or better still, to the “games” that they play. Whereas the first is regarded (at least in principle) by the holder as an *investment*, which thus carries with it all the “army of (social) metaphors,” the latter is regarded as a *pure challenge*, and thus constitutes only a meaningless passionate duel.

As my interpretation suggests, Auster will enable us to stage this antinomy, or this impossible encounter between the two accounts of capital and of signification, in a new way. However, these two possible interpretations of the role of capital in the “social,” which are brought together in our narrative in a way as yet unspecified, point to another important aspect—the relations which exist between Art and Culture in general, and between the fictional world of *The Music of Chance* and late capitalism in particular. The issue demands an answer here, because we are constantly being confronted with Auster’s vision of society as a huge, meaningless game. Tim Woods, one of Auster’s astute interpreters, has in fact suggested that we should see this confrontation in terms of “cognitive mapping” (159). He argues that Auster is clearly responding to Jameson’s programmatic call to the arts to help us “cognitively map” our relation to the world.

For Jameson, the concept of “cognitive mapping” provides a way to overcome the deadlocks of postmodernism (“Cognitive” 356; *Postmodernism* 51-54). Although Jameson, like other Marxists, holds late capitalism “responsible,” in the last instance, for the acute crisis in representation experienced by contemporary culture, he nevertheless insists, following Althusser’s theory of ideology, that we might find a (partial) refuge from this crisis in art. Ideology, according to Althusser, always distorts the subject’s relation to his or her real life conditions, to the social totality. On the one hand, ideology is a “lived” set of representations of reality, that is, it makes us view reality as elementary, spontaneous, and natural; it helps us feel at home in it. Yet on the other hand, this relation is a *méconnaissance*.

Méconnaissance is the misconception that we, and not society, constitute our world and being. Ideology, therefore, always places the subject in the center of a drama. Since ideology has no boundaries, and as Althusser states, since almost every social domain or practice reproduces it, it is important to find a vantage point from which it could be criticized. In the spirit of the Russian Formalists, Althusser asserts that one of these vantage points is art ("A Letter"). Although art is totally immersed in ideology it can still move away from it, mainly through its ability to construct a certain defamiliarization of reality (222). Armed with this Althusserian concept, Jameson turns to art to help us "cognitively map the world".

These things considered, can the poker game metaphor, so rich in implications and meanings—yet constantly alluding to the notion of social totality as a gigantic game (guided by conventional rules and ultimately devoid of meaning)—fit at all into Althusserian-Jamesonian project? And if so, what exactly can be mapped with the aid of the poker game? Let us begin answering these questions by raising yet another question: in describing the conspiracy of the signs, I disregarded one decisive element—why did the signs, like the wall and the number seven, take the side only of the millionaires? After all, once they had won the lottery, luck was always on their side. Indeed, at one point in the novel Auster deals directly with this question. Flower tells Nashe and Pozzi how he knew which numbers would win the lottery. Flower used to be an accountant, and claims to have developed a personal relation with numbers, regarding them as souls. This is how he describes them, "twelve is upright, conscientious, intelligent, whereas thirteen is a loner, a shady character who won't think twice about breaking the law to get what he wants" (73). The rest of this description is even more fanciful. Not surprisingly, we notice that the millionaires do not explain the meaning of the number seven. "The bettor," says Baudrillard, "claims that anything can be seduced—numbers, letters, or the laws that govern their distribution. *He would seduce the law itself.* Here lies the 'immorality' of games" (*Seduction* 144). Thus, we see that the gambler over-reads (i.e., seduces the sign) in order to get rid of reading, of the necessity of reading. Personification becomes a process of the seduction of the law of significance, transforming it into the rule of insignificance. Indeed, Flower and Stone seem to be true seducers in the Baudrillardian sense. They were the first to challenge Pozzi to come and play with them, and he—not knowing that they took poker lessons from one of America's best players—falls into their trap. "To seduce," writes Baudrillard, "is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness" (83).

Nevertheless, this example of the seduction of numbers and perhaps even of the rivals themselves (Nashe and Pozzi), also points to the way in which dimensions of justice and ethics are disposed of during the process. After all, is it a mere coincidence that the stand which the millionaires take towards numbers is opposite to the stand that they take toward Nashe and Pozzi: total de-humanization? Indeed, “here lies the immorality of games.” And we should not forget: the millionaires were not playing for money, but only for pure pleasure. This question of the players’ motives is crucial to the communicative situation in which the novel is written and comprehended. It is worth noting that within the horizon of expectations of the readers, gambling does not aim at making money but at being entertaining. In fact, empirical studies (such as Abt et al. [11] and Michael B. Walker [6]) show that the ambition of making a swift and easy fortune is near the bottom of a gambler’s list of motivations. Therefore, even when gamblers lose money, which is usually the case, they do not feel cheated. While subscribing to this vague notion of “entertainment,” Baudrillard, nevertheless, interprets gambling as a token of something else, not desire, but the gamblers’ *passions* and *seductions*. According to Baudrillard, “it makes no sense to reduce [gambling] to an economic logic that would speak of conscious investment, or to a logic of desire that would speak of unconscious motives” (*Seduction* 134). Gambling establishes a *totally different order of satisfaction*: “Investments and counter-investments—they belong to the psychic economy of drives and sex. Games, stakes and challenges are the figure of passion and seduction” (140). Seduction always places us in an arbitrary duel with the other, in which the stakes are the only thing that count. Seduction is, as Mike Gane states, “a play of challenge and response, and of reversibility of position, of metamorphosis of role, even of being” (63). This is one reason why gambling is seduction’s favorite playground.

But things were not always like this. Due to gambling’s character as a denigrated miniature model of the stock exchange, drawn especially from the common central element of speculation and the dramatic fluctuations in the players’ capital, it was seen in previous eras of capitalism as a subversive element that should be outlawed. This notion underwent dramatic change once gambling became commercial and legalized and was accepted as “entertainment” (Abt et al. 191-209). The legitimization of gambling was facilitated by luxurious hotels offering, in addition to gambling, every other possible means of pleasure. People from all levels of society began to come to gaming centers for entertainment and excitement, and not primarily to make money. In this respect, late capitalism

could be characterized as the era in which the “proper” conduct and manners of gambling were allowed to be exercised openly.

Thus the pair of millionaires, Flower and Stone, did not gamble for money. This is what we are made to believe; after all, they have more money in their bank account than they could ever spend in their lifetimes. The ones who did come to the poker game in order to make a quick fortune as a substitute for work, were Nashe and Pozzi. The four players did play for money, and when the time came to claim the stakes, the millionaires would not relinquish. On this point *The Music of Chance* produces an effect of total disorientation. The reader’s identification, very carefully constructed up to this point, is with the losers. We feel that there is something fundamentally unjust in the millionaires’ insistence on being paid. But, at the same time, we also realize that the millionaires’ attitude is quite normal. After all, in poker, as in any other game, each and every move, including victory itself, is regulated according to particular *rules*. The world of games is precisely a world in which justice, if it is at all meaningful to use such a concept here, is always with the winners.

Nevertheless, the specificity of gambling lies in the fact that money for the players is not only a means to keep score; the pawns also belong to another totally different world which is not considered a game at all: they belong to the “economic order.” In the economic world, the notion of justice, the judgment regarding who wins and what the fate of the loser should be, is, at least in principle, meaningful. So under which category does Nashe’s and Pozzi’s loss fall? Is it under the category of the poker game which makes it clear that they have to pay, or is it under the category of the economic order under which the question of the payment is open? What would have happened had they, as a result of a regular business failure, become indebted to, say, a bank? The novel itself suggests this possibility as Flower turns to a wall safe with these words: “[the safe is] perfectly empty. I thought we could use it as our bank. Cash for chips, and the cash goes here” (91). Although Flower speaks of the “bank” in a metaphorical way, he is dead serious here. It is clear to the readers that if we displace the situation into a regular business venture, it would be Nashe’s and Pozzi’s duty to pay the debt. The scene and the rest of the novel suggest that the rule and the law can produce exactly the same effects, and can entail the same powerlessness of the player. Considering the fact that, in Auster’s portrait of America, the social order is progressively evolving into the same hermetic and enclosed universe as that of the game, we could say that he subscribes to Jameson’s cultural diagnosis regarding our current inability to question anymore whether capitalism is

indeed the best social order possible (“Cognitive” 356; *Postmodernism* 263).

Indeed, with the aid of poker, and the ethical discord we experience in relation to the millionaires, Auster provides us with a framework in which we can envision the imbrication of the social order with that of the game, such that we act in reality as if it were a game whose rules cannot be changed and as if, once it is “decided” that the winner takes all, no one even thinks of raising an ethical question (cf. Woods 160). It is easy now to observe how the work of the poker metaphor in *The Music of Chance* leads us to the hypothesis that the ideological function of the gaming industry in late capitalism is to make us believe that *all the rest is not a game*. Thus, gaming aims at reproducing the imaginary, false distinction between the “real” world, in which there is reason and justice (at least in principle) in the distribution, accumulation, and spending of money, and the world of games in which the arbitrary rules are the only authority. We could further say that this places gaming in the same position as all other cultural scenarios in the age of simulation: the scenario of “an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter” (“Simulacra” 172). In other words, *The Music of Chance* suggests that the metaphor of the game, applied conventionally, to the global money markets, should be taken seriously.

Yet, as Althusser has taught us, assigning an imaginary status to ideological distinction doesn’t mean that it stops being effective in our life, or that we can easily be rid of it. In fact, this might be the place to ask why this particular imaginary distinction is sustained by society in the first place? What are the limits of this imaginary? And does the cultural scenario of gaming have other functions apart from supporting the “artificial perimeter”? I suggest that at these points Auster departs from Baudrillard and that he does so by bringing this imaginary distinction back to the table for one more round in the game of interpretation. Auster’s last round reveals the limits of Baudrillard’s vocabulary.

The last round begins when the players themselves insist on converting their money into chips. As we recall, this is the moment when Stone introduces them to the empty safe in the wall, he calls it “a bank,” where he intends to keep their money until the game ends. Whereas we presented this moment before as a testimony of the blurred boundary between the financial system and the sphere of the game, now we could ask why this conventional boundary needs to be sustained at all with the aid of chips? If money is indeed totally transformed into a stake, a challenge, why does it need the specific body of chips? Do chips constitute an instance of mere

(blank) parody of value, as Baudrillard would claim (*Seduction* 150-51), or a necessary “trans-action”? Doesn’t this “conventional” procedure suggest conversely that in games, money does not abolish its elements of (libidinal) investment and capital, but merely restages them in another scene? Does the player’s shared willingness to put the money “aside,” away from the table, better in a “safe” place, where its status and (real) value remain intact, serve as an indication of the *total transformation* of money, or of the *splitting of its essence*? Is it possible to argue, with Baudrillard, that this specific moment of pay, of redeeming the debt, is subjected *only* to the rule, and thus “abolishes the law”? Is it not better to assume that money serves in poker both as an object of desire (hence “an investment”), and as an object of seduction (hence “a challenge”); that it is caught always in a double bind?

As if to further problematize these issues, Auster introduces another turn of the screw in the second part of the novel. As we recall, Nashe and Pozzi, unable to pay the millionaires, offer them a marker instead. The millionaires refuse. They sense that the two “brothers” are potential *cheaters*. Consequently, they force them to pay back the money through manual labor. Interestingly enough, the millionaires’ insistence not only prolongs the closure of the poker game but, more importantly, extends its limits and rules to include severe punishment, illegal actions, and finally a totally new “playing” ground. Thus, what began as an ordinary poker game has now evolved into an enchanted and cruel duel for life and death. In this “post”-poker game, the stakes are much higher; the chips are replaced with bricks; and “building a wall around you” is not just a poker’s (dead) metaphor but a brute “reality.”

This strange extension of the poker game is enabled only because Nashe and Pozzi are regarded as cheaters, players who don’t observe the rules. Baudrillard treats the cheater as an “unsportsmanlike,” alien intruder who “profanes the game’s ceremonial conventions for economic reasons,” the one who introduces “factors of an individual nature” and because of that “destroys the game’s ‘duel’ enchantment” (*Seduction* 140). Conversely, Auster’s narrative, through a different understanding of the place of the cheater, helps us think how these “individual factors” become the game’s vital catalyst, making the wager more passionate and seductive, as well as more vertiginous.

The specific solution that the millionaires came up with in order to bring the game to its “proper” close is also evidence of why Baudrillard is too hasty in regarding law, enjoyment, and capital as irrelevant to, and incommensurable with, the game. It may be true that “[the game] creates

a symbolic pact [. . .] which compels one to pursue the game to the end” (*Seduction* 133), but can we really differentiate between the pleasure obtained by the two millionaires from pursuing the poker to its fatal end on the one hand, and the enjoyment they gain by transgressing the law at the same time? The text cleverly opens this question, but refuses to answer it by keeping the millionaires out of sight throughout the second part of the novel.

One thing is clear though: we know that the millionaires need the law, and particularly its transgression, in order to keep the game going. Contrary to Baudrillard, who expels the cheater from the game, we see that without the law, this move is not so simple. This is because the law itself, and not the ceremonial obligation, ensures the observation of the rules. Thus, it is clearly not that “the game’s sole principal [. . .] is that by choosing the rule one is *delivered* from the law” (*Seduction* 133). In fact, the whole history of gambling can be read in this way as a testimony of the need to enforce the law in order to ensure the proper observance of rules. One only has to take note of the fact that wherever games of luck are prohibited, we find other quasi-institutions which replace the law.

And what about Capital? Baudrillard never asks why one is more willing to cheat, to break the rules, in gambling. Is it not because this willingness, this near compulsion to be “unsportsmanslike,” indicates that gambling is in fact not just a game, but the very place in which seduction and desire are in a constant “duel”? In fact, one could argue that in gambling, the Law and the Rule, and consequently the two forms of satisfaction they entail, are not in opposition, are not even a simulation of one another, but are always co-present in their heterogeneity. This may qualify gaming as itself a kind of massive cognitive mapping—not a simplified simulation of the global market, but the place where the encounter between the two dominant orders of satisfaction and exchange of our time is openly experienced and lived. Thus, returning to our first proposition, gambling is indeed a symptom of late capitalism, albeit a very peculiar one: a compromise formation of seduction and desire, laws and rules, games and “reality.” And like any other social symptom, it constitutes the site where the truth about the social relations appears and is disavowed at the same time (“after all it’s only a game!”).*

* I wish to thank Hannan Hever, Eyal Peretz, David Pearlman, Ilan Safit and Miriam Schler, as well as the two anonymous readers, for their critical help in writing this essay.

WORKS CITED

- Abt, Vicki, James F. Smith, and Eugene Martin Christiansen. *The Business of Risk: Commercial Gambling in Mainstream America*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1985.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review, 1971. 127-86.
- . "A letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre." *Lenin and Philosophy*. 221-27.
- Auster, Paul. *The Music of Chance*. London: Faber, 1991.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "Fatality or Reversible Imminence: Beyond the Uncertainty Principle." *Social Research* 49.2 (1982): 272-93.
- . *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer. New York: St. Martin's, 1988.
- . "Simulacra and Simulations." Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge: Polity, 1988. 168-84.
- Gane, Mike. *Baudrillard, Critical and Fatal Theory*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Harris, Laurence. "Alternative Perspectives on the Financial System." *New Perspectives on the Financial System*. Ed. Laurence Harris, Jerry Coakley, Martin Croasdale, and Trevor Evans. London: Croom Helm, 1988. 7-35.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition Of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into The Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 347-57.
- . *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.
- Kellner, Douglas. *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
- Walker, B. Michael. *The Psychology of Gambling*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1992.
- Woods, Tim. "The Music of Chance: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies Within 'The City of the World.'" *Beyond the Red Notebook*. Ed. Dennis Barone. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995. 143-61.

EYAL DOTAN teaches psychoanalysis and comparative literature at Tel Aviv University. He is presently writing on the subject of identification and ideology.