

CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

Editorial:

Philosophy & Gambling: Reflections from Macao

Mario Wenning, Fiona Nicoll

APA Citation: Wenning, M., & Nicoll, F. (2022). Editorial: Philosophy and gambling: Reflections from Macao. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs147>

© 2022 The author(s)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Authors retain copyright of their work, with first publication rights granted to *Critical Gambling Studies*.





EDITORIAL

Philosophy and Gambling: Reflections from Macao

Mario Wenning, Fiona Nicoll

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs147>

Contemporary gambling spaces, representations and practices are in need of a critical interpretation that is informed by interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities as well as social sciences. To better understand the unique role of gambling in past and contemporary societies, East and West, it is helpful to come to terms with the deeper meaning gambling practices have in our lives, and what significance they hold as distinctive anthropological phenomena.

This special issue includes contributions that were initially presented at the conference “Philosophy of Gambling” held at the University of Macau in October 2019. Macao’s gambling market is one of the largest in the world, and it plays a central role in contemporary gambling studies. The event created a forum in which scholars either specialized in gambling studies, or with an interest in gambling as a cultural praxis, could engage in constructive dialogue. Some of the contributions from the conference in Macau are featured in this special issue, together with other relevant contributions. Articles span the fields of philosophy, cultural studies, communication studies, and anthropology.

References to gambling are ubiquitous in philosophy and the arts, even if they tend to occur at the margins and below the surface of mainstream discourses and artistic genres. In this introduction we will start by turning to one genre, namely the depiction of gambling in film noir. We will then briefly summarize the contributions included in this special issue, including as they relate to Macao.

Gambling in Film Noir

Before turning to the depiction of gambling in film noir, it may be helpful to start with some general remarks about this genre. Film noir emerged from German expressionist film in the 1920s and 1930s. Major directors include Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm

Murnau. The genre is influenced by, to use Ricoeur’s phrase, the “masters of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970): Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Their analysis of what happens in society and in each person’s psychic life below the surface of orderly self-control has served as the theoretical background for the noir genre that is aptly characterized by the attribute of being “noir” or dark. The main period of Hollywood Noir was in the 1940s and 1950s represented by, among others, the directors Orson Welles, Josef von Sternberg, Nicholas Ray and Alfred Hitchcock. The noir genre not only presents obscure atmospheres and plots, but it is also subversive of mainstream cinema. In particular, Hollywood noir serves as a mockery of mainstream Hollywood film, e.g., Westerns, in breaking down established conceptions of action, plots, and heroism. Most film noirs undermine the appearance of Hollywood protagonists marked by stereotypic gender and beauty ideals as well as predictable narrative patterns. Noirs break with the reified cinematic representation of heroic action and happy endings by presenting the human condition as entangled in existential contradictions that cannot be easily avoided, resolved or transformed into a struggle between good and evil in which heroes win over villains.

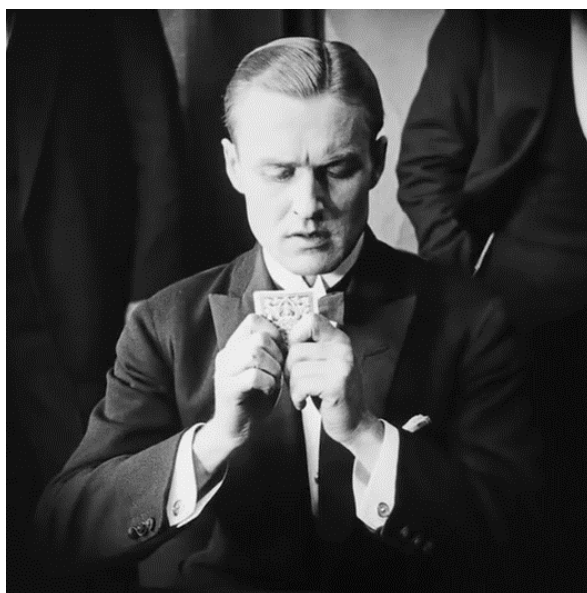
Common cinematic features of film noir include grim urban settings, cramped interiors, gloomy atmosphere, unusual camera angles, and changing speeds. The protagonists are shady characters who inhabit an extra-legal space at the margins of society. There has been a recent upsurge of interest in film noir from the perspective of film philosophy (Oliver & Trigo, 2003; Pippin, 2012; Conard, 2006). Film noir is interesting from a philosophical perspective because it breaks with the assumption that human beings are agents who possess: (1) a clear understanding of the meaning of their intentions and actions, and (2) control over their desires, intentions, and the consequences of



their actions. Instead, film noir presents human agents as: (1) being part of complex and often opaque, entangled, and contradictory plots, (2) engaging in “foolish” actions in spite of knowing better, and (3) simultaneously performing self-reflection and exposing the limits of this reflection and the limits of control.

One example to illustrate these themes from early film noir is that of Dr. Mabuse, the protagonist in *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler: An Image of Time* (Fritz Lang 1922). Dr. Mabuse, also referred to as the great unknown, lives

a double life: (1) a respected medical doctor and (2) a puppeteer who tricks people (e.g., the other protagonist Hull) through his hypnotic, even demonic, powers. The film reveals a radical transformation of modern temporality where acceleration and standstill coincide. In a key gambling scene, the clock races forward and suddenly stands still. It documents how the expansion of modes of gambling have been extended from the action on the casino floor, to the stock market, and to role play in modern society.



Screenshots from *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler: An Image of Time* (Fritz Lang 1922)

One is tempted to ask: Why is gambling a recurring theme not only in this classic work, but more broadly in the genre of film noir? An obvious answer is that gambling takes place beneath the surface of order. In games of chance, the gambler willingly engages in more or less controlled risk-taking. The gambler's

actions are, at least in part, determined by, depending on one's perspective, chance or fate rather than human reason and mere skill. Just like the characters in film noir, the gambler is subject to misinterpretations by himself as well as by others. Thus, Hull, the protagonist in the gambling scene depicted above, does not notice

that he has what it takes to win. His winning hand, a ten of clubs and the ace of diamonds, remains unnoticed to him, even though it is right in front of his eyes. He is being hypnotized by his fellow player Dr. Mabuse, who is introduced as Hull's friend, even if Hull claims that he does not know him and has never met this friend before.

As a second example demonstrates, film noir draws on gambling in luring viewers to exotic spaces that subvert conceptions of order. The film *Shanghai Gestures* (1941) by von Sternberg is set in underworld Shanghai. In his autobiography, von Sternberg recounts his experience of a casino-theater in postcolonial Shanghai that prompted him to make the movie:

On the surface the city was a picture of order, divided into sectors where the citizens of half a dozen nations had their own courts and, until 1923, their own post offices where letters could be mailed with stamps issued by the United States, Hong Kong, France, Japan, Russia, Germany and, at times, even India. But underneath the surface, or around the corner, it was something else, and that is where I went. (...) I spent a pulsating three hours in a turbulent branch of the theatre known as the Great World (...) It was a condensed world, and as complex as if it had not been squeezed together (...) When I had entered the hot stream of humanity, there was no turning back even had I wanted to. (von Sternberg, 1965, pp. 81-82)

The "Great World" in Shanghai was a six-floor building stacked with "every variety of entertainment Chinese ingenuity had conceived". It included, according to von Sternberg:

"gambling tables, singsong girls, magicians, pickpockets, slot machines, fireworks, bird cages, fans, stick incense, acrobats, and ginger (...) actors, crickets in cages, pimps (...) midwives, barbers, and earwax extractors (...) jugglers, herb medicines, ice cream parlors, photographers (...) exposed toilets (...) shooting galleries, fan-tan tables, revolving wheels, massage benches, acupuncture and moxa cabinets, hot towel counters, dried fish and intestines (...) a stuffed whale, story tellers, balloons, peep shows, masks, a mirror maze, two love-letter booths with scribes who guaranteed results, rubber goods, and a temple filled with ferocious gods and joss sticks (...) tightrope walkers (...) seesaws, Chinese checkers, mahjongg (...) lottery tickets, and marriage brokers". (von Sternberg, 1996, pp. 82-83)

The Casino World in *Shanghai Gesture* (1941) seems to present a melting pot where East meets West, a dreamworld of a luring anticulture. The temptation of evil coincides with the promise of infinite possibility. As the protagonist Victoria (Gene Tierney) puts it: "Anything could happen here". In contrast to this sense of possibility, the casino turns out to be a trap: Money rises to the house while unfortunate players keep on falling into an inferno. Colonial tensions persist in spite of cosmopolitan pretensions. The promise of infinite possibility turns into the settling of debts and a lethal encounter with the unacknowledged past in the form of Victoria's mother: the Chinese dragon lady and casino owner Gin Sling (Ona Munson) depicted below. Gin Sling ends up killing her daughter Victoria as an act of revenge against Victoria's British father and also as an act of self-destruction.





Screenshots from *Shanghai Gesture* (von Sternberg, 1941)

The third example highlights that gambling in film noir presents the deliberate acceptance of radical twists of fate and loss of control. In von Sternberg's and Nicholas Ray's *Macao* (1952) the figure of the gambler is that of a drifter who is conscious of wasting time. Nick Cochran (Robert Mitchum) is a cynical, yet honest, ex-serviceman who finds himself caught up in a chase in the Portuguese enclave of Macao. In one of the gambling scenes in the casino "Quick Reward", he overstretched his luck by consciously engaging in the

gambler's fallacy (addressed by Nahum Brown in this special issue). Good luck turns into bad luck, not rarely due to overstretching one's initial good luck. The gambler is a sympathetic outlaw who acts in spite of hesitations and against his better insights. In the end Nick turns in the mobster and casino owner to the international police. He continues sailing with his lover Julie and is inadvertently rewarded by being cleared of a former shooting charge. Unlucky in gambling, lucky in love.





Screenshots from *Macao* (von Sternberg and Ray, 1952)

Film noir presents us with an archeology of modern times and practices in which the gambler figures prominently as a hero and a victim who plays and is being played. Gambling representations in film noir reveal the human capacity of letting ourselves be fooled deliberately. We take it that the conception of human agency presented in film noir is better suited to approach the cultural praxis of gambling than, for example, models such as that of game theory with its assumptions about fully rational agents engaged in calculations exclusively aimed at profit-maximization. Instead, the modern gambler in film noir is depicted as playfully overstressing her luck to the point of self-destruction with the promise of occasionally winning. We will now leave the movie theater and turn to the distinctive aspects of gambling highlighted by the contributions included in this special issue.

Contributions

The first piece, "On Card Games", is to our knowledge the first English language translation of a fragment written by Hegel. The text was originally composed in 1798 when Hegel was living in Frankfurt. This rich and densely argued document addresses the relationship between gambling, on the one hand, and understanding, judgment, and god, on the other hand. Hegel distinguishes gambling in modernity from the

role of art in Greek culture. The modern gambler is restless and lacks the calmness of spirit typical of Greek works of art. Hegel is interested in a typology of different kinds of gamblers. In particular he discusses the "cold" or dispassionate gambler. In contrast to the rare case of the dispassionate gambler, most gamblers are interested in the play of the passions of fear and hope. The document reveals that the philosopher of reason, necessity, and the absolute spirit, himself an avid card player of the card games L'Hombre and Whist, was captivated by the way in which gambling captures the spirit of the modern age. While gambling is distinguished from reason and morality, it is a significant activity for two reasons. First, gambling allows human beings to rehearse their understanding and power of judgment. Secondly, gambling makes explicit the - usually only implicitly tolerated - role of chance in human affairs.

In "Absorbed in Play and Gambling: Gadamer and Csikszentmihályi", Csaba Olay presents a phenomenological approach to explain "how and why playing and gambling are attractive for us" (p. 126). Drawing on Gadamer, Olay emphasizes the ontological character of play. Not only does play exceed subjectivist interpretations, it is amusing, and liberates us from the seriousness of life, while creating a different sense of playful seriousness. The article then turns to

Csikszentmihályi's conception of flow. Flow is an optimal experience consisting in "a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation" (p. 129). Olay identifies an analogy between Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* and the distinction between "heterotelic" and "autotelic" actions in flow psychology. While *praxis* is autotelic in being intrinsically meaningful, *poiesis* is heterotelic in being directed at a goal exterior to the activity at hand. Gambling, and in particular, games of chance are interesting to consider in this context, first, because they have the potential of being pleasurable even though the outcome is not based on personal skill. Yet, they create an illusion of having some control of an unknowable future. To pursue the question whether there is a "dark flow", a form of being absorbed that is pathological and leads to addiction and a loss of autonomy, the paper distinguishes episodic experiences from those that contribute to lasting human growth and flourishing.

In her contribution "Daring to Play Oneself: Gambling, Psychoanalysis and Practical Self-determination", Judith-Frederike Popp addresses the relationship between play and autonomy. More specifically, she interprets daring, understood as the willingness to take a risk as "a fundamental attitude of playful openness towards the uncertainties of life" (p. 135). When subjects gamble in a non-pathological manner, they play themselves and let themselves go. Gamblers alternate between moments of determining who they are – or might be – and moments of letting themselves be determined. This playful self-experimentation is achieved only as long as subjects feel secure in a certain environment. Moreover, they need to be supported by an empathetic other. Drawing on psychoanalysis as well as anthropology, Popp demonstrates that daring to play oneself is an essential component of practical reason. Subjects suspend the pressures of self-identification and self-control rooted in a one-sided construction of rationality. "Becoming a person", Popp demonstrates, "involves an existential dare that everything will go as planned as well as the willingness to accept the reality that everything will continue differently than planned" (p. 140). Ending with methodological reflections, the paper cautions against the potential tendencies of gambling philosophers to either pathologize or romanticize the figure of the gambler. Instead, Popp calls for a critical as well as interdisciplinary interpretation of the potentials of diverse gambling practices.

Rick Dolphijn's article, "What Matters in Macao: Situating the Game in the More-than-Human City," critically engages with the space of Macao to formulate an original provocation within accounts of play and games that are constrained by 'the normal game'. Drawing on the work of architects and anthropologists, and the philosophy of Deleuze, he offers an account of game and play that is "materialist" and "nomadic" rather than "transcendentalist" and "sedentary". Traversing

examples of play spaces and architectural innovations that are designed to transform dominant paradigms of human subjectivity, Dolphijn considers Macao within a broader project of reimagining human and non-human entailments of urban space. His original intellectual journey illuminates an infinite and ideal game of chance that is ultimately uncontainable in the safe and enclosed environments of commercial gambling architecture.

In "The Gambler's Fallacy: Aristotle's Sea Battle Paradox and Kierkegaard's Response", Nahum Brown focuses on the mistake in reasoning that consists of inferring from independent past events to make predictions about the future. Rather than an unwarranted lapse in judgment, the gambler who commits the fallacy may believe that skill is relevant in games of chance, or that the future is not radically independent of the past or that she possesses special perception that allows her to make warranted predictions based on past patterns. Brown relates the gambler's fallacy, with its emphasis on the psychology of the gambler, to Aristotle's Sea Battle Paradox. According to the latter, a future event, in this case a sea battle, appears to be both determined and undetermined, which contradicts the law of the excluded middle. Aristotle resolved the paradox by distinguishing a determined past that combines necessity and actuality from a still undetermined, possible future. There is a necessity of actualization (the sea battle will or will not happen), but no determinate actualization of future events (the sea battle must happen). Kierkegaard tries to resolve the paradox differently. A strong advocate of indeterminism, he rejects Aristotle's conception of necessity. Brown distinguishes two interpretations of the gambler's fallacy and defends the one according to which the gambler believes that the future can be revealed rather than assuming that the gambler can influence the future. Ultimately, she "is the person who forgets that the past has come into existence, and from this forgetfulness, thinks that the future can be combined with necessity, as if it were a matter of skill whether the gambler can learn to see how the future will fork" (p. 158).

In their contribution "'Almost the Same but not Quite': The Camouflage of Play in Digital Gambling Iconography", Fiona Nicoll and César Albarrán-Torres explore recent shifts in the visual dimensions of gambling platforms. They identify a tendency in which "gambling can be camouflaged as play and playful entertainment can be camouflaged as gambling" (p. 168). The creation of spaces of "safe risk" in which consumers are confronted with familiar themes draws on new techniques of meta-communication. The contribution draws on two case studies related to "Sex and the City" and the Robinhood investment platform. The iconographic adaptations of "Sex and the City" shows how popular film iconography is being transformed from the image of sexually liberated

metropolitan woman to objectifying women to serve patriarchal forms of entertainment and consumption. The example of Robinhood demonstrates the camouflage of finance as play in digital investment schemes with often very real consequences. The contribution concludes by offering a critical reflection on what is concealed in the camouflage of play and gambling: “Behind the world of cute kittens, sexy girls out on the town, and redistributive Robin Hoods, powerful machines of economic extraction are at work” (p. 171).

Building on themes of architecture and containment, Kah-wee Lee focuses on the strategic capture and containment of the Integrated Resort (IR) both as a concept and as a set of material and discursive practices of cultural space-making. He begins his article, “The Myth of the ‘Integrated Resort’: Selective History, Retrospective Branding, and Fungible Assets,” with examples of current corporate discourses through which the IR appears as an imported model of economic development through which Asia can normalize commercial gambling expansion. He demonstrates how the highly selective histories on which this representation of the IR relies not only enable its retrospective branding but mask its role as a portfolio of fungible assets for global corporations. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork within industry events and architectural analysis, he shows how a pervasive myth of a transnational IR model of economic growth in Asia obscures the political negotiations between gambling corporations and national and subnational governments on which large casino projects ultimately rely.

This special issue has been enriched by a fascinating illustrated commentary by Richard Fitzgerald and Mark R. Johnson. The authors link consumers’ experiences created by the thematic architecture of Macao’s casino resorts to the Great Exhibition, held in London in 1851 to showcase the diversity and scope of the British Empire’s colonial territories. Taking readers on a tour of some of Macao’s most iconic yet generic spaces, their essay reveals the unique cultural landscape that makes this former Portuguese colony and Special Administrative Region of China as fascinating for international intellectuals and tourists as it is for the millions of Chinese gamblers whose gambling sustains its economy.

We also include a timely and topical book review by Sheyla S. Zandonai exploring Janet Ng’s important 2019 monograph, *Dreamworld of Casino Capitalism: Macao’s Society, Literature, and Culture*.

References

- Conard, M. R. (Ed.). (2006). *The philosophy of film noir*. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.
- Lang, F. (Director). (1922). *Der große Spieler: Ein Bild der Zeit* [Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler: An Image of Time] [Film]. Uco-Film GmbH.

- Oliver, K., & Trigo, B. (2003). *Noir anxiety*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Pippin, R. (2012). *Fatalism in American film noir: Some cinematic philosophy*. University of Virginia Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation*. Yale University Press.
- von Sternberg, J. (1965). *Fun in a Chinese laundry*. Macmillan.
- von Sternberg, J. (Director). (1941). *Shanghai Gesture* [Film]. Arnold Pressburger Films.
- von Sternberg, J., & Ray, N. (Directors). (1952). *Macao* [Film]. RKO Radio Pictures.

Acknowledgements


The editors would like to express their gratitude to Elise Sammons for her invaluable editorial assistance and to the contributors of this special issue for their patience during the publication process in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. They would also like to acknowledge financial support from the University of Macau, the China Institute at the University of Alberta, The Alberta Gambling Research Institute and to the many anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback to earlier versions of the articles included in this special issue.


Editor Details

Mario Wenning is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Andalusia. His work focuses on social and political philosophy as well as aesthetics from an intercultural perspective. Recent publications include the coedited volumes *The Human-Animal Boundary* (Lexington, 2018, 2021), *Environmental Philosophy and East Asia* (Routledge, 2022), *The Right to Resist* (Bloomsbury, 2023) and *Intercultural Philosophy and Environmental Justice between Generations* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). He has edited special issues of *Kritike* (2021), *Revista de Cultura* (2020) and *Thesis Eleven* (2017) and translated German philosophers into English. Before moving to Spain, Wenning worked at the University of Macau for thirteen years and held visiting appointments at Kyoto University, the Goethe University of Frankfurt, UC Berkeley and Fudan University in Shanghai.

Fiona Nicoll is Professor and Alberta Gambling Research Institute Chair in Gambling Policy. She is the author of *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity* (2001), *Gambling in Everyday Life: Spaces, Moments and Products of Enjoyment* (2019) and co-editor of *Transnational Whiteness Matters* (2008) and *Courting Blackness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University* (2015). She has also contributed numerous articles and book chapters to scholarship in the following areas: critical race and whiteness studies, queer theory, Indigenous sovereignty, law, feminist studies, reconciliation, cultural economy and critical cultural studies.

ORCID

Mario Wenning  [0000-0002-4904-2629](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4904-2629)

Fiona Nicoll  [0000-0002-0761-0376](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0761-0376)