

## Lotteries, betting, Coca-cola and Octopus Paul. The extraordinary side of the ordinary

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*I'll think of some way to get  
him back. After all...  
tomorrow is another day.*

*(Scarlett O'Hara,  
Gone with the Wind)*

The mass of money invested in different forms of gambling (slot machines, bets, video poker, lotteries, on line casinos, and so forth) has been dramatically increasing in recent years. Just to take the case of Italy (and considering only the legal circuit controlled by the Government), people spent 17 billion euros on gambling in 2000; ten years later the figure had reached 53 billion - 2% of the Italian GDP.

Such a dramatic increase runs alongside the socio-economic crisis that is affecting Italy as well as other Western economies. Thus, while one could expect that in periods of crisis people tend to refrain from spending resources on secondary needs, what happens is exactly the opposite: the more dramatic the crisis and the more uncertain the future, the more people commit to bets and lotteries- in so doing reducing the amount of resources devoted to primary needs.

How can one understand this astonishing phenomenon? Above all, can such an understanding help us to model the process of sensemaking that sustains experience?

### 1. The phenomenology of gambling

It would be hard to conceive of the widespread commitment to gambling as the consequence of the malfunctioning of any mental mechanism and/or personality trait (e.g. control of impulses, self-aggression, masochism) in gamblers. Even if one accepted that in certain circumstances gambling can be a form of psychopathology, this cannot be a generalized interpretation, unless we are to regard most of the population (80% of Italians gamble) as being affected by mental malfunctioning.

This leads to a shift of focus to the phenomenological standpoint, namely to gamblers' subjectivity, the world of meaning that feeds their self-representation of experience - what punters feel and believe about their action, coming together with the action and interpreting it. Needless to say, the contents of the gambler's experience are idiosyncratic, varying from case to case. Nevertheless, keeping to a generalized level of analysis, one can see some recurrent aspects – *faith*, *immediacy*, and *continuity* - which I examine briefly below.

*Faith.* Everyone who has direct or indirect experience of gambling knows that this experience is an intense, pleasant, even inebriating feeling, sustaining the sense of absolute faith in one's own ability to win, to be superior to the world - the latter is presented in the form of Chance and/or other punters. The gambler places bets trusting in the benign face of chance. Because of this faith, people may conceive of gambling as a way of coping with economic difficulties, despite the disadvantageous payoff that, though not highlighted in social communication and advertisement, is easy to recognize. The growth of gambling in times of crisis is a marker of such faith, not justified from a

mere economic or functionalist point of view (for a reading of economic behavior in psychological terms, see Salvatore, Forges Davanzati, Potì & Ruggiero, 2009; Forges Davanzati & Salvatore, 2012), nevertheless essential in the experience of the gambler – gambler punts to win, not to lose money. It is worth noting that what has just been said does not mean that the objective pursued is to obtain an advantage associated with the win. As Dostoevsky (1866/1945) has shown magisterially, the punter is somehow insensitive to the material consequences of the act of betting. The gambler's faith in winning does not concern the material advantage associated with betting, but the local connection between this act and its positive fulfillment – one could say that is *a matter of happiness of the act, rather than of its functionality*.

*Immediacy.* A significant aspect of the phenomenology of gambling is that the pleasantness of gambling is associated not only or not mainly with the amount of the win, but with the temporal closeness between the moment of betting and its outcome. The more immediate the outcome the more appealing it is to punt. It is more exciting to place a bet of a few Euros when the result is immediate than to wait for several weeks before the result of the lottery is revealed. This aspect can be found in the recent evolution of the gambling market – there is a constant tendency to offer forms of gambling where the betting-result linkage is closer and closer and a parallel decline of forms where this linkage takes longer. For instance, the traditional Italian lotteries whose results were known periodically (e.g. weekly, even yearly) have been supplanted by “immediate” lotteries, working through 10 minute cycles.

*Continuity.* The gambler does not consider gambling as a discrete action with a starting point and an end. Gambling is felt and acted as an uninterrupted flow – each bet is just a step of a single, continuous process where any outcome is the triggering event for the following bet. In other words, any punting is not a self-contained act mediating between the subject (the gambler) and the object (the gambling at stake) but a whole, all-consuming world which the gambler inhabits.

The mechanism of the jackpot – i.e. the transformation of the unassigned prize into the prize of the next draw - shows the reciprocal influence of the gambler's feeling of continuity and the structure of gambling – thanks to the jackpot the prize of the single draw is no longer defined within the circumscribed event, but comes to be defined in terms of the participation of the single lottery in the chain of lotteries preceding it. In sum, the jackpot makes the individual lottery a transient moment in a single flow, in which the gambler is immersed. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the jackpot mirrors and assimilates the gambler's feeling of continuity, yet does not invent this feeling. The feeling of continuity is linked to the gambling that took place long before the creation of the jackpot – take, for instance, the many specialized journals that are designed to help punters study statistics associated to lotteries (e.g. to calculate the “late” numbers), so as to make a better choice of the number to bet on in view of its behavior in the previous draws. In sum, the gambler considers the single lottery just a local battle of a perennial struggle. For him/her, any battle, whether lost or won, is just a stage in the preparation of the next one. Punting has an infinite outcome, and thus it has no outcome.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

## **2. A puzzling issue. The intertwining of desire and frustration in the experience of gambling**

The phenomenological picture proposed above is not complete. It has to be integrated with a look at the role played by the experience of *loss*, the experience gamblers have every time the outcome does not fulfill their desire. In this perspective, it is relevant to recognize how both from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint, *losing is a constitutive part of the action of punting*. From a quantitative standpoint, regardless of how far chance may be on their side, gamblers cannot help experiencing frequent defeats. On the other hand, the experience of losing is structurally part of gambling – one of the contents of the possible outcome. The subjective value of winning is such because of the way it is connected with the opposite outcome – losing. In other words, the gambler's experience is drawn by the oppositional tension between the desired state and what-is-other-and-has-to-be-avoided. In sum, losing is not merely within the bounds of the act of gambling, as one of its possible results, but is part of the very definition of winning; the latter acquires subjective value only if placed in dialectic opposition to losing.

The constitutive nature of losing in gambling is an important characteristic of this field of experience, distinguishing it from other forms of practice. For instance, consider the situation in which, thanks to a strong commitment, one attains a longed-for prize for a certain merit. Also in that case the person has the experience of obtaining something of value, strongly desired, thanks to commitment. Yet it is not the same feeling as in gambling, because the win is not associated with the risk of losing – winning does not have the sense of: |not losing|. From a complementary point of view, consider the circumstances in which the search for the gratifying state is associated with a risk of negative collateral effects – i.e. addiction, smoking, unsafe conduct. What distinguishes such practices from gambling is the fact that in the former cases the negative effects are a byproduct of the act, not an inherent part of it. For instance, driving dangerously may lead to a crash; yet, in itself, the crash is not an outcome of the action of driving, but a result of its failure. Again, one can see a difference between gambling and those experiences directly aimed at the negative event/state, experienced as the source and the content of pleasure – e.g. watching a horror film or jumping from a high bridge.

The constitutive nature of losing in the experience of gambling raises a puzzling issue. On the one hand, the gambler appears to be a person experiencing and acting out a powerful desire. The faith in winning, the search for the immediacy of the outcome, as well as the feeling of gambling as a totalizing whole are all indications of a form of subjectivity intensively projected onto the conquest of a Valuable Object (I use this term in the psychoanalytic way, namely to indicate the dimension of otherness constructed by desire, Klein, 1967; see also Muller, 1996; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011), felt as being necessarily one's own. On the other hand, gambling is a source of systematic, inherent frustration and disappointment, a symbolic place where people cannot but encounter loss in their pursuit of the win.

In sum, the phenomenological content of the punter's experience is a crucible – in variable proportions – of positive feelings (expectation, desire, explosive joy, excitement), but also negative ones (disappointment, pain, shame, anger, anxiety). And the co-presence of such oppositional elements is the source of what discriminates between those who dislike gambling, regarding it as a circumstance leading to unpleasant events, and the *player* – the one whose motivation seems to be fed, not reduced, by the

experience of loss. A clue to this paradox can be found in the commonsensical image of the gambler as someone heading for disaster – an Italian proverb states: “I am not concerned about the fact that you have lost, but the fact that you want to recuperate”. How to understand such a puzzling form of experience – where the pleasure of pursuing a desire is made up, intertwined and fed by its frustration? How can two such apparently contradictory aspects sit together?

### **3. A semiotic view of gambling. Some premises**

To find an answer to the puzzling issue one has to go beyond the phenomenological standpoint, encompassing it in a more comprehensive, semiotic vision. The interpretation I propose below moves in this direction. It is based on two assumptions.

The first assumption is the idea that gambling is a semiotic phenomenon, namely a dynamics of sensemaking and as such has to be interpreted. This involves regarding video-poker, betting, spending money on lotteries not merely as a behavior resulting from a certain state of the mind (a feeling, a motive, a computation, a belief) that triggers it, but as an *act of meaning*, namely a dynamic gestalt within which action and states of mind co-participate in producing sense. More specifically, gambling is an instance of sensemaking through which the person shapes experience, construing a world charged with sense (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). Accordingly, the act of gambling lends itself to be seen as a *field sign* (Valsiner, 2007), namely as a generalized meaning that can transform experience by triggering further generalized meanings (e.g. the benign nature of chance; challenge; the ability to endure bad luck; endless *next-ness*...). Gambling, in this view, works like very many other performative acts of meaning (Austin, 1962) – e.g. avoiding taxation, bullying, honoring parents... – whose generalized and generalizing symbolic force enables them to make up a world of sense, far beyond their specific content and local displacement/target (Salvatore, 2012).

An important consequence of this semiotic view - gambling as a semiotic totality of action, language and states of mind - is that gamblers' phenomenological experience must not be considered the external cause of their conduct; rather, the gambler's experience is intertwined with the action, both (experience and action) being part of the whole field of sense that gambling comprises.

The second assumption concerns the bivalent nature of sensemaking (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005; Carli, 2007; Ribeiro, Gonçalves & Santos, in press). According to this idea, signs have both an *in praesentia* and *in absentia* side. The phenomenological content of the gambler's self-representation constitutes the *in praesentia* side of meaning – the aspect of sensemaking directly experienced by the interpreter (in this case: the gambler). At the same time, the *in praesentia* side can be experienced only in terms of a more generalized context of meaning – the *in absentia* side of the sign - in accordance to which it acquires its sense. The sense of the sign emerges from the cooperative tension between the *in praesentia* the *in absentia* side of the sign. The latter – which has to be considered the *version of the world* the interpreter has to adopt in order to make the *in praesentia* side of the sign (Salvatore, 2012) thinkable – namely, available to interpretation. In the final analysis, this means that the *in absentia* side of the sign is the further generalized meaning the interpreter has to add onto the *in praesentia* side of the sign in order to complete it and thus to enable it to “stand for something else” (Salvatore, Tonti, Gennaro, in press).

The lottery provides a direct image of the cooperative tension between *in praesentia* and *in absentia* sides of the sign, from which meaning emerges. The prize associated with a given number – and therefore the meaning of the selected number – depends neither on its content (whether it is 1 or 1,000 is irrelevant), nor on the very fact of having been selected in itself. Rather, what defines the prize is the relationship between the number and all the others that might have been selected. The selected number would have a different value if extracted from a set of 100 numbers or from a set of 10,000 numbers.

### *From gambler to gambling*

The two assumptions explained above lead to a peculiar hermeneutic strategy that can be summarized in two basic shifts. Firstly, one has to ask what is the meaning of gambling, rather than what causes it. Secondly, one has to consider this meaning not only in terms of its *in praesentia* side – i.e. the phenomenological content of the gambler's experience – but in terms of the *context of meaning* (i.e. the *in absentia* side of the sign) that makes such experience a subjective and intersubjective matter endowed with sense - namely a piece of existence that can be constituted as such, therefore recognized, represented, negotiated; in sum inhabited by the subject (Salvatore, in press).

Incidentally, it is worth highlighting the theoretical significance of this second shift. It entails moving from the meaning of *gambler* to that of *gambling*. In the former case, the meaning is the inner semantic and lived content of experience (feeling, representation, scripts and so forth) through which gamblers understand and orient their participation in the reality of the game. Conceived thus, the subjective meaning is the way of adjusting (in a more or less autonomous and creative mode, not relevant here) to the pre-existing and independent reality of the game. In the latter case, the meaning is what emerges from the act of gambling, namely the totality of the lived experience of the act (*in praesentia* side) together with the further generalized context of meaning (*in absentia* side) which must be added in order to make the lived experience interpretable. In the final analysis, the focus on the act of gambling means that the semiotic analysis does not seek to “discover” the meaning hidden below/inside the gambler and as such “pushing” her to act; rather, it seeks to understand the meaning as *what is produced* by such an act. And what is produced is the context of sense the interpreter (whether it be the gambler and/or the researcher) has to add in order to semiotize the experience (Salvatore, in press). In sum, the semiotic analysis focuses on the performative actualization of a world working as the symbolic background of the experience. It is only because of – in cooperative tension with - such a background that experience is able to acquire sense (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). Such a view is consistent with Ricoeur's (1981) idea that the interpretation has to recognize the meaning unfolding from the text, rather than searching for the author's intention. According to this, the fundamental question that must be posed is not: what does the gambler think/feel that leads him/her to gamble, but: what generalized meaning must be taken as the ground of the gambler's experience – that is, what context of sense must be constructed around this experience in order to make it interpretable (Salvatore, in press)?<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> . A link can be found between this way of interpreting human experience and activity and the interpretation of an artistic work in terms of the iconological context governing how the iconographic signs implemented by the work acquire sense, that is, governing how the iconographic signs can be felt and thought as part of a consistent totality (Panofsky, 1939/1962).

#### 4. Gambling as instantiation of the world-as-otherlessness

Due to what generalized meaning does the constitutive intertwinement between winning and losing underlying the phenomenology of gambling acquire consistency and interpretability? In other words, which context of sense works as the grounds for the gambler's otherwise puzzling experience?

##### *The omnipotent desire for the Absolute Object*

The answer I propose is the following. The gambler's experience is grounded on the latent, generalized assumption (i.e. the *in absentia* side of the experience) of the *Absolute (availability of the) Object*<sup>2</sup>, as such always able to be attained by the subject's desire.

From a psychodynamic point of view, such a generalized meaning is rooted in the embodied early infantile feeling of omnipotence. The newborn is immersed in the narcissistic illusion that it is its own desire that creates the object. This illusion is important, because it ensures the constancy of the relation with the object, thus avoiding an otherwise overwhelming experience of frustration that the child's premature psychic apparatus would be unable to support. The illusion is not the mere product of the hallucinatory capability of the child. Rather, in the early phase of life, it reflects the mother's ability to readily fulfill the demands of the newborn infant. In so doing, the mother allows the infant to feel the object as if it were there at the child's complete disposal, to perfectly fulfill its demand. The infant, therefore, may feel fully able to instantiate the object through the act of desiring it. Such a state of initial omnipotence is gradually overcome, as a result of the progressive experience of the absence of the object. The mother, in fact, is good not totally, but *enough* (Winnicott, 1952/1975) – that is, she is able to satisfy the child's desire with a certain degree of efficacy, though it may not be complete. Thus the child progressively experiences the object as an instable duality of presence and absence – where the latter works as the condition of the development of thought, i.e. of symbolic activity (Bion, 1967; Lacan, 1978). As Winnicott (1952/1975) wrote

We allow the infant this madness, and only gradually ask for a clear distinguishing between the subjective and that which is capable of objective or scientific proof. We adults use the arts and religion for the off-moments which we all need in the course of reality-testing and reality-acceptance (p. 224).

Thus, the adult has recognized the unsustainability - the "madness" - of the omnipotent feeling of being capable of creating the Object; yet they do not totally give it up –

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In the final analysis, in both kinds of text - human experience and artistic work – the interpreter has to construct a world – in the former case a local context of sense, in the latter case the cultural background of the work – which has to work as the semiotic environment in accordance to which textual elements are put in relation with each other and in so doing acquire the status of signs concurring to the constitution of meaning.

<sup>2</sup> At the generalized level of meaning that I am referring to, the absolute quality of the Object and the sense of being engaged in the Object in an absolute way are the same. The Absolute Object holds all perfections and therefore also its full availability and relationality. The Absolute Object cannot but be the totally present Object.

keeping some “off-moments” as symbolic places for the pleasant experience, dense with sense, of the perfect relation with the Object. According to my thesis, such symbolic places are not only to be found in the arts and religion, but also in other forms of mundane practices, and in particular - as at stake here – in gambling.

*The semiotic machine of desire: the transformation of loss into lack*

Such a thesis is based on and finds justification in the acknowledgement of how, once one conceives of the absoluteness of the Object as the gambler’s grounding assumption, his/her experience stops being puzzling and can be recomposed in a consistent, meaningful picture.

Take the gambler’s faith in winning. It is something more than, and different from, the hope to get an advantage. The gambler’s faith is the view of winning as taken for granted, as the only horizon of the gambling act. In other words, winning is the way of shaping experience, the only semiotic category available. Needless to say, this does not mean that the gambler does not perceive the loss; rather, it means that such a perception is semiotized through the certainty of winning<sup>3</sup> – consequently it does not arrive to become a fully experienced event, a fact endowed with value of life (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). Rather, it is experienced as a contingent step on the route towards conjunction with the Object. In other words, *in the world of absolute availability of the object there is no room for loss – what it is possible to experience is the contingent lack of being fulfilled by the object.*

A way of understanding the semiotization of loss in terms of lacking is to recognize the action of such a process in other practices. For instance, consider a silence in a conversation. It is not felt as a loss of connection; rather, it is interpreted as a marker of regulation of the turn taking. Thus, the moment of silence is semiotized as being part of a more general totality of fullness and emptiness (i.e. the conversation), both participating in the regulation of the encounter with the other person. The gambler’s loss works as the silence that enables the conversation to go ahead.

The semiotization of loss in terms of lacking provides a way of understanding the gambler’s commitment to gambling. From a purely phenomenological standpoint, this aspect is quite hard to explain – the gambler commits to betting despite the fact that this act tends to be negatively reinforced. Besides, the more negative the experience, the greater the commitment to repeat it (recall the Italian proverb quoted above). On the contrary, from the semiotic standpoint adopted here, the triggering power of the loss lends itself to be understood – insofar as the loss is experienced as a lack, where the lack is the place/condition of the object’s fulfilling (Lacan, 1978), the outcome of the gambling acquires the meaning of the presence of the desired object. In other words, the loss-as-it-were-lack acquires the status of the sign of the fulfilling object – it stands for the desired object. Thus, just as the silence triggers the conversation, the negative experience of losing feeds the desire to punt again and again. In the final analysis, this means that the loss does not work as a frustrating experience constraining/contrasting the desire to gamble – the gambler can never be satiated, because he/she always experiences a lack to be satisfied. Instead, the loss works as the inner trigger of the dynamics’

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<sup>3</sup>. To be precise, one cannot talk about certainty, because it anyway entails the possibility of a difference, even if void of probability. Winning as a horizon means just that – it is the absolute assumption within and in terms of which events are experienced.

reproduction, making gambling a self-feeding flow. In sum, the act of gambling is a semiotic dynamics made up by a peculiar recursive circuit: the loss experienced as a lack is the sign of the desired object that in turn feeds the subject's desire, in turn signified in the performative terms of the commitment to punting. The outcome of such a semiotic chain does not make it end. Whether the outcome of the bet is positive (and this is more consistent with common sense) or negative, it is experienced as the sign of the fulfilling object, and therefore it works as the trigger of the desire. And thus, the circuit goes on.

*The Gambler, Scarlett O'Hara and King Midas*

As observed above, the object the gambler engages in is not defined by the single bet. Rather, it is the circuit in itself which is experienced as the lived field of the relation with the Object. Thanks to such a transformation, the act of gambling is able to work as a constant source of the Object's availability. Any instance of punting is void of value in itself, it is only the local, contingent manifestation of the state of the relationship with the whole Object, whose presence is however assured. The search for immediacy and the feeling of continuity characterizing the gambler's phenomenology lend themselves to be interpreted in the light of this basic semiotic transformation. It can be considered the outcome of a mechanism of abstractive generalization – the single event of betting is devoid of any value other than its being a local specimen instantiating the generalized class of relationship with the Object. In the final analysis, one can say that the gambler does not experience the punter; rather, he/she is engaged in the ongoing process of “*puntingness*.”

According to this perspective, the gambler can be compared to the frustrated lover that subjects herself to the perennial torture of searching for the loved object and finding rejection - where such rejection is just lived as the instant experience of a lack, the not-yet-moment, to be fulfilled through a continued search. In so doing, the lover, like the gambler, puts loss in place of the experience of the Object – even if at the cost of transforming it from a specific experience to the flow of engagements experienced as a single totality. The magic quality of such a transformation lies in the fact that nothing can interrupt it – it rewrites the otherness so that instead of working as the source of constraint, it works as the device of reproduction of the flow. In the final analysis, this means that through gambling the desire acquires the semiotic status of a sign that is able to satisfy itself. What is gratifying in gambling is not the quality of its outcome – rather, it is the act of desiring per se, since this act can contain the trace of the presence of its object – to instantiate it. This capacity is such regardless of the destiny of the act, that is, the mundane answer to it in terms of win or loss.

In sum, in gambling the desire is enabled to satisfy itself<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, gambling can be view as a semiotic performative machine transforming the absence of the object (the loss) into the sign of its presence (the lack/not-yet-moment). When Scarlett O' Hara views her husband, Rhett Butler, turning away from her, her reaction is to state that she will recapture him – there is not loss, but only a contingent lack, which will be fulfilled in the next moment of the infinite flow of time (“tomorrow is another day”). The loss object

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<sup>4</sup> . "desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire." (Žižek 1997, p. 39).



(Rhett) is transformed into an instantaneous absence ready to be overcome (tomorrow). Scarlett has had a negative outcome, and this makes her ready for the next gamble.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Seen in this way, the grounded generalized meaning instantiated by the act of gambling can be paralleled to the myth of King Midas. According to the interpretative key proposed above, the myth of King Midas is the dramatized image of the absolute power of the desire to generate its object through the act of desiring it— what is desired (gold) comes into being *because of the very fact of being desired*. Yet, the absolutization of the power of desire defines the condition of its destruction — King Midas cannot but experience objects in terms of the singular quality of their being the Object of his desire — namely as gold. And this is the same as saying that King Midas does not meet the object, whose charge of otherness makes it suitable to be engaged in a contingent, constrained (and because of that meaningful) relationship; rather it is able and at the same time condemned to meet only and always the same perfect Object: “*goldness*”. This is the *tragedy of absolute desire* — its full realization is *ipso facto* its total negation. The complete saturation of desire is the death of desire.

As we have said above, the gambler shares with King Midas the same ground — the sense of the absolute availability of the Object. On the other hand, it can be considered a form of escaping from the tragedy narrated by King Midas’ destiny. The loss experienced by the gambler provides such a way of escaping, introducing the local failure of desire. Such a failure plays a bivalent semiotic role: it inserts a vivifying distance between the desire and the object and at the same time signifies it as its overcoming. If one wants, the gambler is a sort of King Midas with gloves — the bearer of an absolute desire contingently unable to be fulfilled and thus able to be kept alive.

#### *The Cross and Coca-cola: the sweet pain of loss*

The considerations above lead us to picture gambling in terms of a peculiar dynamics of desire. The act of gambling is the performative semiotic transformation of loss into a lack and the lack into the Object fulfilling it. This transformation consists of a chain of signs, namely a connection through time of generalized meaning each of them standing for the following (Salvatore, 2012).

According to this interpretative perspective, one can conclude that gambling is a *powerful ritual of liquidation of otherness*, namely of the capability of the object to produce its own absence for the subject. Thus, the semiotic outcome of gambling is the *world-as-otherlessness*, the transformation of distance into closeness.

Needless to say, such a ritual can have high costs — it is sufficient to think of how many people are ruined because of gambling. Yet, such costs are the “side effects” of the omnipotent transformation of the outcome into the trigger of the act. These mundane, existential costs enable the powerful semiotic mechanism to work and produce the psychological experience of the unconstrained availability of the object — which is the same as saying: *the cancellation of death*, since death is the paradigmatic, radical form of otherness.

One can note the similarity of such a construction with the basic meanings of Christianity: a God that makes itself human, and in so doing transforms its radical distance (the Lord of the Skies) into closeness (Jesus as a human being), defeating death for ever. Moreover, this transformation is marked by sacrifice (the Cross), the symbolic place where death (the maximum cost) is the sign of the conjunction with the Object – i.e. the overcoming of the distance generated by original sin.

An important consequence of such semiotic dynamics is the moving into the background – in psychoanalytic terms: the scotomization – of the outcome of the action of gambling, namely the mundane consequence of it. The gambler punts and the outcome of its action is freed of its mundane, functional meaning (e.g. the alienation of resource), and therefore able to be seen as a sign standing for the Object.

This semiotic dynamics is not a peculiar trait of gambling. Daily life is the source of many circumstances in which this kind of dynamics is involved. For instance, take the case of drinking coca-cola or any other sugary drink. One knows that after drinking coca-cola the thirst increases, rather than decreases. However, this negative outcome (i.e. the failure of the point of drinking) is not removed – rather it is pushed into the background, neutralized as an element entering the regulation of the act. And this is so because what is made pertinent in drinking coca-cola is the actual embodied experience of drinking an iced liquid in itself, as the lived instantiation of the fulfillment of the desire to be refreshed. And it is worth noting that the neutralization of the consequence of such drinking – an even more intense thirst – is not only the condition for experiencing drinking as the desired fulfillment; it is also the trigger of the further desire to drink, which in turn can be addressed with more coca-cola, in a circuit that tends to the perennial. In sum, drinking coca-cola is like gambling – a desire experienced in absolute performative terms through its recursive local frustration.

This peculiar form of scotomization of the outcome of the act can help to interpret an otherwise puzzling aspect of the gambler's phenomenology – the one recalled above in terms of immediacy and feeling of continuity. Gamblers experience loss – they are not insensible to frustration. Yet such frustration does not produce learning – rather, it seems to motivate them to gamble further. A popular way of explaining this aspect is to consider it as the effect of a deficit, namely in terms of a shortage in the functioning of any mechanism (e.g. impulse control; capability to appreciate the consequence of one's own action...) or as the product of a self-destructive motivation. Differently, the view proposed here leads us to interpret the gambler's experience of loss as a feeling lived as local, contingent, however projected on - and so felt in terms of - the conjunction with the fulfilling Object it stands for. Accordingly, the gambler's negative feelings associated with the loss are lived as the sign of the object being reached. Thus, the gambler can appreciate the content of reality of the loss – and thanks to this, implement strategies and choices to avoid it – and at the same time consider the feelings associated with it as part of the pleasant experience of gambling. Somehow this gives the impression that he/she is indifferent, anesthetized to it - or even running towards it.

## **5. The extraordinariness of the ordinary**

The Absolute Object is a meaning which, due to its affective, hyper-generalized value (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Valsiner, 2007), is hard to describe analytically. It grounds

language, rather than lending itself to be held by it. Thus, a way of depicting it is to gather a set of cues of it from a plurality of domains<sup>5</sup>.

*Recursivity as scotomization of otherness*

From a phenomenological point of view, the feeling of being engaged in the Absolute Object characterizes topic moments, charged with emotional activation - think of the experience of falling in love. In circumstances like that, one feels that one's boundaries expand till they encompass the world and are encompassed by it - belonging is felt as totality: inner and outer merge in a single whole. Again from a phenomenological point of view, psychological marginal states of consciousness, as well as basic forms of rupture of the sense of identity (depersonalization) are experienced in terms that recall the experience of diffusion of the self as if it were a liquid dissolving within the whole.

A form of absolutization of the object is that which is enacted in terms of the activation of recursive loops. In those cases, recursivity is at the service of the negation of constraints/otherness. Insofar as the recursive loop leads to the re-introduction/incorporation of the outcome into the process which produced it, it allows the process to go on as if it were a self-contained mechanism. The outcome loses its value as an instance of the world, as such working as constraints of the desire. Rather, it is transformed into the trigger for a further desire. A clear example of this powerful semiotic mechanism is provided by the movement of the stock market over the last few years - thanks to the introduction of financial derivatives, the stock market has become a world where choice is separable from its outcome. It is a stock market freed from constraint - it can develop even through its failure - everything it produces is able to feed its reproduction. In the final analysis, the fact that choice is freed from its content of otherness - i.e. the dimension of meaning of the outcome which does not depend on choice and therefore constrains it (in this case, the real economic values of the financial product) - has made it possible for the market to become its own object. Needless to say, this does not actually cancel the constraints of the reality *ad infinitum*, yet it moves it ahead, thus producing *the sense* of unconstrained reality<sup>6</sup>. In so doing the stock market has become the world of the *as-if-there-is-no-world-outside* - an instance of the perfect relation with the absolute fulfilling object.

A similar semiotic use of recursivity as a source of wholeness can also be found in obsessive symptoms - here too, recursivity creates a network of self-referential linkages of the self with the self - the obsessive does not check many times that the door is closed, rather she checks that she has been able to check that the door is closed and so on - allowing her somehow to saturate the relation with the world through its substitution with a self transformed into the self's object.

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<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, such a meaning is not restricted to daily life experiences. One can also find it in philosophical thought. For instance, take the Hegelian ideal of absolute knowledge as the terminal stage of the Spirit that comes progressively back to itself through dialectically incorporating what is other than itself. Consider, furthermore, the phenomenological notion of belonging as the pre-existing linkage that any person cannot but participate in.

<sup>6</sup> As we have learnt through the repeated economic clashes of recent years, the stock market represents reality's constraints only in terms of catastrophic rupture of its own self-referentiality.

*Paul the Octopus. The route to the Object*

Paul the Octopus is a common octopus that lives in a tank at the Sea life Centers in Oberhausen. Paul has become internationally famous for its divinatory powers. Paul was presented with two boxes containing food, each box marked with the flag of a national soccer team in an upcoming match. Paul ate the food from the box with the flag of the winning team in four of Germany's six 2008 Soccer European Championship matches, and in all seven of their matches in the 2010 World Cup. Moreover, he correctly forecast Spain as the winning team when opposed to the Netherlands in the World Cup final. His predictions were 100% (8/8) correct for the 2010 World Cup and 86% (12/14) correct overall. Paul was the focus of enormous interest – newspaper and televisions devoted great attention to its forecasts, till it retired after the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The interest surrounding Paul is a paradigmatic, plastic instance of the recursive model I have proposed above. At an initial level, it is the forecast of an event that is to happen in the future: Paul provides anticipated knowledge about which soccer team will win the match. Yet this is not all - people did not commit to Paul for the sake of forecasting the future winner. Rather they commit to Paul's forecasting capacity in itself- namely, they bet on Paul's bet.

This shift makes the difference - once one recognizes it, one may understand how the meaningful, intriguing content of the event is not the soccer match - this is the stuff of the event, the pretext allowing the semiotic dynamics, not the sense it produces. One could say, it is the input of sensemaking, not the outcome. The outcome is the representation of an inferior animal successfully engaged in an action of betting. On the one hand, this representation is the product of a process of sensemaking- the anthropomorphisation of animals, namely the interpretation of Paul's conduct in terms of decision, choice, forecasting, in final analysis meaningful intentionality. On the other hand, however, in the case of Paul, the anthropomorphisation is inscribed in and is functional to a more general constructive semiotization: the *epiphany of the extraordinary in ordinary life*. Paul's forecasting capacity is not conceivable in accordance to the canons of normality. And the fact that Paul is an inferior animal makes such recognition even more stringent and necessary. In the final analysis, Paul intrigues us because in front of it we are allowed to leave aside the constrained and constraining knowledge we have of life and so we can commit to the idea that there must be something beyond our understanding. The Octopus Paul, thus, is an instance of Mystery, according to the meaning such a term has in the religious tradition - a truth that is so deep that it goes beyond the capability of human reason. Therefore, we can find in the interest for Paul the same form of desire we recognized in betting - a commitment (attributing the ability of forecasting to an animal) allows a failure (the inability to explain this capacity) which conveys the actualization of a deeper, unconstrained relation with the Absolute Object – (symbolized as the ungraspable, mysterious truth). In the final analysis, we meet again the transformation of loss into lack: failure as fact – i.e. the fact of not understanding - is transformed into the quality of the Object – i.e. its ungraspable-ness – taken as a sign of its absoluteness.

This is what makes the inexplicable so fascinating when it lends itself to be seen as the expression of a magic reality blind to normality. The fascinating sense of mystery, in this sense, is the experience of participating in an encompassing world to which we belong in a deeper, fuller way compared to our real capacity to recognize and experience it. The rupture of the ordinary works as the sign of the extraordinariness of the Object.

In the final analysis, it is the feeling of ourselves as enlarged so as to encompass the whole relation with the Object, beyond the local constraints we have to observe. Such a feeling shows itself in many forms - Lévy-Bruhl (1912/1926/1985) defined it as *participation mystique*, recognizing it as the ground of primitive thought. Mysticism, esotericism, but also cartoons (Salvatore, in preparation) and obviously religion are further instances of how such basic semiotic seeking of the perfect relation with the Object - a relation that in its perfection ceases to be a relation, being an indivisible totality to which any part indistinguishable from others belongs.

## **Conclusion**

In the previous pages I have proposed a semiotic interpretation of gambling. My central thesis is that gambling is a ritual of semiotic neutralization of death. I have based this interpretation on the subjective experience of gambling, yet going beyond it, I have considered meaning to be what the act of gambling produces, rather than what triggers/motivates such an act. According to this perspective, I have proposed that gambling enacts a basic semiotic mechanism – the transformation of absence into the presence of the fulfilling Objects. Thanks to such a semiotic mechanism, desire is enabled to (hallucinatorily) satisfy itself.

Before concluding, it is worth highlighting some aspects that characterize my proposal both at the theoretical and methodological level.

First, my thesis entails a conceptual frame merging semiotic and psychodynamic views (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). Such integration provides a rather innovative, promising way of looking at the dynamics of sensemaking (Neuman, 2009, 2010; Neuman & Tamir, 2009; Salvatore, 2012). Its development requires us to move in the direction followed by this paper – to implement a dialectics between general theory and local modeling of specific psychosocial phenomena (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010)– like gambling.

Second, it is worth noticing the specific hermeneutic model adopted above. It starts from, but goes beyond the content of the phenomenological experience, in order to model the semiotic dynamics producing the conditions of such experience (Salvatore, Tonti, Gennaro, in press). This conceptual and methodological choice is mirrored in the refusal to consider what the gambler experiences as the motive for his/her action. A phenomenological assumption like that raises a major theoretical issue – it means reifying the phenomenon to be explained, transforming what has to be understood – the self-representation of experience - into an explicative entity (for a similar argument concerning emotion, see Barrett, 2006). This can be said also from a complementary point of view: the gambler's commitment to betting is made up of the prefigured belief that luck will be kind; yet, if one considered such phenomenological content as the explanation of the act of gambling, one would fall into pseudoempiricism (Smedslund (1988), namely into the fallacy of considering the semiotic linkage among signs to be part

of the same semiotic dynamic totality (i.e. acts and linguistic descriptions) as if it was a causal connection.

Third, further analyses are required in order to validate the interpretation of gambling offered in this paper. However, one important aspect of conceptual validity can be picked up from the previous discussion – the fact that the theory can allow *abductive generalization*. By this term I intend to mean a twofold pathway of knowledge-building (cfr Figure 4). On the one hand, the analysis of the psychological phenomenon has been performed in terms of hierarchical steps of abstractive modeling. In the case of the analysis carried out above, this methodological strategy works in the following way: the empirical contents (e.g. the gambler's subjective feeling) have not been combined with each other; rather they have been connected, as it were, *vertically*, namely through their abductive encompassing in a more abstract theoretical model (e.g. the psychoanalytic notion of Absolute Object). On the other hand, this theoretical model has grounded a horizontal form of generalization – the gambling has thus become a specimen of a general class of phenomena and signs (e.g. the stock market, Scarlett O'Hara, the intriguing interest in Paul the Octopus, drinking coca-cola) modeled through the same interpretative model. In so doing, gambling has been seen both in its local, specific historical content and as the instance of (and a door for) a universal form of relation with the world, crossing time and space.

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Figure 1



Figure 2





Figure 3



Figure 4. The twofold pathway of abductive generalization

