

Pachinko

Pachinko is a slot machine. At the counter you buy a little stock of what look like ball bearings; then, in front of the machine (a kind of vertical panel), with one hand you stuff each ball into a hole, while with the other, by turning a flipper, you propel the ball through a series of baffles; if your initial dispatch is just right (neither too strong nor too weak), the propelled ball releases a rain of more balls, which fall into your hand, and you have only to start over again—unless you choose to exchange your winnings for an absurd reward (a candy bar, an orange, a pack of cigarettes). Pachinko parlors are extremely numerous, and always full of a varied clientele (young people, women, students in black tunics, middle-aged men in business suits). It is said that pachinko turnovers are equal (or even superior) to those of all the department stores in Japan (which is certainly saying a good deal).

The pachinko is a collective and solitary game. The machines are set up in long rows; each player standing in front of his panel plays for himself, without looking at his neighbor, whom he nonetheless brushes with his elbow. You hear only the balls whirring through their channels (the rate of insertion is very rapid); the parlor is a hive or a factory—the players seem to be working on an assembly

line. The imperious meaning of the scene is that of a deliberate, absorbing labor; never an idle or casual or playful attitude, none of that theatrical unconcern of our Western players lounging in leisurely groups around a pinball machine and quite conscious of producing for the other patrons of the café the image of an expert and disillusioned god. As for the art of playing the game, it too differs from that of our machines. For the Western player, once the ball is propelled, the main thing is to correct its trajectory as it falls back down (by giving little nudges to the machine); for the Japanese player, everything is determined in the initial dispatch, everything depends on the force the thumb imparts to the flipper; the adroitness is immediate, definitive, it alone accounts for the talent of the player, who can correct chance only in advance and in a single movement; or more exactly: the propulsion of the ball is at best only delicately constrained or halted (but not at all directed) by the hand of the player, who with a single movement moves and observes: this hand is therefore that of an artist (in the Japanese fashion), for whom the (graphic) feature is a "controlled accident." Pachinko reproduces, in short, on the mechanical level, precisely the principle of painting *alla prima*, which insists that the line be drawn in a single movement, once and for all, and that by reason of the very quality of the paper and the ink, it can never be corrected; in the same way the ball, once propelled, cannot be deviated (it would be an outrageous piece of boorishness to shake the machine, as our Western sports do): its path is predetermined by the sole flash of its impetus.

What is the use of this art? to organize a nutritive circuit. The Western machine sustains a symbolism of penetration: the point is to possess, by a well-placed thrust, the pinup girl who, all lit up on the panel of the machine, allures and waits. In pachinko, no sex (in Japan—in that country I am calling

Japan—sexuality is in sex, not elsewhere; in the United States, it is the contrary; sex is everywhere, except in sexuality). The machines are mangers, lined up in rows; the player, with an abrupt gesture, renewed so rapidly that it seems uninterrupted, feeds the machine with his metal marbles; he stuffs them in, the way you would stuff a goose; from time to time the machine, filled to capacity, releases its diarrhea of marbles; for a few yen, the player is symbolically spattered with money. Here we understand the seriousness of a game which counters the constipated parsimony of salaries, the constriction of capitalist wealth, with the voluptuous debacle of silver balls, which, all of a sudden, fill the player's hand.