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***The Cooler* (2003): Film perpetuates faulty thinking about gambling**

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What happens when a film makes the reification of a gambling cognitive distortion its central premise?

Wayne Kramer's *The Cooler* explores connections among luck, love, and gambling in this tale about the staff of an old-fashioned Las Vegas casino. William H. Macy plays Bernie Lootz, a former gambler who embodies bad luck. The background to the narrative is his gambling losses and debts to the casino manager of over \$100,000. He was only able to stop gambling when the manager of the casino broke his legs. Whenever he's tempted, Lootz reaches down and feels his mangled cartilage.

The premise of the movie is that Lootz still has such rotten luck that he can actually cool off other player's winning streaks simply by being present. "I do it by being myself," he claims. The casino manager to whom he is indebted hires him to do exactly that. Lootz is directed to stand near players who are winning, as a method of "protecting the casino's investments." Lootz is the adult equivalent of the win/lose switches that the casino operators in *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* use to manipulate the games. Nigel Turner (2001) reflected on the win/lose switch in that film:

[The film] suggests that casinos cheat players. The movie shows Fred lose it all, not because of random chance and a house edge, but because of cheating. Will kids come away believing it is possible to win if you can figure out the casino's scheme and quit before the 'Lose' switch is pulled? [1](#)

The mythology of *The Cooler* suggests that the trick to winning in casinos is figuring out who the cooler is, and the casino's job is to hide this.

Wayne Kramer, the film's director, has said in an interview that the inspiration for this movie was the feelings associated with losing:

My co-writer on the project, Frank Hannah, goes to Vegas all the time and loses a lot of money and he doesn't want to blame it on himself. He always feels there has to be a negative element that enters the room. [2](#)

Kramer's comments on Hannah's inability to blame losing on house odds and randomness are telling in the light of a film that spreads misinformation about winning and losing in casinos. Hannah redirects blame on other people, instead of on the games. His comments suggest his ambivalence about how realistic this concept is:

There probably are ringers that have an ability to kill a table, but perhaps not as pronounced as Bernie Lootz. [3](#)

The messages about gambling in the film become more crystallized when Lootz's luck changes: Relapses can pay off. You can successfully chase your losses. If Lady Luck is on your side, nothing can get in the way.

The film exposes and satirizes casino construction, with Macy stating that he wants to move to a city with clocks and the manager's suggestion that coolers should be replaced with subliminal messages of "lose, lose, lose, lose."

This clearly is a fiction film, not a documentary, and has no obligation to present accurate gambling information. However the film's attempts to walk a tightrope on the fantasy/ reality continuum are not always successful. The fantastic depiction of a cognitive distortion that would have fit in a film such as *Angels in the Outfield* here plays along with the gritty realism of harsh violence, substance abuse, frank nudity, and unsatisfying sex. The casino manager exposes cheaters by using X-ray vision, but uses a metal pipe as a weapon in retaliation - and the characters in this movie bleed.

The Cooler is destined to be the topic of much discussion after successful screenings at the Sundance Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival. It provides another opportunity for problem gambling clinicians and educators to raise the issues of faulty thinking and gambling with the public.

The Cooler (2003), U.S.A., Director: Wayne Kramer, Cast: William H. Macy, Alec Baldwin, Maria Bello, Ron Livingston, Paul Sorvino, Joey Fatone, Shawn Hatosy, Estella Warren, Producer: Sean Furst, Michael A. Pierce, Screenplay: Wayne Kramer, Frank Hannah, Runtime: 103 minutes, Distributor: Lion's Gate Entertainment.

Notes

Endnotes

¹Turner, N. (2001). Movie review: The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas. *The Electronic Journal of Gambling Issues: eGambling*, 3. Available: <http://www.camh.net/egambling/issue3/review/index.html-flintstones>

²As cited in Gore, C. (2003, June 12). Wayne Kramer: Gambling on "The Cooler." *FilmThreat.com: Truth in Entertainment*. Retrieved September 10, 2003 from <http://www.filmthreat.com/Interviews.asp?Id=589>

³As cited in *The Cooler* (2003). *Moviecentre.net*. Retrieved September 10, 2003, from http://www.moviecentre.net/movies/2003/november/The_Cooler/