

film review

The Gambler: Then and Now

Reviewed by: Nigel Turner, The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

The 2014 film *The Gambler*, starring Mark Wahlberg as the lead character Jim Bennett, is a remake of the 1974 film of the same name, starring James Caan in the lead role as Axel Freed. This paper will examine and compare the two films, which will require discussion of important plot events that might be construed as “spoilers.”

The main character is a professor of literature by day and a high-stakes gambler by night. He is often shown betting a large amount of money, as well as doubling his bets until he loses everything. He borrows from the owner of an underground casino, borrows from his mother, and borrows from loan sharks. He ends up embroiled in a point-shaving scheme that, in the remake, nearly costs his lover her life. The film is a good illustration of why athletic associations (such as Major League Baseball) now ban players, coaches, and managers from gambling.

Both films have short scenes of classroom lectures, but the scenes in the original seem more relevant to the plot of the film. In the 1974 version, Professor Freed quotes Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1992[1864]) about making $2 + 2$ equal 5 by an act of free will. He appears to embrace magical thinking in general as a defiant act of free will throughout the movie. I found this view ironic, because rather than setting him free, Axel’s addiction to gambling appears to enslave him. This theme is also echoed in his name, Axel Freed—with “Freed” an ironic reference to his beliefs about freedom, and “Axel” perhaps suggesting the endless cycle of self-destruction his life has become.

In the remake, Professor Bennett lectures on William Shakespeare. When one of his students suggests that Shakespeare was really the Earl of Oxford, the professor argues that all of the theories that try to discredit Shakespeare are motivated by jealousy. He argues that some people cannot accept the idea that this lowly actor could really have been such an incredible genius. During the lecture, he singles out a variety of gifted students in the room—a tennis player named Dexter; a writer, Amy; and a basketball player, Lamar, who hopes one day to play for the NBA (but does not pay attention in class). These three characters will play key roles in the film, as they are all used by Bennett: Amy will become his lover, Lamar will become embroiled in an illegal point-shaving scheme, and Dexter will travel to Vegas to place

bets against the university's basketball team. While the lecture introduces three key supporting characters, it does not necessarily seem to fit with the overall plot. Perhaps his comments about genius are intended to illustrate the professor's own sense of inferiority about his writing, as he is a published author but has a negative opinion of his work. The scene might be suggesting that these emotions motivate him to gamble and engage in other self-destructive behaviors, but if so, this suggestion is not developed.

The gambling itself is largely the same in both films. One surprise for me as a viewer was that the newer film did not change the gambling to high-stakes poker to suit current tastes. The games Jim prefers are, in fact, largely the same as the first film, with an emphasis on blackjack and roulette. In the 1974 version, Axel has a few fantastic wins toward the middle of the film, and he is shown in Las Vegas with a huge stack of chips, mostly from craps and blackjack. This success ends with a losing series of sports bets and a midnight call from his bookie demanding payment. In the remake, Jim never seems to have much success at all. He has several short winning streaks, but each time, he doubles his bets until he loses all his money (see Turner & Horbay [2003] for a discussion about why doubling after a win is a particularly quick way to lose one's cash). In both films, there is a memorable scene in which the professor doubles down on a hard 18 and confidently asks the dealer to "turn over the 3"—and sure enough, it's a 3. This scene makes sense in the original, because it echoes back to the quote from Dostoyevsky regarding a defiant act of free will. In the remake, it just stands out as odd. I would complain that this scene appears to model and thereby encourage magical thinking, but it is clear in the context of the movie that, when it comes to gambling, Axel and Jim are both losers.

The gambler in both films has a strained relationship with his mother, but he still manages to talk her into bailing him out. It appears that she is a loving parent but unhappy with her son's gambling problem, and in both cases, she tells him this is the last time she will help him. In both films, he then proceeds to gamble with her money, rather than paying off his debts. Threats of physical violence from his loan sharks follow. His relationship with his wealthy grandfather is also mentioned but largely unexplored. In the original film, his grandfather refuses to bail him out because he disapproves of his gambling and of his links to the loan sharks. In the remake, his grandfather dies at the beginning of the film without leaving him any money, but the reason is not stated. Little else is said about his family to provide context to his addiction.

Gambling also puts a strain on his relationship with his student-girlfriend. In the original, she leaves him after he receives a midnight visit from his bookies. In the remake, one of his loan sharks threatens to kill her if he refuses to cooperate with the point-shaving scheme. Interestingly, neither film addresses the inherent conflict of interest in this romantic relationship. The professor's morally questionable risk-taking goes beyond money, influencing other significant aspects of his life and leading to equally improbable outcomes.

However, the key moral issue of the film is the precarious and problematic relationship between sports and gambling. In order to help pay off his gambling debts, the professor is coerced into fixing a game by his bookie/loan shark. The professor offers one of his students—Lamar, the star basketball player—a large sum of cash to limit his win over the underdog team to only seven points (when the predicted point spread is eight). This is called point-shaving and is illegal. In many sports bets, a point spread is used to make the game a 50–50 proposition. If the favored team is predicted to score eight more points than the underdog, a bet on the favored team will then only be a win if they cover the point spread by scoring eight points more than the other team. Conversely, a bet on the underdog team will win if that team wins outright, or if they lose by fewer than eight points (see Turner & Fritz, 2007). By point-shaving, the professor's bookie would be able to earn more money from the game by cheating customers.

The most prominent difference between the two films lies in their endings. In both films, the main character manages to get out of debt after the point-shaving incident, but what follows the game is completely different. In the original, Axel first tries to get his bookie to bet if he can sink a basket. The bookie refuses, but invites him to dinner to discuss future game-fixing opportunities. Axel declines and walks away. He goes to a bar in a rough part of town, offers \$50 to a sex worker, and then gets into a fight with her pimp after taking his money back. During the altercation, the woman slashes his face. He staggers into the bathroom, where he stares at his bleeding cheek and smiles. Axel appears to be daring the world to kill him.

In the remake, Jim has three debts to pay. The point-shaving scheme only wipes out his debt to a violent loan shark, but he still owes money to the owner of an underground casino, Lee, and another loan shark, Frank. To pay off the rest of his debt, he gets another of his students, Dexter, to travel to Las Vegas and place bets on his behalf against his school's team. Jim wins enough to pay off one of the debts, but not both. He tells his debtors to meet him in another underground casino, where he bets all the cash on a roulette wheel, wins even more than he owes, and then walks away from the table a free man, leaving Frank and Lee to sort out their payments. Frank catches up to him and offers him the remainder of the winnings, but Jim refuses. Frank approves of his new attitude. Jim then runs across town to his student-girlfriend's apartment, ostensibly to start a new life.

Overall, I prefer the original film because of its more believable depiction of problem gambling. (I also approve of the score's liberal use of Mahler.) The sappy ending in the remake was a disappointment, because it reifies what every gambler dreams of—gambling their way out of debt. People who work with problem gamblers know that the dream of the big win and escaping debt via gambling is a fantasy that keeps gamblers chasing themselves into a deeper and deeper hole. We also know that within a week or two, Jim will be right back in the casino, throwing away his money and begging his family for additional bailouts.

I have long advocated the use of film to help people understand various aspects of gambling (see Turner, Fritz, & Zangeneh, 2007). In Turner (2012), I examined how

scenes from three films provide useful illustrations of such issues as erroneous beliefs, magical thinking, chasing, relationship problems, and criminal behavior. Both the 1974 and 2014 versions of *The Gambler* explore most of these problems. But perhaps the one particularly unique contribution of these two films is how they elucidate so vividly the problematic relationship between gambling and sports—in particular, how criminals can manipulate sports games through point-shaving, and in general, how gambling corrupts the integrity of the game.

References

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