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Slot Machine Addiction: The Untold Story of Contradictions Between Self and America's Neoliberal Risk Society

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: Thesis Overview 3

Chapter Three: The Slot Machine and its Glaring Absence in Scholarly Literature 6

Chapter Four: The Rise of the (Neoliberal) Risk Society: Hyper Individualism and Impossible Odds 9

Chapter Five: Gregory Bateson's Addict: The Cartesian Self and American Individualism 13

Chapter Six: Slot Machine Addiction: An Illustration of Illusory Agency 16

Conclusion 19

References 20

ABSTRACT

The ability to take risks is nothing short of heroism in the modern United States which thrives on a diet of hyper mobility, technological progress, and globalized, deregulated "free" markets. Such relentless instability affirms scholarly contentions that the U.S. is now a "risk society." Indeed, in Gambling with the Myth of the American Dream: The Pokerization of America, rhetoric scholar Aaron Duncan suggests that media stories of modern poker tournaments signify a collective desire to grapple with this heightened modern "chanciness" within our established gambling lore and make it cohere with our deeply cherished notions of American individualism. While Duncan indicates that such narratives have successfully reduced this collective dissonance, I hesitate to accept that media narratives could fully tap into the pulse of the U.S. populace. While poker is popular in television and media, when it comes to risk-taking practices, there is no question that, in casinos, Americans prefer slot machines—a game which not only renders individual agency and skill irrelevant, but also reduces its player to a button-pusher, a gear in an automated process. Even in this banality, the game is notoriously addictive as Natasha Schull reveals in her groundbreaking book Addiction by Design, which builds on firsthand accounts of slot machine addicts. I examine these through the lens of Gregory Bateson's Cartesian self and Lacanian theory in order to bring slot machine addiction into the realm of cultural narrative. Where Duncan's poker players successfully reconstruct cultural narratives, the story of the slot machine addict reveals that there are certain realities in American culture which have been left unresolved. I ultimately contend that the slot addict's experience

tells the story of an American subject in today's neoliberal risk society who remains stuck in the contradictions between hyper-individualism and its increasingly uncertain, unpredictable socioeconomic context.

CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The ability to take risks is nothing short of heroism in the modern United States which thrives on a diet of hyper mobility, technological progress, and globalized, deregulated "free" markets. Such relentless instability affirms scholarly contentions that the U.S. is now a "risk society." Indeed, in *Gambling with the Myth of the American Dream: The Pokerization of America,* rhetoric scholar Aaron Duncan suggests that media stories of modern poker tournaments signify a collective desire to grapple with this heightened modern "chanciness" within our established gambling lore and make it cohere with our deeply cherished notions of American individualism. While Duncan indicates that such narratives have successfully reduced the dissonance between an individual's effort and the luck which comes to them, I hesitate to accept that *media narratives* could fully tap into the pulse of the U.S. populace.

While poker is popular in television and media, when it comes to risk-taking *practices*, there is no question that, in casinos, Americans prefer slot machines—a game which not only renders individual agency and skill irrelevant, but also reduces its player to a button-pusher, a gear in an automated process. Not only do casino patrons prefer it, but the game is also highly addictive, more so than any other casino game. Thus far, scholars who look at the relationship between gambling and American culture have avoided the question which has continued to baffle me: of everything that casinos have to offer, which in cities like Las Vegas includes magic

shows, amusement parks, and other spectacles, why do patrons prefer playing slots? Scholars and writers may refuse to look at slots because it is less sexy to do so—what could be less titillating than hearing the tale of a sedentary individual pulling a lever, after all? And then, in all this banality, how could people become possessed and addicted to these games to the point of their own destruction?

To answer these questions, this paper creates a dialogue between the firsthand accounts of slot machine addicts collected by Natasha Schull in *Addiction by Design*; theorists such as Gregory Bateson and Jacques Lacan; and Duncan's analysis of poker and definition of today's risk society. Where Duncan's poker players use the game as a means of self-expansion, I intend to, throughout the course of this paper, argue for a renewed take on Schull's slot machine addicts. I ultimately contend that the slot addict's experience tells the story of an American subject in today's neoliberal risk society who remains stuck in the contradictions between hyper-individualism and its increasingly uncertain, unpredictable socioeconomic context.

CHAPTER TWO:

THESIS OVERVIEW

This paper will attempt to tell the story of the slot machine addict as the story of flawed epistemologies of self which are encouraged and enforced in American culture as well as Duncan's risk society. These epistemologies incidentally coincide with those of Bateson's addict, and Bateson contends they often set an individual on an inevitable, one-way route to becoming enmeshed in the cycle of addiction. In this way, addiction can be seen as a problem individuals face when they are unable to integrate dissonant realities with available cultural narratives which would otherwise help them find meaning. Lacan is an important connection in this regard, as he points out that addiction and trauma can often be the result of a disruption in our maps of meaning—the realm of the Symbolic, which is shaped by personal experiences with the world around us, from the most intimate to our broader cultural context.

The story of the slot machine addict in today's risk society is the story of what happens when we are unable to find a story to account for the contradictions in our cultural beliefs and realities. In this way, addiction is no longer a looming pathology which lies dormant in the human mind—it is a matter of trying to find truth amidst contradiction. Where Duncan believes poker provides a viable narrative to form a selfhood in America's risk society, Schull's slot machine addict finds no such respite. They attempt to form a hopeful narrative in a game where they are almost certain to lose—as their losses increase, their own agency is continually

undermined in a never-ending, compulsive cycle. Where Duncan's poker players preserve the coherence of American individualism, the slot machine addict reflects a disenchantment and nihilism with the idea of having any agency whatsoever. While their stories have been hitherto left to smolder in the ashtrays in the shadowy recesses of the casino floor, this paper intends to assert meaning in spite of the nihilistic premise which the story of slot machine addiction seems to assert.

This paper begins by examining the slot machine and its place in scholarly works where it has been primarily dismissed as a juvenile exercise in nihilistic hope without symbolic depth or cultural relevance. Schull, in spite of spending years collecting anthropological evidence in Las Vegas casinos, hesitates to delve into the slot machine's cultural significance, more interested in describing the phenomenology of slot machine addiction itself. The next section re-examines Aaron Duncan's exploration of the beginnings of a risk society in American culture, which he argues precludes the rise of poker as a narrative space to incorporate risk in a re-imagining of the American Dream. Duncan leaves out the trends of postmodernity, which magnify the currents of individualism in American culture—and, when we consider the postmodern pressures against and expectations of the individual alongside Duncan's risk society, we arrive at a wide gap between individual agency and external circumstance.

The next section asks what Schull's discoveries and intensive research might mean at this specific moment in time and within an American cultural context. I attribute slot machine addiction to an alternative response to what Duncan describes as our nation's "risk society", where our economic, social, and political cohesion and stability have been severely compromised. This context is superficial in comparison to neoliberalism and its granular focus on the individual's, as opposed to the collective's, responsibility to determine their own fate. The

point is to demonstrate the perniciousness and extreme nature of this hyper-individuality which cannot be fully illustrated in the mythologies of Duncan's poker players, but finds expression in the stories of Schull's machine gamblers.

Following these sections, the paper makes its theoretical intervention. Bateson unwittingly connects the Cartesian self—a self-epistemology—to many of the extreme tenets of American neoliberal era individualism. He argues that this is often the real source of addiction, which, instead of a pathology, is a correction to the grandiose illusions of this kind of self-concept. My paper looks at how slot machine addiction is America's cultural fix for the imbalances created by its rabid individualism. Since slot machine addiction is characterized by an enmeshment between the addict and the machine, it articulates a desire to dismantle any sense of self the individual has left. I introduce Lacan as a way to understand slot machine addiction as a cultural problem instead of the result of individual pathology. He describes addiction as the result of some irreconcilable contradiction: and here, the slot machine addicts cannot reconcile the chaos and instability of America's risk society alongside its expectations for individual success at any cost, no matter how high the stakes or improbable the odds.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE SLOT MACHINE AND ITS GLARING ABSENCE IN SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Before Natasha Schüll wrote *Addiction by Design*, a serious analysis of the slot machine as a significant American cultural marker had been notably sparse. In his book of essays *The Interpretation of Culture*s, prominent scholar Clifford Geertz describes slot machines as "stupid mechanical cranks, operated by concessionaires on the outside of the Balinese cockfight circle, of interest only to women, children, adolescents… the extremely poor, the socially despised, and the personally idiosyncratic" (Geertz 83). Furthermore, Geertz argues the game could not possibly induce the state of "deep play" which is, according to him, essential to investment and cultural significance, nor could it, with such shallow demands, put such significance on display (Geertz 86). Other prominent scholars and writers who have written famously on gambling such as Erving Goffman and Fyodor Dostoevsky have said nothing much more about slots other than that they were absurd. Roger Caillois, a French sociologist who examined how games reflect culture, was puzzled by the slot machine since it was the only game he could find which was *alea* ("pure chance") without *agon* (skill/choice)—whereas most modern games, even gambling games, carry out a dynamic tension between these two (Caillois 37).

Mentions of machine gambling in scholarly work often exclusively crop up en route to some broader point concerning gambling in American society or are otherwise timid in

considering the deeper implications of such a game which relies on chance alone. Aaron Duncan, among the few who have done work on the rhetoric of gambling games in American culture, explores how modern poker illustrates changes in the mythos of the American Dream. He utilizes the terminology of Caillois, highlighting poker's dynamic between *agon* (skill) and *alea* (chance) to draw an analogy with the American individual and today's risk society. He also cites statistics which reveal that women often avoid and are intimidated by table games and prefer to gamble with slots, though the significance of this is left unexplored (40).

Although neglected in scholarly literature, the slot machine now dominates casino floors, on average generating 70-80% of gaming revenue for any given casino (Boylan 10). Natasha Schüll is the first scholar to take the game's impact seriously, yet she does not assert its "symbolic depth" in the way that Geertz does the Balinese cockfight or Duncan American poker, instead focusing on the slot machine's ability to "erase" the subject (12). As she puts it: machine gambling is not a symbolically profound, richly dimensional space whose depth can be plumbed to reveal an enactment of larger social and existential dramas. Instead, the solitary, absorptive activity can suspend time, space, monetary value, social roles, and sometimes even one's very sense of existence (11). Like Duncan, Schüll wants to bring gambling out of the rhetoric of psychiatry and addiction treatment and into cultural studies, yet unlike Duncan, she does little to consider the way broader sociocultural context is weaved into the game.

Still, slots need not be tossed in the mired swamp of cultural insignificance. I would like to assert that while the slot machine lacks superficially dynamic qualities, the experience of the *slot machine addict* within the contemporary American context imbues slots with serious analytical potential. That the game is based on chance alone calls attention to an absurdity which is not meaningless, only paradoxical: slot machine players desire a particular outcome with

enormous fortitude yet willingly submit themselves to a situation where their will is entirely irrelevant. Whereas Duncan's poker players have reconciled their agency with chance, the slot machine addict swings between the polarities of extreme self-will and compulsive self-annihilation: and this is in a society which prizes the individual's ability to overcome all odds.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE RISE OF THE (NEOLIBERAL) RISK SOCIETY:

HYPER INDIVIDUALISM AND IMPOSSIBLE ODDS

The context which Aaron Duncan establishes for his poker player is what he, among other scholars, refers to as today's risk society. Originally conceived by Ulrich Beck, Beck describes the risk society as one with rapidly disintegrating traditions and institutions that once oriented the individual to their collective past and respective societal roles; a prevailing obsession with the future; and frequent political, environmental, and economic crises and instability (Beck 56). Furthermore, he describes this age as one "in which faith in God, class, nation and the government is disappearing…in which the apparent and irrevocable constants of the political world suddenly melt and become malleable" (Beck 56). Without a doubt, uncertainty has always been a fact of human existence, but contemporary narratives of risk have also taken center stage: in his work on popular news media outlets in the early 2000s, Robert Danisch found their stories increasingly emphasize contingency, uncertainty, and open endings.

Duncan is somehow able to skirt around a discussion of what made Beck's risk society possible: the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, which marked a dramatic shift in national (as well as global) socioeconomic organizations and set the stage for the precarity of the risk society. The ethos of neoliberal economic thought is best summed up by one of its intellectual parents, Milton Friedman, who believed the market should be freed up and government regulations

abolished—he was a steadfast believer in the 'spirit' of capitalism which he characterized as an equalizing and liberating force in the fate of humanity. Friedman spoke about the practical effects such policies would have on most ordinary, middle to lower class citizens with a certain whimsicality and relentless optimism: layoffs, poverty, and inflation would only be temporary and eventually, the market would work everything out. When these lofty ideals became tangible economic policy during the 1980s under the Reagan administration, business leaders were freed up to roll the dice as they saw fit. More often than not, it was those down below who felt the consequences incurred by these risks: obligations to workers were relaxed, employment became transitory, class mobility came to a halt, unions dissolved, and financially supportive programs for the poor drastically reduced (Harvey). Where most scholars who are theoretically invested in the "risk society" focus on these circumstances, they rarely mention neoliberalism—and what I discuss later in the paper is better understood as a direct adaptation to these conditions which also adheres to American norms and values.

As opposed to reflecting the limitations of individual agency amidst the growing uncertainties of the fresh neoliberal landscape, American pop culture doubled down on the country's already deeply entrenched individualistic tendencies. Callbacks to America's Wild West became frequent—the romantic figure of the cowboy came in handy as support for the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality which would be undoubtedly necessary to maintain composure should the whimsical market inevitably fail to regulate itself. Advertising painted pictures of stand-alone individuals as messiah-like figures who would usher in freedom and economic opportunity. Apple's famous 1984 Super Bowl commercial features a statuesque blonde woman running through an audience of gray, hypnotized civilians: she is a stand-in for Apple's personal computer, the solution to our collective hypnosis and a tool for our own

personal empowerment. Perhaps the best living advertisement for neoliberalism in the 1980s was Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood film cowboy who never stopped talking like one. The attitude engendered in the neoliberal agenda and expressed in American public culture seems to be that individual citizens should not just survive, but thrive in this new, precarious socioeconomic environment full of even *more* barriers to personal economic security. Individualism has always been deeply embedded in American culture, yet its potential to yield tragedy and suffering is realized when an individual faces adversities they did not cause, cannot control, and may be unable to overcome alone.

In looking over the neoliberal origins of America's risk society, Duncan also overlooks this heightened and manic variant of individualism which demanded every-day Americans to become *more* economically prosperous with *fewer* opportunities to do so. Moreover, Ulrich Beck, one of the first scholars to coin risk society, calls this a "tragic individualism" whereby individuals, without its former traditions, institutions, and pastimes, are left to "cope with the uncertainty of the global world by him- or herself" (Beck 226). Many scholars have devoted time to examine how this inflamed individualism, and neoliberalism more generally, produce subjects modeled after what Schull calls the "actuarial self." The actuarial self is: "a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments…Specifically, the model actuarial self is expected to indemnify itself against the increased risks of neoliberal policies, while simultaneously reaping the economic rewards. To fulfill this double expectation, individuals must be ever-alert masters of themselves" (Schull 191). While this may seem like a tall order, the actuarial self is an effective strategy for survival in today's risk society.Engin Isin points out that Duncan, like other risk society scholars, overlook this fundamental change in subjectivity and "fail to contemplate the changes these

conditions produce in individuals—they leave the rational, free modern subject model intact" (Isin 20). In its place, we have the actuarial self, a product of neoliberal hyperindividualism, the risk society, and a huge rift between.

Unlike Duncan's retelling of the American Dream mythology through modern day poker, this particular social tension between uncertainty and individual control lacks a coherent narrative. In his work on addiction, Gregory Bateson not only explores a similar dynamic within the addict's psyche but taxonomizes the epistemological flaws in their self concept—what he calls the Cartesian self, which overlaps in many ways with the predicaments of the actuarial self.

CHAPTER FIVE:

GREGORY BATESON'S ADDICT:

THE CARTESIAN SELF AND AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

Although he was looking at alcoholism in his article "The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism," Bateson was primarily concerned with the underlying epistemic flaws of the self-concept under which the alcoholic operates, what he labeled the "Cartesian self". In his argument, the addict suffers from "an unusually disastrous variant of the Cartesian dualism, between conscious 'self' and the remainder of the personality" (442). The afflicted individual experiences their consciousness as rigidly transcendent and separate from their surroundings. Bateson contends that our consciousness is not so neatly compartmentalized and that our transcendent self is, in fact, subsumed within a cybernetic circuit with its total environment—it is one point along a mutually dependent system, a translation of differences. As such, the cybernetics model of self includes external realities, subconscious information—in opening oneself up to these broader realities, the individual comes to realize their transcendence within an immanent cybernetic system.

The addict, according to Bateson, compartmentalizes their life in two parts: their sober one, in Cartesian selfhood, and their addicted one where any sense of "I" is replaced with a complete sense of immanence. This latter state comes as a complete relief to the addict who lives most of their life with the weight of the world on their shoulders, and so the cycle of addiction

ensues. To truly reconcile and move beyond this polarity, the addict must come to realize an *immanent-transcendent self* which understands the limitations of "I" within their given circumstances which they both shape and are shaped by. Understanding this can prove to be elusive, but it is the only way to form a more complete picture of reality and thus the only path towards sanity.

The Cartesian self is not unique to the addict; rather, this is an epistemology and a foundation for conceiving of one's relationship with the world that is proven false within the addictive process (Bateson 442). Although this section did not outline Bateson's taxonomy of its epistemic flaws, it's important to note that the Cartesian self is prone to many cognitive distortions—the most salient being *illusions of control*, where individuals perceive themselves as having agency/influence where they do not.

The addict alone does not suffer from these, and the belief systems of America's hyper-individualism which, with its emphasis on sheer grit and determination, might encourage very similar distortions even in the minds of sober, non-addicts.

If the Cartesian self might well be a stand-in for the American individual in the neoliberal age, the actuarial self, who is not only expected to survive but profit amidst these adverse conditions, only further predisposes its subject to illusions of control. While Duncan offers a picture of the individual as able to maintain some efficacy in the face of improbable odds, the slot machine reveals an alternate reality where any sense of agency the player might have in a game of indifferent chance is rendered necessarily delusional. From Bateson's angle, slot machine addiction can be seen as the result of a Cartesian self which refuses to unmask: and so, the sufferer remains in an irreconcilable polarity between the self and its risky context.

In poker, players interact with chance; they have agency, however limited. The slot machine, meanwhile, distills and conceals chance and puts the player in opposition to it. According to Duncan's analogy, the risk in poker is a stand-in for risk in the risk society, and the player the American individual in pursuit of the American Dream. Although the poker player is limited in how much they can influence the outcome of the game, they can employ various strategies: deception, calculating probabilities, choice, and people skills, to name a few. In the case of the slot machine, chance itself is the other player one has to win against: the odds are either good or bad, the outcome is win or lose, and this is all up to chance and chance alone. The slot machine restricts the way the player is able to relate to chance so that any cause-effect relationship between the two is only possible in the player's imagination.

This difference, between the relationships both respective games establish with their players, is essential as they paint different pictures and pose different questions. The slot machine asks: in a scenario where the individual has no impact, what happens to their socially constituted and perhaps also universally human desire to come out on top?

CHAPTER SIX:

SLOT MACHINE ADDICTION: AN ILLUSTRATION OF ILLUSORY AGENCY

Slot machine addicts embody this illusion in their desire to influence chance while any such influence can only ever be, at best, imagined. Their attempts are real and well-documented: avid slot machine players have developed involved "methodologies" for detecting "hot" machines that emit "high energy"; others are devoted to particular themes which are "luckier" than the others, and the less creative are spotted with a lucky sock they put over the lever (Joukhador 175). The designers of the game capitalize on this as well: they offer the player multiple “choices” for play—adding a real button and screen button in addition to the lever, advertising higher bets increase odds, offering hope with a large, initial payout and yielding only diminishing returns.

Illusions of control, held by some and encouraged by the game architects, hooks the player in, but slot machine gameplay eventually exposes them. The tiny chip in the machine runs an unchangeable algorithm which tilts the odds in the house's favor no matter what the player does. Addicted players realize this, but they persist, not with the desire/hope that they can achieve a sense of control, but to stay in an affective state the slot machine facilitates: what Schull calls ‘the zone’, Bateson’s immanence wherein one’s ego dissolves, and the individual

loses any sense of separateness (Schull 162). In Schull's interviews, slot machine addicts describe this state as the total loss of self-awareness; they feel "vacuumed into the screen," "played by the machine," "hypnotized," "spun by the wheels" (Schull 188). It is not in reflecting on this desired affective state but in engaging the distortions of the Cartesian self that the addicted player convinces themselves to play: maybe they will get lucky *this time*, maybe they will try a different machine, etc. (Schull 199).

Although addicts themselves engage in self-deception, they manage to uncover a truth beyond the delusional "I," the "I" which American culture expects to triumph over any and all odds. This truth is the experience of something more powerful than themselves. The story of what kinds of meaningful action can be taken in the face of the uncertainties of today's risk society is left without reconciliation; and, so, the addict repeats the cycle of resurrecting and then sacrificing their agency to the greater power of their addiction in an endless cycle.

The place where the addict finds reconciliation is often in the rooms of twelve-step programs, where the "greater power" then becomes the community of recovering addicts—except their rhetoric is also heavily focused on self-regulation/self-management which strikes a parallel with the neoliberal, actuarial self. Schull, too, notes the irony or "double bind" of therapeutic programs designed to treat addicts, where the cures look an awful lot like the problems. The self is put under a microscope while its context, and the many powerful interests and parties it may hold, is left without much examination.

Lacan's theory of the Symbolic and the Real renders the above account of slot machine addiction comprehensible from the point of view of cultural criticism. In the case of the slot machine addict, the Cartesian self is a part of their Symbolic understanding of the world around them--and since the slot machine directly contradicts this understanding, this exposes them to the

Lacanian Real. The Real is a space which cannot be grasped and resists symbolization. The Real, in the case of slot machine addiction, appears as the addict's hope for control is continually undermined. America, with its emphasis on self-mastery, does not have a language to describe such powerlessness. Yet for the addict to extricate themselves from the Real, their experience needs to be captured and validated by their culture. Unfortunately, intense self-focus is pervasive and stubborn so much so that American therapeutic models often offer their own versions of the Cartesian self as cures. This may be why recovery models struggle to offer lasting solutions for addiction.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to elevate slot machine addiction from medicalizing discourses to the concerns of cultural narratives. The story of slot machine addiction is cyclical: this does not render it invalid but, rather, points to a cultural snag in the tale of the American individual in today's risk society. The illusions of the Cartesian self, promoted by neoliberal, American individualism, are contradicted and nullified by the slot machine, a game of pure chance. The game exposes the potential insanity guaranteed by individuals who do not know their limitations—and that it is perhaps our all American all-or-nothing attitude which drives the polarity between the slot machine addict's initial efforts at control and then their compulsive relinquishing of that control in the course of addiction. With this paper, I intend to open up new avenues of questioning which include American culture in discussions of addiction. Examining the beliefs encouraged in popular culture could be vital not solely for intellectual prosperity, but for the health of the individual. By finding the gaps that contradictory cultural beliefs make, one may find the secret to the addictive process and present opportunities for self-expansion and liberation.

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