

Scenes of Instruction: *The King of Comedy* (Martin Scorsese, 1982)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Martin Scorsese's 1982 film *The King of Comedy*, focussing chiefly on its central character, Rupert Pupkin (played by Robert de Niro). Drawing on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and those influenced by him (notably G.E.M. Anscombe and Stanley Cavell), it argues for a "partial idealism" centred on phenomena such as promises and manners, whose basis is in shared human practices of education and conduct. This idea is explored via a close reading of our various and conflicting responses to the film's central character and the way *The King of Comedy* manages these responses so as to reveal very different relationships on subsequent viewings. It proves to be the case that we can be most closely aligned with a character at the very moment we are surest of our distance from them. The article draws some conclusions from this about the nature of the sharing involved in Anscombe's "partial idealism."

KEYWORDS

The King of Comedy; idealism; Wittgenstein; Anscombe; Cavell

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Fig. 1 Rupert looks in at Masha in Jerry's car. (Digital frame enlargement.)

Outside a New York television studio after the recording of a popular chat show, the street is thronging with autograph hunters. One of the host's most fanatically devoted admirers has managed to find her way inside his car. She throws herself on him, only for a man in a pale suit and red tie to open the door and pull the embattled host out, closing the door on the woman. She presses her hands on the window in imploring protest, partially obscuring the face of the host's rescuer. The image freezes and the credits of Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* (1982) begin to roll (Fig. 1).



The complexities of this image are many. It brings together the film's three protagonists, namely Rupert Pupkin (Robert De Niro), the man looking in; Masha (Sandra Bernhard), whose hands are on the window, and who we discover later to be Rupert's friend; and Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis), the talk show host whose car it is. The glass surface and the just-visible window frame cannot but suggest a television. As the frozen image persists on the cinema screen it is surprisingly easy to get confused as to who exactly is inside and who is outside. Although she is within Jerry's car, Masha's raised, imploring hands express the sense that she is trapped outside somewhere she wants desperately to get into. It is, therefore, unclear whether the frozen image's primary suggestion is that Masha is trapped within the world of television, or whether it is better read as an emblem of her inability to enter that world.

This article will suggest that *The King of Comedy* is a rich and complex resource for thinking about incompatible worlds, impassable boundaries, and the extent to which they depend on us (on our fantasies, desires, assumptions, and actions). (Towards the end of the film we see an issue of *People* whose cover reads "The Very Private World of Rupert Pupkin".) Or, to put things in more obviously philosophical language, the article's claim is that the film offers interesting resources for an exploration of both idealism – understood, as Robert Pippin pithily puts it, as a matter of "what depends on us to be what it is" (*Henry James* 14) – and scepticism (which we could, in this context,

describe as a possible consequence of idealism – namely the belief that if something turns out to depend on us, in Pippin’s sense, it cannot truly be said to exist). I concentrate here on the character of Rupert, around whom the film revolves; to further develop these ideas more detailed attention would have to be devoted to the other characters, and to Jerry and Masha in particular.

Before embarking on the task of articulating and defending these claims, it may be of use to say something concerning the presumptions about the relationship between film and philosophy with which this article operates. Without wanting to deny for a moment that there are many different ways in which philosophy and film may productively be brought together, the approach taken here accords with that which is both articulated and exemplified in Pippin’s work on film. To put matters as briefly as possible, the view is that certain films (by no means all of them) require us to think philosophically in order to gain an adequate understanding of what the film is up to. This is the case not because such films were deliberately constructed so as to demonstrate a philosophical thesis but rather because “[a]esthetic experience . . . does not simply happen to one” (Pippin, “Bearing” 533). On the contrary:

Just in the way that a bodily movement in space can count as an action only by virtue of the self-understanding embodied in and expressed in it, an art work, including any ambitious movie, embodies a formal unity, a self-understanding that it is always working to realize. Such a formal unity . . . requires investigative work focused on the details of the film, both stylistic and substantive, covering as many details as possible. In fact, the movie, one has to say in an ontological mode, *is the movie it is* only by means of this emerging, internal self-conception. (541)

The claim is not that some films are open to philosophical interpretation as an optional extra (true as this is), but rather that there are films an adequate interpretation of which must address philosophical issues; in so doing, the very specificity of such an interpretation can open up onto matters of general philosophical importance. Pippin gives the example of *Vertigo*, a film whose general philosophical significance we might well wish to query; after all, Hitchcock’s movie “is about *quite* a distinct individual, a neurotic with vertigo caused by acrophobia, obsessed with a woman who is impersonating another woman” (539). What general significance could this possibly have? Pippin’s answer is that if we address the question of why the film shows us what it does, in the ways that it does, we discover that this “has a great deal to do with, let us call it, a general, common struggle for *mutual interpretability* in a social world where that becomes increasingly difficult.” This article makes the very same claim with regard to *The King of Comedy*. An adequate understanding of the film bears on an adequate understanding of important aspects of our lives outside of film, and particularly on the question of whether and how those lives are shared. The same can be said of the philosophical texts on which this article draws: both the film and the philosophical writings bear on questions of our mutual self-understanding. They do so in very different

ways, but neither has an in-built priority. This is to say that this article aims neither to use *The King of Comedy* as an illustration of some self-contained philosophical issues, nor to use the philosophical texts referred to merely as a tool to help generate a new reading of the film. The claims made herein aim to demonstrate the different ways that *The King of Comedy* and the philosophical texts referred to can be brought to bear on one another in the service of greater understanding. If what I have to say is convincing, then a greater understanding of, say, the film's narrative will – in and of itself – contribute something to our understanding of the philosophical matters that are at issue. (My book *Robert Pippin and Film* spells out in much greater detail both my understanding of Pippin's position concerning these matters, and my reasons for thinking this to be an extremely fruitful way in which to investigate films philosophically.) I can say nothing here by way of introduction to establish beyond doubt that the kind of approach discussed in this paragraph will be fruitful with respect to *The King of Comedy*; the only pieces of evidence I have for that are the claims and arguments that this article will go on to make.

The structure of the article is as follows. After summarizing the film's narrative and drawing attention to its ambiguous presentations of the distinction between fantasy and reality, an understanding of idealism (or "linguistic idealism") is outlined, one that derives from responses to the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This account of idealism is then developed further, in tandem with an exploration of questions of promising and of sanity in *The King of Comedy*; all these topics highlight the issue of the extent to which Rupert shares a world with the other characters in the film. These issues lead, in turn, to a discussion of Rupert's resistance to instruction in the film, as well as his failed attempts to instruct others in his own name. The article's argument culminates in claiming that repeated viewings of the film serve to instruct *us*, its viewers, that our relationship with Rupert has not been what we have initially taken it to be. The conclusion returns briefly to the question of the relationship between television and cinema as it is presented in *The King of Comedy* and offers some final remarks about idealism and scepticism as they operate in the film and as they relate to film viewing understood not as passive reception, but as an *activity*.

Narrative: Fantasy and Reality

The King of Comedy begins by showing the opening sequence of Langford's show. Although the framing remains widescreen, the ragged video quality indicates that the cinema screen is substituting for a television. It is on Jerry's joke, "I'm sorry I woke you" (directed at the veteran announcer Ed Herlihy, playing himself) that we cut to Rupert wending his way through a crowd, filmed in 35mm. The boundary between wakefulness and sleep (and hence dream) is thus aligned with the distinction between television and cinema. (Does this transition from television to cinema suggest that film wakes us up from the dream of television, or that it is a deeper form of sleep?) Given the centrality of promising to the film's narrative, to be discussed below, it is worth noting that during this, the film's first image of Rupert, the sound is

partly held over from the TV show and we hear Jerry say, “I shall adhere to your request, sir.” Having rescued Jerry from Masha, in the sequence discussed at the beginning of this article, Rupert inveigles a lift in his limo, during which he announces himself as an aspiring stand-up comedian who has “finished the course” and is ready for his big break on Jerry’s show. To get rid of him, Jerry suggests that Rupert call his office, giving him the name of his secretary, Cathy Long (Shelley Hack). Rupert takes this as a promise, but on his first visit to the office Cathy tells him to come back with a tape and then, after he has done so, that he should test and develop his act further in a live situation (although he does have good timing). Rupert takes Rita (Diahnne Abbott), a woman he has held a candle for since his schooldays, to Jerry’s country home, which ends as disastrously as can be expected. Frustrated, Rupert and Masha concoct a plan to kidnap Jerry and ransom him with the demand that Rupert be allowed to appear on the show. The plan works; before he is arrested, Rupert watches the broadcast of his taped performance with Rita in the bar in which she works. The film concludes with a montage informing us that, after his release from prison, Rupert’s memoirs were a bestseller. We finish with Rupert appearing on a television special whose announcer repeats “Rupert Pupkin, ladies and gentlemen” (or variants thereon) over and over.

There are several sequences in *The King of Comedy* that clearly represent Rupert’s fantasies, although they are not unambiguously marked as such when they begin. These include a dinner between Jerry and Rupert in which the former invites the latter to take over his show for six weeks; a sequence in Jerry’s office in which he sings the praises of Rupert’s demo tape; and another in which Rupert and Rita get married live on Jerry’s show. The film also generates some more subtle confusions of this kind. When Rupert takes Rita out for a date, the viewer’s memory of the imagined dinner between Jerry and Rupert makes us initially suspect that this, too, may be a fantasy. Ed Sikov has pointed out how, during a sequence in which Rupert telephones Jerry’s office from one of a line of payphones, “[s]uddenly all the other phones are broken, the receivers dangling, a hostile crowd closing in on Rupert. Just as suddenly, the phones are back in order and the crowd is gone” (Sikov 20). Rupert’s fantasies, then, are not only of success, but can also be of exaggerated adversity. The film also contains many sequences in Jerry’s basement room in his mother’s house, which is populated with life-size cardboard cutouts of Jerry, Liza Minnelli, and other stars, as well as a huge image of an adoring audience that covers an entire wall. We never see Rupert’s mother (voiced, famously, by Catherine Scorsese, the director’s mother), but we often hear her shouting down to her son in irritation and exasperation at his noisiness. In his monologue on the show, however, Jerry says that his mother has been dead for nine years; he also tells Masha that he lives in a “hovel” rather than a “townhouse,” as she does. Is what we are shown of Jerry’s home to be taken as reality, or is this his fantasy home? Or even, one might say, his fantasy of his fantasies, the place in which he would ideally like to live out his dreams in preparation for their coming true?

In this context, the precise status of the film’s final sequence is only the latest in a string of deeply ambiguous elements. Is Rupert’s post-arrest success real

or merely the latest in his string of delusory fantasies? (Scorsese and Jerry Lewis seem to disagree about this; see Houston 91). Whatever we conclude about this, the film very clearly shows that Rupert lives for at least some of the time in his own little world, as the saying goes. But not everybody who does so is unclear about the distinction between fantasy and reality; there are fantasists whose fantasies are knowingly entered into. To take these narrative ambiguities as suggesting that the film renders the distinction between reality and fantasy entirely unstable would be a mistake. The function of the film's confusions of diegetic status is not to prompt the viewer to give up on the question of the reality of what we are shown (there is, for example, no doubt at all that Rupert and Masha "actually" kidnap Jerry), so much as to render uncertain the ground upon which our reactions to the film – emotional; psychological; ethical – are based. Crucial to the film's effect is a bewildering and uncomfortable uncertainty of tone involving extremes of embarrassment, not only for characters within the film, but also for the viewer. De Niro's performance is a remarkable tool for the achievement of this uncertainty. Rupert's impeccably neat tailoring, haircut, and moustache (all of which are perfectly pitched in a no-man's land between a kind of garish stylishness – or stylish garishness – and profound sartorial misjudgment) combine with his open, earnest face and absolute refusal to take no for an answer in rendering him a deeply discomfiting screen presence. (More than one commentator has compared him unfavourably to the more obviously violent Travis Bickle of 1976's *Taxi Driver*.) Some of this discomfort comes, as we shall see, from the fact that the film does not allow us to settle comfortably into dismissing Rupert as simply psychotic; the relationships between his world, the worlds of those he encounters, and our world are much too complex and uncertain for that.

The Extent of Idealism

Although the increasingly desperate encounters between Pupkin and Langford present us with an instance of mutual incomprehension as profound as any in cinema, it may seem, at the very least, to be stretching the point to see their confrontations as raising problems of idealism. But it all depends, of course, both on what one means by idealism and on what one takes to be its scope. Bernard Williams finds this to be an unresolved issue in Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, referring to "his notoriously generous use of the expression 'language-game,'" as well as to his tendency, "in the converse direction as it were . . . to use 'form of life,' to refer to some quite modest linguistic practice" (154). If we are amenable to seeing different uses of language as indicating, at least possibly, the existence of fundamentally different forms of life, we open ourselves to the risk that an increasing subtlety and discrimination in the investigation of such uses may multiply these "forms of life" unproductively and implausibly. (We might, that is, end up exaggerating what separates people from one another, whereas what Wittgenstein wants to emphasise is how much has to be held in common for us to so much as disagree: "it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life" (*Philosophical Investigations* §241).) Despite this reservation, Williams is nevertheless clear

that there are much more sensible forms of idealism than the “ridiculous” notion of “a kind of aggregative solipsism”; an example of a sensible idealism is the idea – which he believes he finds in the later Wittgenstein – of

a form of transcendental idealism which is suggested, not indeed by the confused idea that the limits of *each* person’s language mean the limits of *each* person’s world, but by the idea that the limits of *our* language mean the limits of *our* world” (150).

Jonathan Lear has remarked along similar lines that “if it is human *action*, not behaviour, that is fundamental, and action is the expression of beliefs, desires, interests, concerns, then there is reason for calling this philosophy a kind of idealism” (239, n. 49). There are, it should be said, dissenting views; Norman Malcolm, for example, argues *contra* Williams that “that no tendency towards any form of idealism is to be found in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy” (249), although it is questionable whether Malcolm really engages with the understanding of idealism with which Williams operates.

My interest here is not in the precise accuracy of these accounts as interpretations of Wittgenstein; for one thing, both the issues and the debate are far too complex to do justice to while still paying the requisite level of attention to the film. My concern is, rather, with the relationship of the idealist themes that some philosophers discover in Wittgenstein to our experience of *The King of Comedy*. We might elaborate the relevant aspects of this line of thought by echoing Williams’s queries and saying that if the practices that we think of as generating a “form of life” are too minor then the possibility of significant insight into human actions and relationships will recede dramatically (the stakes need to be high enough – the practices widely enough shared – for our conclusions to be of value), whereas if the “us” in question is seen as, necessarily, referring in the final analysis to *any* human being whatsoever then the consideration of conflicting cases loses its bite. *The King of Comedy* responds to these ideas, in that it raises questions as to the level of divergence required in order to make it appropriate to speak of conflicting forms of life, as well as prompting reflection on how we can articulate what it is that needs to be sufficiently shared for us to talk about “*our* language” and “*our* world.” What, I want to ask, does the film suggest about the relationship between “the limits of *each* person’s language” and “world” and “the limits of *our* language” and “world”?

The philosopher G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe – Wittgenstein’s student, friend, and translator – also investigated whether the later Wittgenstein’s interest in linguistic practice led him towards “what might be called a linguistic idealism” (Anscombe, “Question” 112). She discusses situations of profound conceptual difference and asks whether they can even rightly be described as instances of conflict, in the absence of a shared background of agreement in judgements. Anscombe, following Wittgenstein, shows that not any incorrect statement or action can rightly be called a mistake. (The film contains a famous joke about this very thing. When Jerry is throwing Rupert out of his country house, the latter says, “so I made a mistake!”, at which Jerry yells back, “so did Hitler!”) Anscombe offers some alternative poss-

ibilities that resonate with many of the possible interpretations of Rupert's words and actions which the viewer may entertain while watching *The King of Comedy*: "such an utterance [that is, an incorrect utterance that is not a mistake] may be . . . 'a queer reaction' or a manifestation of some different 'picture of the world' . . . it may be a mere manifestation of ignorance like a child's. It may be madness" (124). All these possibilities have their attractions – it is certainly tempting to ascribe to Pupkin a divergent, indeed delusional, "picture of the world," or to write off his behaviour as ignorance rooted in immaturity (his relationship with Rita, who he could never pluck up the courage to ask out when they were at school together, could certainly be described as a case of arrested development) – but none of Anscombe's descriptions are wholly satisfactory when applied to Rupert, raising the possibility that we really are dealing with "conflict of irreconcilable principles," with the kind of case that, as Anscombe concludes, "remains unfinished business" (132, 133).

Before going on to explore in more detail the basis of this claim, it may be worthwhile asking whether there is any direct evidence that *The King of Comedy* itself raises issues of idealism or scepticism, rather than merely being amenable to having them foisted upon it. I think some apparently throwaway comments can serve such a function. When, for example, the kidnapped Jerry is on the phone to his studio, he explains to Rupert and Masha that "we call our second cameraman Helen Keller," a decidedly un-politically correct joke about the legendary deaf and blind author and activist. For a sighted and hearing audience, imagining the world of an unsighted and unhearing person is to imagine some kind of limit case of shared perceptual experience. A little later, Masha asks Jerry, "Wouldn't you like to see me out of my head?" While this line most directly refers to Jerry seeing Masha out of control (given her unruly behaviour throughout the film, one wonders exactly what this could look like), what the words literally say also suggests the idea of seeing Masha as she sees herself, of looking at her from "out of [her own] head." (Scorsese was in many ways faithful to Paul D. Zimmerman's script, but also encouraged improvisation; the reference to Keller is in the script, but Masha's line is not.) There is thus in *The King of Comedy* an understated but persistent tendency to invoke the notion of forms of experience that at least *may* be sufficiently divergent as to raise, firstly, the possibility that people who do not share such forms could not share a world (scepticism) and, secondly, the question of the extent to which these worlds depend on these very forms of experience (idealism). (Seen in this way, Masha's remark that she wishes she was black also contributes to this theme; is Masha's world Rita's world?)

What Depends on Us?

Questions of idealism can lead so rapidly towards extremes of abstraction that it will be useful to be as concrete as possible. Recalling Pippin's description of idealism ("what depends on us to be what it is?"), let us ask what things we might, most uncontroversially, consider as depending on us to be what they are. Anscombe argues that prime examples are promises. (The question of idealism thus intersects importantly with matters of moral

psychology.) As we have seen, the film's narrative is set in motion by Rupert's belief that Jerry has promised him something. It is easy to believe that this is not the case, that Rupert has simply (wilfully?) misinterpreted an obvious fobbing-off as some kind of commitment. This is not entirely accurate. What Jerry actually says to Rupert is that he should contact his office and "ask for Cathy Long," his secretary, and that "we'll make time to listen to what you're talking about." Rupert, however, insists instead on asking for Jerry himself, and is only reluctantly willing to engage with Cathy instead. When, in a crucial scene to which we will return, Cathy returns Rupert's audition tape to him, it is clear that she has indeed listened to it. So, given the fact that it is perfectly reasonable for Langford to have used a collective "we" to refer to himself and his staff – "we'll make time to listen" does not, on any reasonable interpretation, commit him actually to sit down with Cathy and listen to Rupert's tape himself – then, contrary to what I think is likely to be our initial impression, it is not only the case that Jerry *does* make Rupert a promise, but also that the promise is fulfilled. (Jerry does "adhere to [Rupert's] request.")

Anscombe expresses her openness to the possibility of what she calls a "partial idealism," according to which there are (at least) three types of "things whose existence does depend on human linguistic practice" in an untrivial fashion (indeed, far from being trivial, she claims that this dependence "touches the nerve of great philosophical problems"); these three phenomena are "rules, rights and promises" ("Question" 118). She argues that it was one of David Hume's great discoveries that promises are, as she puts it, "naturally unintelligible" ("Rules" 97). (There is something of a linguistic sleight-of-hand here to make the point more emphatic; Hume actually says that "a promise is not intelligible naturally" which, perhaps, comes ultimately to the same thing but feels very different; see Hume 516 [*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Part 2, Section 5].) This unintelligibility comes about because it seems, for example, impossible to explain what obligation is imposed by a promise without invoking the concept of a promise. (Why is it wrong to break a promise? Because it infringes an obligation. Which obligation? That of not breaking one's promises.) The solution to this problem is that it is human convention that creates the obligation; we are brought up to respond to certain injunctions not to do something which Anscombe refers to as "stopping modals." She observes that during such training "you are told you 'can't' do something you plainly *can*, as comes out in the fact that you sometimes *do*" ("Rules" 101). When being taught a game, for example, we might be told, "you can't put that piece there," in response to our having done just that. Ultimately, Anscombe concludes, "[i]t is part of human intelligence to be able to learn the responses to stopping modals without which they wouldn't exist as linguistic instruments and without which these things: rules, etiquette, rights, infringements, promises, pieties and impieties would not exist either."

Much of the difficulty in interpreting Rupert's actions in *The King of Comedy* stems from how hard it is to decide whether or not he has in these cases learnt the appropriate responses. Is there a "stopping modal" according to which adults understand that "you can't force your way into a talk show

[2] See Richard Greene's discussion of the rationality of what he calls the "Pupkin gambit." Greene's conclusion that Pupkin's actions "can be viewed as rational only through the lens of a certain irrational sensibility" blurs the distinctions rational/irrational and reality/fantasy (137). It is not entirely satisfactory to say that, "[i]n virtue of his delusional nature," Rupert's actions are "virtually guaranteed to lead to good consequences." Rupert's apparent willingness to be satisfied with being "king for a night" can readily, it seems to me, serve as evidence for his essential *rationality*, rather than indicating his inability to distinguish being "rich, famous, and successful" from "the experience" of so being.

host's car and ask him for a guest spot on his show"? Rupert's original plan of asking Jerry for a guest shot cannot but appear to be, on an initial viewing, unambiguously a case of self-delusion. But during their car ride together, Rupert refers to "the night that Jack Paar got sick," which was Jerry's "big break" because it gave him the opportunity to take over Paar's show. Rupert's attempt deliberately to orchestrate for himself a repetition of what happened to Jerry by chance and good fortune of course overlooks the crucial question of why it is that Jerry was a candidate to be Paar's replacement (presumably reputation and experience). But, in Rupert's mind, if Jerry listens to his tape the sheer quality of his act will put him in such a position. From such a perspective, Rupert's delusion starts to look more like opportunistic optimism than sheer irrationality; and is not America supposed to reward those who aim high? Rupert says that he walked out of the show in which Jerry substituted for Paar "like I was in a dream." (An American dream, perhaps.) [2]

Later in the film Rupert seems genuinely to believe that he has been invited to Jerry's country house, even though the idea of paying him a visit there started out as a pretext for a second date with Rita, the "invitation" itself taking place only within one of his fantasies. Such is the danger of fantasy; Stanley Cavell remarks that "[f]antasy is precisely what reality can be confused with" (*The World Viewed* 85). But elsewhere in the film Rupert is capable of lying perfectly lucidly in order to further his aims, such as when he says, falsely, "I'm in a meeting myself" when he first calls Jerry's office. Psychosis does not, of course, require that its sufferer has absolutely no connection to the shared world of the non-psychotic. But it is easy to overlook the fact that the eventual success of Rupert's scheme is dependent on his firm grasp of the consequences of his actions. Rather than automatically thinking of fantasy as a retreat from reality, we should bear in mind that it can take courage to approach reality (Iris Murdoch, almost certainly echoing T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," says that "human beings cannot bear much reality" (Murdoch 64)), and that – strange as it may sound – there is a sense in which Rupert, in kidnapping Jerry, is fully cognisant of reality; perhaps even courageously so. While the kidnapping is in progress, Jerry's lawyer (Jay Julien) wonders, "How can you say, 'I was crazy'; how can you say, 'I didn't know what I was doing?'" concluding that "only an idiot kidnaps." The argument is that the act of kidnapping proves stupidity by ruling out insanity. But such an interpretation assumes that the kidnapper's ideal scenario involves not being caught, whereas Rupert's plan involves no such thing. (One of the policemen tells him to consider himself under arrest; "fine," he replies, "I think I should get made up.") The plan is meticulously designed to prevent his capture only until after his monologue has been broadcast; Rupert tells the truth about the kidnapping at the end of his monologue, even though the audience inevitably takes this as just another joke. But when we notice that the charge of stupidity has not been made to stick, our appreciation of Rupert's resourcefulness can easily mask the corollary: that insanity has not, in fact, been disproved. [2]

Deciding one way or another on Rupert's sanity is, then, a more difficult proposition than it has sometimes been held to be. Cavell offers a valuable

hint when he investigates the consequences of “look[ing] upon our shared commitments and responses – as moral philosophers in our liberal tradition have come to do – as more like particular agreements than they are,” a view which, he argues

can give us a sense that whether our words will go on meaning what they do depends upon whether other people find it worth their while to continue to understand us... as though our sanity depended upon their approval of us, finding us to their liking. (*The Claim of Reason* 179)

This is how Anscombe's “partial idealism” could lead to a form of scepticism. Recognising the role of human convention in our lives might, in some circumstances, slip into thinking of what people share in terms of arbitrary agreement – a kind of *sheer* convention – according to which the fact that Anscombe's “rules, etiquette, rights, infringements, promises, pieties and impieties” are not “naturally” grounded, or naturally intelligible, would be taken to suggest that they ultimately have no basis at all. (This, to be clear, is something neither Anscombe, Wittgenstein, nor Cavell have any intention of claiming.) In the face of such anxieties of groundlessness, a desperate clamour for approval is all the reassurance we might be able to come up with. Rupert is not merely obsessed with wealth and fame; he has staked his very sanity on being liked – the more popular he is, the saner he must be.

Scenes of Instruction

As we have seen, Anscombe's discussion of “partial idealism” insists upon the importance of human capacities for learning; her paper “Rules, Rights and Promises” ends with the declaration that the “musts and can'ts” which are crucial for the existence and operation of rules, rights, and promises “are understood by those of normal intelligence as they are trained in the practices of reason” (“Rules, Rights and Promises” 103). As we have also seen, *The King of Comedy* begins with Rupert's declaration that he has already been trained, that his learning days are behind him, that he has “finished the course.” The “course” that he has taken consists mainly of Jerry Langford: “I studied everything you ever did.” Cavell refers to what he calls the “scene of instruction” in §217 of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* (*Conditions* 71). One might think that, having come face to face with his guru, Rupert would be eager for a one-on-one lesson, a “scene of instruction,” but in fact he wants to *forego* any further instruction. (One of Rupert's most straightforwardly nasty moments occurs when he and Masha are in her car following Jerry with the intention of abducting him. Marsha is explaining why Jerry prefers crowded streets, at which Rupert says with aggressive sarcasm, “let me learn from you.”) What does this tell us, beyond the relative banality of seeing the film as prophetic of today's cultures of instant celebrity? It tells us, I suggest, that instruction makes us vulnerable, which is why Rupert does not want any more of it. Cavell says that “[w]e understandably do not like our concepts to be based on what matters to us . . . it makes our language seem unstable and the instability seems to mean . . . my being responsible for whatever stability our criteria may have, and I do not want this responsibility” (92).

Combining these thoughts with Anscombe's discussion of the training required for participation in the "partial idealism" of promises and their ilk, it becomes possible to see all Rupert's encounters with Jerry as failures of instruction, missed opportunities for instruction. But it is not only Rupert who fails to be suitably instructed. Rupert's first joke to Jerry is the rather good one that he knows that his name "means nothing to you, but it means an awful lot to me." Jerry underlines this very point by asking Rupert to repeat his name and then simply referring to him as "pal"; throughout the film, Rupert's name (has a film character ever been more perfectly named?) is continually mangled. He is referred to as Pumpkin, Pipkin, Popkin, Pubnik, Puffer, and Krupkin, and the policeman at the end of the film asks his real name, confident that it could not possibly be Pupkin. (The "kin" syllable seems to be the easiest thing to get right, so close to "king" yet emphasising affinity – as in "kith and kin" – rather than the aristocratic distinction to which Rupert aspires.) For Rupert, one of the first things we ever learn – his own name – proves exceedingly difficult to convey to anybody else. It is also worth noting that, for all his egotism, Rupert doesn't pay others the disrespect they pay to him. He even gets the head of security's name right – Mr. Wirtz – as he is being manhandled out of Jerry's offices. Ironically, when Rupert tells him that he'll be hearing from his lawyer, Wirtz replies, "make sure he gets my name right," which is exactly what Rupert *has* just done, while Wirtz has just called "Krupkin" and is about to call him "Puffer." Rupert may not be a solipsist after all. (Actually, if the adulation he so craves is to mean anything, it is crucial for him not to be.)

One's own name is one of those things that Wittgenstein argues that one "cannot be making a *mistake* about," which is not at all the same thing as being "infallible about it" (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 55 [§425]). Anscombe believes "that *no* language is in Hume's sense naturally intelligible," from which it follows that one's name cannot be merely, as it were, a personal matter, but depends on wider human linguistic practice (Anscombe, "Rules, Rights and Promises" 97). It would not be unreasonable, in such a context, for Rupert to interpret this persistent failure to get his name right as evidence that others do not find him "to their liking," as Cavell puts it, and for this to pose a threat to his confidence not only in his worth but also his sanity or even existence. The prospect of being unable to tell anyone else one's own name is comic because it is frightening, and Rupert's blithe patience in the face of constantly having to repeat his own name is both funny and excruciating largely, I suspect, because finding it so (almost) allows us to avoid considering how we would react if put in the same situation.

Manners and What They Make

Getting somebody's name wrong is rude. Scorsese has referred to *The King of Comedy* as "a comedy of manners" (Altobello), and it is significant for our purposes that Anscombe's list of idealist phenomena includes "etiquette." Ian Miller describes the film in terms that resonate with Cavell's analysis of our reaction to our vulnerability. "[W]atching others make fools of

themselves is painful,” Miller argues, because “[w]e do not want our humanity so utterly vulnerable, our bases for self-respect so fragile” (327). Miller’s analysis of the function of embarrassment in the film is very precise. Just as Rupert’s irrationality, if that is what it is, is not global, Miller points out that

Rupert’s incompetence is not a general incapacity to feel embarrassment, or even a lack of knowledge of broad ranges of appropriate behavior. It is just that he can only feel embarrassed by another and only recognizes inappropriate behavior when it is someone else’s. (335)

Murray Pomerance notes how this capacity manifests in Rupert’s encounter with the secretary at Jerry’s offices (Margot Winkler) and how this manifestation combines with the obliviousness to his insignificance in the eyes of others that we noted above:

De Niro puts on a charitable smile of toleration, as though to say, “My name gives a lot of people trouble, has always done so, and I can remember that, so it’s no surprise it’s giving you trouble, too.” But also – and here is the charity, “I am telling you this because I also know, from past experience, that you might get flustered or embarrassed or feel you have done me an offense, and I want to assure you that’s not the case.” Yet he is not picking up on the possibility that to her he is a nobody *already*, since only people with appointments show up at this desk; one of the legion members of the great urban crowd, whose name one is under no obligation to know. (Pomerance 16)

Our embarrassment, awkwardness – even pain – in the face of Rupert’s actions is almost certain to be one of the most prominent components of an initial encounter with *The King of Comedy*. What this obscures is the way in which the film manages to align us with Rupert at precisely the point when we are most confident in our separation from him. The film confounds us in the way that it “instructs” its audience, only for this instruction to reveal its true significance on repeated viewing. I am referring to the difference between our experience, on a first viewing, of the scene in which Cathy returns Rupert’s tape to him, when we have not yet heard Rupert’s monologue, and subsequently, when we have. Astonishingly – and I think almost unimaginably on first viewing – when we finally hear it, Rupert’s monologue *is* pretty funny. Just as with his dress sense, it is a perfectly poised piece of mediocrity.

We’ve been rude to Rupert in so summarily underestimating him, a possibility that the pain he has given us (potentially an exquisite pain, depending on how funny one finds the film) has entirely obscured from view. The failures of instruction I referred to above are not only within the film, but in our encounter with it; the film sets us up to fail so that we can be better instructed next time around. Just as the audience for Rupert’s monologue can’t at the time see that he is telling the truth about having kidnapped Jerry, first-time viewers can’t see that when Cathy Long tells Rupert that he has “a good potential,” that the timing he displays on his audition tape is

“excellent,” and that he would be well-advised to develop his act in a live situation, all of this is true. Rupert begins by faux-submissively echoing her words – “don't think I'm ready”; “[not] right for Jerry”; “not very strong” – before pursuing her as she attempts to leave, telling her that he doesn't “have faith in [her] judgement.” Once again, he shows his resistance to instruction; he can only repeat or dispute what is said, not take it on board and actually *respond* to it. The irony, however, is that Rupert's confidence in his own abilities and our certainty of their nonexistence – our lack of faith in *Rupert's* judgement – mean that both we and Rupert see only the brush-off and don't listen to what is being said. We are so dismissive of his judgement that we don't notice that we are judging Cathy the same way he is. Neither Rupert nor the first-time viewer can hear Cathy's insistence that “we mean what we say” – not to mention her assertion “that's a promise” – for what they are, any more than the audience for Jerry's monologue can hear his entirely truthful claim that tying up Jerry was (so he thought) “the only way I could break into show business” for the straightforward explanation it is. It is only when we have heard the monologue that we are prepared to accept that this man could possibly have “excellent” comic timing.

Conclusion

It is remarkable that *The King of Comedy* never shows anybody watching television at home except when we briefly see Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953) on one of Jerry's televisions (Fig. 2). A handkerchief that we witness being moved aside in the process of stealing a wallet reminds Jerry that Rupert still has his handkerchief. This inverts the film's opening. There the cinema was temporarily transformed into a giant television screen, as happens again during Rupert's monologue and in a couple of other places; here the cinema has been shrunk to the confines of a television, and Jerry doesn't lose himself in the story but finds in it something concerning himself. This scene is echoed when the escaped Jerry watches Rupert's monologue on a bank of televisions in the window of a shop. We have moved from Fuller's (diegetically fictional) crime, seen by no one – but that would easily be recognised as a crime were it to be seen – to a (diegetically actual) crime seen by everyone, but that hardly anyone can recognise as such, despite Rupert's honesty about it (Fig. 3). Does “crime” belong on Anscombe's list of idealist phenomena? (She does refer to “infringements.”) I cannot pursue the question here, but the film certainly complicates the notion of what it means to witness a crime.

Fig. 2 Jerry watches television for the first time. (Digital frame enlargement.)



Fig. 3 Jerry watches television for the second time. (Digital frame enlargement.)



Rupert manages eventually to do what Masha, her hands pressed against the glass, could not: to enter the world of television. As Bill Krohn describes the image which this article began by discussing, it “is not satisfied with underlining the limits of the television viewer’s hysteria from within the fiction: it also announces the moment when Rupert achieves his goal, in the great monologue sequence at the end, of passing to the other side” (18; my translation). The film does in places suggest a general hysteria among television viewers and their imagined relationships to, and supposed rights over, those that they watch on the “other side” of the small screen; recall the woman who responds to Jerry’s refusal to speak on the telephone to her hospitalised nephew with “You should only get cancer!” (On the evidence of the film, television and its audience could certainly be said to comprise a world that is, as the name of the restaurant visible behind Rupert when he is first escorted out of Jerry’s offices has it, “Chock full o’ Nuts”; Rupert is certainly not the only one.) But it would, I think, be a misreading of the film to see it as suggesting that cinematic authenticity straightforwardly trumps televisual artificiality. By not showing anybody watching television at home, the film denies cinema viewers any easy route by which to separate them-

selves off as something superior to the television audience (more rational, more self-aware, more critical); it was a wise move to omit the montage stipulated in the script of Rupert “walking onto television screens in various homes across America,” in most of which he is simply ignored. Rather than a scene of instruction this would, in all likelihood, have come across as closer to a lecture, and a rather smug one at that.

There is, then, much more than condemnation to the film’s treatment of the relationship between those on either side of the screen, whether small or silver. In *The King of Comedy* our entwinement with the perspectives of the film demonstrates that considering a film’s aesthetics as a way of coming to terms with alternative viewpoints need be neither anodyne (“let’s listen to other voices”) nor purely contemplative. It is not purely contemplative because we are caught out by our own inescapable complacency; subsequent viewings allow us to reconsider what we were *doing* while watching the film. Wittgenstein wrote in *On Certainty* of how “justifying the evidence comes to an end,” but that in so doing what is involved “is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (28 [§204]). Watching films is an *activity* (of interpretation; prediction; presumption; reaction; correction) rather than a matter of passive absorption, but not everything we do is entirely under our control. This is not to say that it is subconscious, necessarily, but rather that it is under constant negotiation, reinterpretation, and reorientation. *The King of Comedy* instructs us that what Rupert says to Jerry when he has kidnapped him – that “even though this is a kind of a strange situation, there are . . . moments of, I don’t know, you call it sharing or whatever” – is (contrary to scepticism) true of Rupert and the film’s viewers, as well as that it is human activity and upbringing that create some of what is shared (confirming a “partial idealism”). The film also, however, shows that we do not always know either exactly *what* we share, nor precisely *when* we are sharing it. The film emphasises what we might call the realism of idealism: it is *we* who create promises, who create manners, but not *each* of us individually. Our distance from Rupert is real, but, as Jonathan Lear puts it – and as much as we might not want to accept this of Rupert – “to consider an individual in isolation we must be treating him as one of us” (Lear 234).

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