

1994

# 'I Can Take a Hint': Social Ineptitude, Embarrassment, and the King of Comedy

William I. Miller

*University of Michigan Law School, wimiller@umich.edu*

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/1437>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles>



Part of the [Entertainment, Arts, and Sports Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Miller, William I. "I Can Take a Hint': Social Ineptitude, Embarrassment, and the King of Comedy." *Mich. Q. Rev.* 33, no. 2 (1994): 322-44.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [mlaw.repository@umich.edu](mailto:mlaw.repository@umich.edu).

“I CAN TAKE A HINT”:  
SOCIAL INEPTITUDE, EMBARRASSMENT,  
AND *THE KING OF COMEDY*

The phrase “I can take a hint,” when said seriously, contains its own denial. It reveals that the speaker has not been very adept at recognizing the hints already given, nor very graceful about not making a scene once he has recognized them. Its very utterance has the effect of punishing the hint-giver by making her hint fail as a hint. The truly successful hint works by gaining its end with no extra awkwardness added to the social encounter. The good hint should be barely perceived by the person toward whom it is directed. We could even say that it should not really become a part of his active consciousness. It should simply trigger a sense that it’s time to go or that the line he is pursuing needs to be terminated. The good hint achieves the invisibility of the natural.<sup>1</sup>

People vary in their sensitivity to hints. The vast majority of us, in most settings, seem to pick up on them with reasonable facility. But we shouldn’t be picking up on too many of them. That would be a sign of paranoia or self-loathing, if we are being hypersensitive, or a sign of how little we are in fact esteemed, if we are only middlingly sensitive. Yet we should worry if we are picking up on no hints. Few of us are so delightful all the time that we could never be the object of a distancing hint. It might be that our competence in reading signals is so habitual, so much a matter of second nature, that we are not conscious of the hints we discern and act upon properly. But it might also mean that we are being somewhat dense.

We are hint-givers as well as hint-receivers. And this fact should help us hone our skills as hint-receivers. But not necessarily. Hints can be given with focused intention, or hints can just be read (rightly) into rather unfocused unconscious distancing signals. There

is no reason that the unconscious hint-giver need have any special aptitude for discerning when she is the object of someone else's hint. The person skilled in giving intended hints, however, should also be proficient in discerning when she is the object of someone else's hint. That skill is often what we think of as the very substance of good manners and tact, of refined social sensitivity. I am assuming, of course, that these hints are successful ones, that is, those that do their work anonymously.

The situation needs to be complicated a little more by noting that hints whose failure has the capacity to produce scenes come in two varieties: those that are distancing, that reveal the hincer as wishing to be free of the other, and those that seek greater closeness, as in hints of sexual attraction, of continued social relations, of desires to give or receive gifts. Each type involves somewhat different social and psychological risks. The risk of making distancing hints is of giving offense and the attendant awkwardnesses that accompany giving offense: embarrassment, regret, maybe even guilt and remorse. The risks of making hints of desired contact are the risks of rejection and its attendant pains: as before, embarrassment, but more seriously and centrally, humiliation, shame, chagrin, indignation and resentment. Both hints of distance and closeness tend to establish a moral and social hierarchy in which the distancer or the desired one has a higher status. There is a certain moral economy here. The two types of hint often appear in tandem: the hint of closeness, not unusually, provokes hints to keep away, while the distancing hint often prompts desperate and pathetic hints of closeness and reassurance from the rejected party. It is clear that a certain right inheres in the distancing position, a right to be free of relations not consented to.<sup>2</sup> The person seeking closeness is always cast in the role of a seeker of favors, or more accurately, of the other's consent to have her social spaces intruded upon.

The structure of this moral economy means that, somewhat perversely, we are inclined to find the seeker of closeness to be more off-putting than we are to find the distancer off-putting. Social obtuseness in the former produces in others contempt, disgust, annoyance, emotions that motivate removal and distancing; social ineptness in the distancer produces hatred, indignation, resentment, emotions that, though hostile, impel us to get closer even if only to wreak havoc or take vengeance. The seeker of closeness is thus a nudnick, a nerd, a creep, a dork, a schnorrer (Yiddish seems to make a myriad

of refined distinctions in this social type), and more recently, a harasser or a stalker; the distancer is rude, boorish, a cold fish, or more charitably, shy or reserved. Ineptness in the distancer is not, however, simply a matter of giving offense. There is another kind of ineptness: failing to keep others off, being too accessible. Thus the patsy, pushover, chump, on the one hand, or the gracious, sweet, long-suffering soul on the other. Gender figures in this also. We usually envisage men as more likely to violate the norms of distance than women: it is men who are usually treated to epithets like nerd and creep. A woman who doesn't pick up on distancing signals might be pushy, or aggressive, whiny or dependent, but not a dork or a nudnick. Men, on the other hand, are cut more slack for being rude as distancers than women are, even though women are caught in the double bind of being condemned both for not being circumspect enough about men approaching them and for not being generally more welcoming when appreciated.

"I can take a hint," as I indicated above, is already a sign that a hint has not succeeded in doing its work without social disruption, that is, without giving offense and without that offense becoming the basis for "making a scene," for "I can take a hint" makes a scene. It is the indignant response of someone who feels that he hasn't been treated to the respect he feels himself entitled to. But if indignation is the emotion of the nudnick who finally gets the message, embarrassment and mortification, or a more generalized sensation of awkwardness, are likely to characterize the emotional position of the hinter and observers of the scene. Embarrassment figures more insistently in the world of hints than just as a response to making a scene. The inept reader of distancing signals embarrasses us even before he must be disciplined by being forced to "get the hint" or "get the message." It is his denseness that makes the situation awkward for others long before it degenerates into a "scene."

This is a long prologue to a tale which I must make a bit longer still, for the failure of hints and the embarrassment generated by inept hint takers are the central motifs of *The King of Comedy*, which is my subject in this essay. Let me sketch briefly some salient features of embarrassment. It has been observed that embarrassment and certain closely related sensations of awkwardness and social discomfort can be experienced vicariously. We can feel embarrassed on someone's behalf even though that person does not feel embarrassed but, as our own sensations judge, should feel so. This

allows us to experience a doubling of the embarrassment. Not only do we feel the embarrassment we would feel if we were in Rupert Pupkin's predicament, but we also sympathize with the embarrassment that Rupert's ineptitude has caused the other party. In fact, it is this latter embarrassment that triggers the former. Because Rupert embarrasses others, we imagine to our own embarrassment what it would be like to be so embarrassing and so dim as not to have perceived we were.

Embarrassment is also contagious; that is, we can catch it from another who does feel it. In these instances it is not the case that we are feeling embarrassed by what the other is feeling embarrassed by — that would simply be another example of vicarious embarrassment. The contagion of embarrassment is a function of the fact that the display of embarrassment can itself be embarrassing. Embarrassment can thus feed on itself, producing more embarrassment in the embarrassed person who now can add the embarrassment of a loss of poise to whatever failings gave rise to the initial embarrassment. The manifest embarrassment of another also embarrasses others who witness it. Blushes produce blushes because embarrassment makes demands on our tact which we are not always up to. Do we pretend not to notice? Do we notice and say something to defuse the situation? Or does our embarrassment at their embarrassment do just the right thing by making us a community of equals again? Embarrassment, it has been observed, is not only disruptive of a smooth social order; it is called upon in many situations to do the remedial work of restoring smoothness to a disturbed social setting.<sup>3</sup> Embarrassment works, as we all well know, to effect apology, to make amends for our gaffes and awkwardnesses. In fact, if we are not embarrassed or embarrassable we are unlikely also to be very adept at picking up on the distancing signals that others give us.

There lurks here an issue which may be of special interest to film theorists: the process by which the viewer develops identifications with characters, themes, or the camera's eye might vary with the particular emotion at stake. Certain depicted emotions, like embarrassment, because contagious and vicariously experienceable, prompt the reproduction of themselves in the viewer; other emotions cannot reproduce themselves. Compare, for instance, jealousy: one does not feel jealous on someone else's behalf. We can sympathize with their jealousy or understand it, but we do not feel it. In this regard, it is unlike embarrassment. Any theory of the identificatory

process in film will remain forever oversimplified without a more detailed consideration of how spectator sympathy works in conjunction with different kinds of emotions.

Embarrassment is an emotion that has a strangely insistent connection with laughter and comedy. We might think of embarrassment as occupying the middle ground between humiliation on its dark side and amusement on its light side. Embarrassing incidents are the same things that provide mirth to observers and even to the poor embarrassed soul within hours or days of the event. Embarrassing events are thus distinguishable from humiliating ones. We will regale others to our own and their delight with our embarrassments, but we will guard our humiliations and reveal them to no one unless we are engaged in certain ritualized degradations like confession or psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup> Yet humiliation too partakes of the comic world, for our humiliations often occur to the delight of others, producing in them Hobbes's "sudden glory"<sup>5</sup> and the gray mirth of Schadenfreude.

The emotion we name amusement,<sup>6</sup> and by this I mean the feeling that we have in response to things deemed humorous rather than the sense of amusement as when we say we amuse ourselves by playing basketball, seems to find in the embarrassing much of the occasion for its elicitation. Not only is it that the same events that are embarrassing can with a slight shift of perspective also appear amusing, but also that embarrassment itself provides amusement, if not to the embarrassed person then surely to others. But this is tricky, for we think of embarrassment as an unpleasant emotion; indeed it is sufficiently painful to provide much of the discipline and threat that keeps us functioning as mannerly and sociably presentable people. Embarrassing situations are embarrassing for all concerned, the one who embarrasses, the one who is embarrassed by the one who embarrasses, and those that witness the spectacle. At some level watching others make fools of themselves is painful. We do not want our humanity so utterly vulnerable, our bases for self-respect so fragile. Yet it is precisely the fragile basis of our respectability that produces the comic: what is a clown, what are the grotesque, slapstick, black humor, burlesque, if not the spectacle of our ineffable foolishness? We are dealing here, rather obviously, with some pretty deep-seated ironies of the social and psychological.<sup>7</sup>

Here I note as an aside that it has been a commonplace of literary theory since Aristotle that certain emotional experiences in the

observer may be as constitutive of a particular artistic genre as its other formal generic structures. Aristotle was clearly onto something when he made the elicitation of certain emotions the signature of tragedy. We have even come to the point where we categorize films by the emotions we expect them to elicit: horror film is named after a type of fear, revenge films engage the passion of vengefulness and its close associates: indignation, resentment, and the satisfaction of justice done. Tear jerkers often elicit a range of emotions from wistfulness to pity. Action films exhilarate and partake of aspects of apprehension, revenge and horror. We would need to distinguish more precisely the differences between the emotion we experience as an observer of a fictional representation from the one we give the same name when the representation is not fictional or to the one we say we feel when we are one of the principal actors. We would also want to recognize that our precise emotional responses depend to some extent on what we figure the emotional situation of the observed party to be. Thus the apprehension we experience in horror films may well have a different structure depending, say, on whether the character in the film is also experiencing fear and terror or whether she is blithely oblivious to the danger that lurks behind the closet door.

Embarrassment and amusement also share some of the same somatic features. Laughter, central to the bodily presentation of amusement, is no stranger to embarrassment either, although distinctly less central than blushing. Laughter, as we all know, can mark a variety of psychic, social, and somatic states: embarrassment, malice, contempt, joy, anxiety, awkwardness, getting tickled, being amused, or simply supplying the necessary signs of engagement in amiable conversation. It may be that these states share nothing more than the fact that they all can trigger laughter. Is there anything really similar between the awkward laughter of embarrassment, and the laughter of genuine amusement? It is never too difficult to tell one from the other. Yet they are both laughs; they are not different genera, but species within a genus and they share a certain common relation with the ridiculous, the ludicrous, the humiliating, and the embarrassing, and the comic universe in which they thrive.

Like laughter, comedy cuts across a number of emotional domains. Comic laughter is not only the laughter of amiability. Most any laugh provoked by the comic (we may thus except the

laugh of being tickled) is over-determined: part nervous, part “sudden glory,” part just joining with others who are laughing, part amusement and mirth and part relief in the style of “oh please be funny enough, so that I don’t have to feel embarrassed by your not being funny.” This last item is surely some of what motivates laughter at the performances of that most vulnerable of souls, the stand-up comedian, the modern clown. Is it possible to separate our fear of his embarrassing us by his being embarrassing from the total experience of the comedy? Consider the emotions elicited by observing an unfunny comedian, something we will take up again shortly when we meet Rupert Pupkin. If humiliation lies in pretending to bigger shoes than you can fill, then the unfunny comedian humiliates himself and one of the sure indications that you are watching someone humiliate himself is that you will be embarrassed by the display.

\* \* \*

Embarrassment, comedy, stand-up comedians, and the norms of respectable and competent social behavior, especially as these have to do with the practices surrounding leave taking, conversation and interaction closure all come together in Martin Scorsese’s under-appreciated classic, *The King of Comedy*.<sup>8</sup> The movie, according to press critics and Scorsese in interviews, is about the American obsession with celebrity. The film presents the story of Rupert Pupkin’s obsessive drive to get his break on network television as a stand-up comedian. Rupert (Robert De Niro) is a pathetic 34 year-old messenger boy who enjoys an active fantasy life imagining himself the host of his own talk show which he stages in a room of the house he shares with his mother amidst life-size cardboard cutouts of Liza Minelli and Jerry Lewis.<sup>9</sup> Jerry Lewis plays Jerry Langford, the popular host of a late night talk show and the object of Rupert’s emulation and fixation. One night Rupert insinuates himself into Jerry’s car after having helped him brave a throng of autograph hounds and groupies like himself; he confesses his ambitions to Jerry, asks Jerry if he would listen to his act, and extracts from him an unfelt concession to contact his office. The film then treats us to the painful experience of Rupert’s numerous attempts to see Jerry as he remains oblivious to the rebuffs and brush-offs from Jerry’s staff people. Interspersed with scenes of Rupert cooling his heels in the reception area of Jerry’s office are Rupert’s fantasies: Jerry begging Rupert to take



over his show, Jerry declaring Rupert a comic genius, Rupert getting married on the Langford show to Rita, a bartender who was once the object of Rupert's fantasies from afar when they were in high school. Pursuant to Jerry's invitation in one of these fantasies to visit Jerry's summer home, Rupert actually shows up with Rita and is rudely sent packing. In the next scene, Rupert, with the assistance of another psychotic Langford fan, Masha (Sandra Bernhard), kidnaps Jerry and the end of it all is that Rupert uses Jerry as a hostage to secure his own appearance on Jerry's show after which he blithely goes off to jail, but not before he, we, and Rita view his monologue on network TV in Rita's bar. The movie closes with various voice-overs in the style of the evening news in which we find that Rupert Pupkin's name has become a household word, that his performance was viewed by 87 million households, that he was sentenced to six years in the white collar minimum security facility in Allenwood, PA, that Rupert's memoirs have been purchased by a New York publishing house for more than a million dollars, that Rupert was released after serving two years and nine months of his sentence, that his best-selling autobiography will be appearing as a major motion picture. And in the final scene the resonant voice of an announcer introduces the one and only King of Comedy Rupert Pupkin who now has his own network show. "Rupert Pupkin, ladies and gentlemen, let's hear it for Rupert Pupkin. Wonderful. Rupert Pupkin, ladies and gentlemen. Rupert Pupkin, ladies and gentlemen. Let's hear it for Rupert Pupkin. Wonderful. Rupert Pupkin, ladies and gentlemen."

Let me touch on a few small items before taking up the issues of misreading social cues and the emotional responses such misreadings provoke that are so central to the movie's feel. Rupert loves his name; thus his first words to Jerry in the car: ". . . my name is Rupert Pupkin and I know the name doesn't mean very much to you but it means an awful lot to me. Believe me." At some level he seems to know it may be his best joke. He leads with it when he gives his comedy routine, even after it has been given by the announcer. Names, some think, dictate our destiny. Rupert's surely dictates his. It takes a very special person to overcome a name. Nerdy names go a long way to making their bearers nerds. In any event, the movie industry operates on such an assumption, for if names can't quite make a star, they surely can prevent one from being born. We thus have Clark Gable and Rock Hudson, names which have a style every

bit as parodiable as the names we give residential subdivisions. Could Rupert possibly be a skilled social actor with such a name? He does not disappoint our expectations.

The movie ends by obsessing on Rupert's name and getting it right, something no one but Rupert in the movie does. To others he is Mr. Pumpkin, Mr. Puffer, Mr. Pipkin, Mr. Pubnik, Mr. Krupkin, Mr. Potkin, etc. Together with the improbable number of households (the entire US) viewing Rupert's night on the Langford show, this repetition of his correct name by someone other than himself, presented somewhat slower than it would be in reality, is a very insistent indication that the extravagant news items and voice-overs at the end of the film are just another one of Rupert's fantasies. Critics have taken it straight, some going so far as to chastise Scorsese's irresponsibility in depicting the rewards obtainable by criminal devotion to celebrity.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning of the film Rupert's fantasies are clearly marked as such. When Jerry finally extricates himself from Rupert after their first encounter, Rupert falls into reverie and the scene breaks to Jerry and Rupert having lunch. Here it is Jerry who is importuning a reluctant Rupert to take over his show for six weeks which a self-satisfied Rupert deigns to do. Scorsese makes sure we do not mistake the reverie for reality by breaking to Rupert in his room acting the part of Rupert in the fantasy. Rupert must even suffer the indignity of his mother's off-screen interruptions ("What are you doing down there so late?"). It is striking that the Rupert of the fantasy speaks with more reserve (but still it is a reserve with many indicia of "showbiz" vulgar) and less volume than he is actually uttering the lines in his room. We thus see explicitly the metamorphosis Rupert's self-conception effects on the raw reality of Rupert's self that others see. Rupert does not hear himself as others hear him, nor does he see himself as others see him. Maybe. There is more than an occasional indication that Rupert is not without some strange access to insightful self-knowledge, of which more anon.

If the reality of the final scene is less obviously the stuff of fantasy, that is only because Rupert and the movie have insistently moved to make his fantasy and his reality converge into a kind of "fan-reality" in which fans become the performers. Earlier fantasies were clearly signaled as such, but now we, like Rupert, are not sure anymore where fantasy ends and reality begins. This is a film that delights in all kinds of ambiguities that arise when the boundaries between



It's fantasy time as Rupert daydreams doing lunch with talk-show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis).

reality and fantasy, play-acting and playing at acting, television and life, good jokes and bad jokes, are not clearly demarcated. Was Rupert's monologue supposed to be funny or supposed to be bad? The critics split on this question, as have people I have polled; even Scorsese and De Niro split, the former thinking it weak, the latter thinking it great.<sup>11</sup> Ambiguities and ambivalences figure in the casting. We thus have dramatic actors such as De Niro trying to do comedy just as Rupert Pupkin is trying to do comedy and as De Niro as Jake LaMotta did comedy at the conclusion of *Raging Bull*, Scorsese's film before *The King of Comedy*. Sandra Bernhard, a stand-up comic, gets her acting debut as a dramatic actress. Tony Randall, Victor Borge, Joyce Brothers play themselves, but they are not just being themselves, but playing themselves, self-enacting. And if De Niro is remarkable because he seems to come less determined by his prior roles than most big stars, less encumbered with the sludge of his public person, the opposite is the case with Jerry Lewis, about whom no one does not have an opinion, and, unless French, usually a negative one. Lewis is a comedian playing a dramatic role, but

playing a comic in that role. Lewis figures greatly in what I take to be one of the central implicit issues raised by the film: the unfunny comedian, the generally inept social actor, and the embarrassed discomfort he creates in his auditors. For every occasion someone might have actually laughed at Lewis one has cringed in embarrassment at least three times. The real Lewis, in other words, has caused us almost as much discomfort as Rupert will cause us.

Rupert's fantasies are wonderful stuff. They are pure wish-fulfillment, but they are not ends in themselves; rather they motivate Rupert to actualize them. The strength of his fantasies seems to overwhelm the embattled reality of others. When Jerry, in a desperate attempt to bring closure to Rupert's verbal barrage in the car, tells Rupert to call his office and ask for his secretary, Rupert replies: "You know how many times I had this conversation in my head? This is beautiful." Jerry responds with cool patronizing contempt: "And did it always turn out this way?" Rupert: "Yeah, it did." Later, he goes to Jerry's summer home with Rita because Jerry, in a fantasy, invited him. In these fantasies Rupert, more successfully than he can in real life, adopts Jerry's cool competence, while Jerry is reduced to acting like Rupert (or the real Jerry Lewis) as he fawns, importunes, and tells lame jokes. Yet Rupert's visions are indelibly Rupert's, still manifesting tastelessness and bad social judgment. In one he imagines his high school principal as a special guest on the Langford show, called there to pay homage to Rupert and marry him to Rita on national television. The taste mimics the tackiness of Tiny Tim but reproduces it as something to aspire to rather than to parody (as even Tim was able to do). And the irredeemability of his smallness of character manifests itself in the apology his vision extracts from the principal on behalf of all those who made Rupert's high school life miserable. Rupert thus constructs humiliation rituals (pathetic ones in the form of fantasized apology and deference) for others as a source of his pleasure. At dinner with Rita, Rupert links himself with one well-attested Christian tradition which makes the joys of heaven the delight of watching the pains of the damned in hell. He paints Rita a future of bliss in which they will be able to "look down on everybody and yell, 'Hey, tough luck, suckers. Better luck next time.'"

Triumph is the contempt of losers for losers, Nietzschean *ressentiment* writ small. Rupert thus consistently manifests contempt not only for Masha but for the other autograph seekers outside Jerry's

studio. But there is something about Rupert's sheer obliviousness that makes him an object of a kind of reluctant awe. Don't we root for him because his triumph will come at Langford/Lewis's expense? Our willingness to discover appealing characteristics in this psychotic nebbish is not quite separable from the fact that he annoys Jerry Langford, someone for whom we have as little love as we do for the actor who plays him. Thus do we participate in Rupert's Schadenfreude.

Rupert is so inept that his ineptitude produces perverse consequences, that is, ones that cannot readily be distinguished from aptitude. De Niro's Rupert is a wonderfully subtle portrait of someone who lacks subtlety, who gets all the little things wrong and misreads everyone else's hints and cues. His hair, his dress, his body posture, his facial posture, his verbal and tonal tics all capture precisely someone who just doesn't quite get it. The remarkable thing about human sociability is how subtle we are in discerning the slightest deviation in these matters. But Rupert lacks key components of this competence: he is largely clueless. We need, however, to distinguish between at least two kinds of clueless person: the one who is simply oblivious and the one who at some level of consciousness uses his ineptitude strategically.<sup>12</sup> We all know cases of each. The difficult matter is what kind of consciousness to attribute to the latter. They are not sufficiently clued in to have the ability to become properly socialized, yet they are not without some awareness that the offenses they give others get results. Others back off, others don't want to make scenes, others are too well socialized to be so rude as to call them on their rudeness, their intrusiveness, their boringness, boorishness, etc. These are the people who prey off the general sociability of the majority. Yet it would be hard to attribute to them the classic mentality of the predator: that preternatural hyperawareness of each move of its would-be victim. The Ruperts of the world are not subtle hunters, nor are they generally cruel in a focused way. Such persons don't pretend, convincingly that is, not to want what they want; in this they are unlike the predator who studies how not to tip off danger alarms in his prey.<sup>13</sup> Yet at some level of consciousness they are not displeased with the consequences of their behavior. In straight economic terms the cost of their nerdiness, the cost of their violating all these myriad of social norms, does not outweigh the benefits they obtain by violating them.

Rupert is at different times both kinds of clueless. He really does

think the excruciatingly awful jokes he tells are funny. He thinks the picture of his *Pride and Joy*, a card picturing the household products of the same names, is witty. Yet at the same time he is not without awareness that the way to get where he wants to go is to make it very uncomfortable for others not to let him get there. But only some of the time, for his fantasies do not make him the best of cold rational actors. He does, after all, overplay his hand by showing up at Jerry's summer home for the weekend with Rita in tow. That blunder finally provokes Jerry into making a scene of his own, the one in which Rupert finally acknowledges that he can take a hint. And when the violation of little norms won't get Rupert where he wants to go, he shows little reluctance at violating big ones, such as kidnapping laws. It is not without interest that the movie cuts from Rupert's finally admitting he can take a hint at Jerry's place to him and Masha in the car with the toy gun waiting to abduct Jerry.

There is in this another clue as to what constitutes so much of the offensiveness of the socially clueless person, whether instrumentally so or not: clueless people are not forgiving of other people's similar lack of competence. Masha embarrasses Rupert as he does her; Rita embarrasses Rupert when she makes herself a little too at ease at Jerry's before Jerry arrives, putting on the record player ("You really shouldn't put that on, you know; it's not polite.") or when she takes herself on a sightseeing expedition upstairs ("No, Rita, I . . . No, Rita, I wouldn't go up there. Rita. Rita, Rita. I don't think it's a good idea. . . . Rita, I don't think you have the right to go upstairs. Rita, please, don't go up. . . Rita."). 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. Thus it is that Rupert will brazenly maintain to Masha that he didn't get thrown out of the building in which Jerry's office is located even though she saw him get unceremoniously chucked out by two security guards. To Rupert's mind the grossest violations of the norms of appropriate social interaction are Jerry's, not his.<sup>14</sup> Jerry's tact fails him and thus is Rupert forced to have to take a hint:

Jerry: You understand English? Take your things and go.

Rupert: All right, all right. I can take a hint, Jerry. I just want

to ask you if you'll listen to my stuff for fifteen minutes, that's all. Is that asking too much?

Jerry: Yes, it is. I have a life, okay?

Rupert: Well, I have a life too.

Jerry: That's not my responsibility.

Rupert: Well, it is when you tell me to call you and then you don't. . . .

Jerry: I told you to call to get rid of you.

Rupert: To get rid of me?

Jerry: That's right.

Rupert: Okay. All right, I can take a hint.

Jerry: If I didn't tell you that, we'd still be standing on the steps of my apartment.

Rupert will not suffer such rude treatment and he now feels justified in taking revenge.

An actor of less genius would have made this movie into the satire on celebrity that at one level it is and nothing more.<sup>15</sup> But with De Niro doing Pupkin we have a serious piece of social psychology, the kind of insightful comedy of manners we rarely find except in the best novels. His Rupert is a master of using the form of apology as a conversational wedge: "Jerry, I'm sorry. I don't mean to disturb you. I just want to talk to you for a minute." His "I'm sorrys" are frequent and they are always of the preemptive variety, never designed to remedy a wrong done, but to introduce and defuse an offense about to be given. Other instances in this genre are the "I don't mean to bother you but. . ." or his "Really, I don't mind" to Jerry's vexed administrative assistant which skillfully traverses any suggestion that he shouldn't wait around any longer. With the passive aggression of his use of the apology, there is the excessive thank-youing of desperate, but not to be denied, obsequiousness; hands are shaken too often and held too long. First names are used excessively and De Niro gets the style of intrusive familiarity exactly right: he drops Jerry's name to others while in Jerry's presence it becomes a mantra, a magic charm intended to counteract Jerry's desperate efforts at closing their encounter: "Thanks Jerry, thanks. Thanks a lot. It's a pleasure meeting you Jerry. . . . Jerry, Jerry, let me show you a picture of my *Pride and Joy*. . . . Jerry, seriously, if you ever want lunch, my treat." De Niro gets the accompanying body movements, smiles, tones, and rhythms exactly right in their wrongness.

More than thirty minutes of the film are taken up watching

Rupert trying to get by Jerry's staff to Jerry. He is subjected to every kind of distancing move imaginable and we feel awkward suffering not only vicarious embarrassment and vicarious pain of rejection, but embarrassment for the staff people whom his cluelessness puts in awkward situations. His phone calls are not returned. There is no record of his appointment. Receptionists don't recall talking to him and as mentioned, no one gets his name right. And Rupert, true to form, does not get the message or take the hint. Instead he waits until they and we can't bear it. He is willing to endure the awkwardness of waiting in a reception area that he and we are told is not a waiting room. Even Rupert, we should note, experiences the minor awkwardnesses of trying to maintain "normal appearances," trying to enact oneself acting normal. So Rupert doesn't quite know where to rest his eyes or which way to cross his feet or what expression he should wear on his face as he waits.<sup>16</sup> He tries various postures, never holding any of them long enough to do the work of enacting one's normal self very successfully. He cranes his neck back and looks at the ceiling with a quizzical air: "Is that cork?" he says after what to us and the poor receptionist seems like an eternity. She: "I don't know what it is. Is it dripping on you?" He: "No. I was looking at the patterns. You know cork is good for sound. . . . It's very quiet in here." Rupert's ineptness is complex. It is not that he does not feel awkward, it is not that he does not know about trying to act normal, it is not that silence doesn't bother him, or that he feels out of place in some settings, it is that he totally botches how to remedy the awkwardnesses he feels so as to help others avoid feeling awkward for his incompetence.

Missing cues and not taking hints without making scenes: I would say I was riding my own hobby horse and not the movie's if it weren't for one scene that seems to make the matter of missed cues the organizing metaphor for the film. Rupert has made up cue cards containing the message that Jerry, fake gun to his head, is to read over the phone to his producer. Rupert bungles the card turning: one card is blank, he turns two at once and has to go back, another is upside down. The broad comedy of this scene actually goes on longer than the burlesque-type joke warrants, but that too is emblematic of missed cues. No one has their timing right. Cues are missed, bungled, not read right and as a result people stay longer than they should, try things they have no business trying, etc. Not even the woman at the studio who is to turn the cards Rupert



penned for his intro times it right. Tony Randall, subbing for Jerry, has to call attention to the audience that his bad timing is her fault not his: "Turn it over please." Miscues and missed cues, Rupert's behavior in a nutshell.

\* \* \*

Let me return to Rupert's monologue and take up again the matters I raised in the prologue of this essay: the relation of comedy to embarrassment and other emotions. If we laughed at the monologue (and I did), I suspect that no small motivator of that laughter was relief, particularly relief at being saved the embarrassment of witnessing Rupert's humiliation if his routine turned out to be utterly awful. Whatever the case, his routine seems no worse than most stand-up comic fare but that is beside the point. More crucial is that Rupert's routine, by any measure, was nowhere near as bad as he had led us to believe it would be. We, after all, had cringed along with Jerry at the Pride and Joy card, the feeble attempts at wit at Jerry's (J: "You're a moron." R: "Ordinarily I wouldn't allow anybody to speak that way about Rita . . ."), even the lame attempts in his fantasies ("Delores? That's my father's name."). Rupert has been the cause of making us feel uncomfortable and embarrassed both by and for him throughout the film. And in the end he spares us any further discomfort. Could it be that the King was simply softening us up so that with our low expectations he could only succeed on national TV? And what effect does casting Jerry Lewis as the successful comedian Jerry Langford have ultimately on our expectations and standards of competence when it comes to comedians?

There is an enormous literature on comedy, laughter, and humor. I do not want to get into its intricacies or its failure to develop interesting intricacies. I wish to set forth, by way of assertion and hypothesis, stated more strongly than may be justifiable, a few thoughts on the social psychology of stand-up comedy and Rupert. Rupert reveals that *relief* figures in our laughter at the comic more than we are likely to concede as a preliminary matter. Not relief from our own pent-up frustrations as in Freud's theory of jokes, but the emotion relief, the experience of having escaped a fate which we feared might materialize.<sup>17</sup>

Consider all those things that make us laugh at a comedian that have nothing to do with whether the routine is funny. We laugh

because others are laughing, for, like embarrassment, laughter is contagious; we also laugh to connect with other laughers, some of whom might be together with us, some of whom are just sharing space with us, but a space defined as one in which laughing is supposed to take place: a comedy club, a movie, a lecture. And we laugh because we have precommitted ourselves to it: we have gone to the video store to rent a comedy because we want to laugh; we have paid for tickets to enter the comedy club; we are invested in laughing. That the comic is supposed to produce laughter makes it easier to laugh. The very label “comedy” cues us to think laughter is expected and thus lowers our critical threshold for what is funny. Comedians have an even better thing going for them than these helpful precommitments and expectations. Much laughter is motivated by social norms that tell us it is inappropriate not to. The comedian, after all, is asking us to laugh and we usually oblige him because it is easier to do that than not to, easier for us to let him maintain his self-respect than embarrass everyone with the truth. The comedian, in short, benefits from our tactfulness, our decency, our capacity for saving someone else’s face when that other has jeopardized it by incompetence. That tact is motivated by an uneven mixture of fellow-feeling and the desire to save ourselves the embarrassment of witnessing and participating in another’s failures. Sympathy for the poor devil up there partly motivates our concern to save him from himself, save him from the humiliation he will suffer if he could see himself as we see him, because we can only imagine too well what we would feel like if we were being judged at that moment by the likes of us. By saving him we hope to save ourselves.

So the unfunny comedian gets his laughs and the moderately funny one, like Rupert, gets heartier laughs than, strictly speaking, the material deserves because of the added emotional input relief, in its strange dance with embarrassment and amusement, gives to laughter. But if the social rules that make us save another’s face, that make us honor his claim to respectful treatment, give the comedian one big assist in gaining laughter without regard to any special merits of the material, that is fair compensation for the impossible situation stand-up comics put themselves in. We usually think that the funniest of things, the things that make us laugh the hardest, are spontaneous, unpredictable, and most often, not contrived, but “real.” The bore who prefaces a joke with “I’m going to tell you a

joke—it will really make you laugh” has killed the joke before its birth and will only get the laughter that tact, sympathy, and normal politeness can muster. But that is what the comedian does too. The very performance is one big announcement that reproduces the bore’s exactly, except with one big difference: the bore bores us without our consent; we have consented to endure the jokes of the comedian and even invested in them. The remarkable thing is that an occasional genius does genuinely make us laugh and the ones who do usually do so by teaching us something about social norms, the same thing I have been trying to do here.

I consider my account too sweet, too filled with empathetic and sympathetic mechanisms or benign ones like embarrassment and relief. We also laugh out of contempt, Hobbes’s sudden glory again. This is sticky stuff. Many comedians try to coopt contempt and make themselves the indulgent object of theirs and yours: Woody Allen, Rodney Dangerfield, Rupert Pupkin. Their style is to preempt a kind of cold and malicious contempt, the contempt that borders on disgust and revulsion, the contempt that we would feel for your pretense of thinking you are funny when you are not, with a benign contempt, the contempt that often accompanies amusement at the antics of animals and kids.<sup>18</sup> Some comedians adopt another strategy for dealing with contempt, not being funny on purpose. This is a very self-reflexive style which discovers the comic by thwarting its conventional expectations: the jokes are meant to be bad, the timing is meant to be off, the atmosphere meant to be something less than convivial. The skill here is in signaling conventional competence only to undo the expectations arising from it, the violation of those expectations constituting the basis for humor. This style can also indulge a kind of self-loathing, a contempt for the stock-in-trade of being a comedian in the conventional mode. And this self-contempt has a way of becoming a malign contempt for you. You become the contemptible fool, the butt of his jokes, the sucker. But loathing the audience is not unique to this style. One suspects it also motivates types like Woody Allen. They might pose as sad-sacks, but they let you know that their knowledge and especially their self-knowledge is superior to yours and that that is the respect in which they differ from you.

I know. I know. I can take a hint. My account misses so much of the experience of laughing at Rupert’s monologue or any other comedian for that matter. Can it only be a race to see who can hold

whom in contempt first? We may indeed have to admit that some gentle contempt figures in our laughing at Rupert's monologue, but then mostly because Rupert gave us permission to have those feelings. We are laughing *with* those who are laughing at Rupert, one of whom is also Rupert. There is a community formed, a community of laughers, and it produces and is produced by amusement and *relief* that he and we survived the threat of our embarrassment at his humiliation. Surely my account is partial: what about the simple fun, the exhilaration, the feeling of freedom and escape that often accompanies the laughter that comedy provokes? And isn't that sense of freedom and escape a liberation from the constraints imposed upon us by the myriad of social norms that keep us civilized if not exactly content, even as those same norms are constraining us, in part, to laugh so as to transcend them?<sup>19</sup>

Let me make one final observation. The discomforts of failed attempts to elicit our laughter seem to be remarkably resistant to variations among visual representational media. Rupert Pupkin can make us just as uncomfortable as any real comedian we see fail on television or live before us in a comedy club. But if we read bad jokes or read cartoons in the newspaper that are not funny we are not embarrassed for their author who remains, for us, a disembodied name. Instead we have contempt for the people who would find such stuff funny. We cannot imagine ourselves as them at all. Thus does our imagination limit the objects of our sympathy. We can sympathize with someone being laughed at, whatever the reason they may be the objects of laughter, but we cannot sympathize with the laughers unless we accept the beliefs and the perceptions which underpin their laughing. It is thus very hard, if not impossible, to sympathize with senses of humor that are not also ours. And nothing elicits our contempt quite so easily as laughter we cannot participate in. Ultimately the whole array of emotional experiences involving the intersection of laughter, the comic, social ineptitude and the emotions it evokes depends on a capacity for imagining ourselves in the other's shoes while we at the same time remain in ours; in effect, we achieve a kind of double consciousness, one part feeling vicariously what we judge the other should feel, the other part feeling as we do when we judge the other. And if we are good enough at that double vision we should never have to say, "I can take a hint."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Larry Kramer, Kathleen Koehler, Carol Clover, and Phoebe Ellsworth for helpful criticism and suggestions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Let me stake out some definitional limits here. I mean to discuss those hints that are subsumed in the category that gives the phrase "I can take a hint" its sense, that is, hints that are distancing and can thus be perceived by the other as somewhat hostile. Although we may give other people hints of encouragement, that is not the type of hint I will be dealing with here. In fact, one could conceive of almost any kind of social indirection as a hint. But little of analytical value would be gained by doing so. Nonetheless, I will have to make some references to a slightly broader class of hints in the discussion that follows than that entertained by the notion of the hostile hint.

<sup>2</sup>The strength of the distancer's right to keep another at bay varies with the moral status and the urgency of the seeker's claim. If the seeker is a child, handicapped, sick, the distancer maintains his distance at the cost of being thought callous, selfish, cruel.

<sup>3</sup>See Erving Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 97-112.

<sup>4</sup>See William Ian Miller, *Humiliation* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 159.

<sup>5</sup>"Sudden glory, the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter and is caused . . . by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves." *Leviathan* I.vi.

<sup>6</sup>Both philosophical and psychological literatures generally consider amusement an emotion; see Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Robert Sharpe, "Several Reasons Why Amusement is an Emotion," *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed., John Morreall (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>The issue of finding discomfort pleasurable or the witnessing of others' discomfort as pleasurable engaged Aristotle and was much discussed by literary theorists of the eighteenth century; see Aristotle, *The Poetics*, and Steele, *Tatler* No. 82 and Addison, *Spectator* No. 39. Why, for instance, is tragedy pleasurable? Some may find the explanation in a kind of commitment to masochism as the chief motivator of human psychic life; others may prefer a more complex account of aesthetic emotions.

<sup>8</sup>The film was also a box office failure. It exceeded its \$14 million production budget by almost \$5 million. Its American box office take was less than one-sixth that amount. See Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>The coding of Rupert's ethnicity is complex and I relegate some brief observations to this note. De Niro's Rupert is not so clearly Jewish as his surname, his nagging mother, and his pushy nerdiness would indicate. His Jewishness fades into a kind of lower-middle class east-coast ethnic, an amalgam of vulgar Jewish, Italian, and Irish styles that itself is the ethnic base of the vulgar showbiz style pilloried in the movie. The Jewish predominates in this mix, as one would expect, but it is not the pure thing. Nor is this style the fashionable way to self-present Jewishly in a film. Brash and pushy confidence, not very self-reflective, as perhaps exemplified in the Marx brothers has given way to the self-involved, obsessively self-doubting, wimpy, intel-

lectualized neuroticism of Woody Allen. Rupert's filmic Jewishness is the old Hollywood; he is manifestly dated.

<sup>10</sup>See Gary Arnold, "Unroyal 'King': Wrong Tone, Wrong Time in Scorsese & De Niro Film," *Washington Post* (April 15, 1983), C1, and Marilyn Beck, "The King of Comedy," *New York Daily News*, Feb. 2, 1983, 37. These writers seem to hint that Scorsese should take special care given that he must bear some responsibility for the production of John Hinckley, Jr., Reagan's failed assassin whose obsession with Jodie Foster dated from her appearance in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. See, however, Krin Gabbard and Glen Gabbard, *Psychiatry and the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), who suggest that the film's closure may be fantasy. But we should never underestimate the American media culture's ability to make such fantasies not quite implausible. Consider the fame of the likes of Oliver North, Amy Fisher, the Bobbitts, etc.

<sup>11</sup>See Keyser, 134–35. Note John Simon's befuddlement (*National Review*, May 13, 1983, 574):

This is where things become particularly muddled. The monologue strikes me as only slightly less funny than most such monologues, which I don't find very funny either. Are the filmmakers saying that Pupkin's comedy is junk, but that on the Langford Show, introduced by Tony Randall, it enchants an audience of Pavlovian fools? Or are they saying that Pupkin does have that minimal talent needed to make anybody's success in this abysmal business? Is the film about weirdos cannibalizing their betters, or are there no betters, and are large numbers of—if not, indeed, all—Americans a breed of imbeciles? Is the satire specific or all-inclusive?

<sup>12</sup>I owe this distinction to a student, Spencer Gusick.

<sup>13</sup>See Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 238–47.

<sup>14</sup>Grand social theory tends to ignore the crucial but homely questions that the social theory of Goffman took as central. Some of these are, do bores get bored by bores, boors offended by boors; do nerds have contempt for other nerds? Do we have the self-knowledge to know these things? Can they be answered? Since I have been from time to time both a bore and a boor I draw on my own experience to suggest that evidence warrants answering Yes. About nerds I plead agnosticism, but I suspect yes, for the key to all these character types is not the failure to recognize others for what they are, but to fail to recognize the content of others' recognition of ourselves.

<sup>15</sup>This is not to say it doesn't work well as such a satire. De Niro's genius is given more than an able assist by Paul Zimmerman's psychologically and socially rich script. Another theme the movie deals with is the failure of any characters to connect with any others. All are obsessively self-referential and unwilling to admit the claims of others. Thus it is that Masha can never get a letter delivered to Jerry. When she gets Jerry's unlisted number, he hangs up (and presumably gets a new number). In the end she can only get to him by mummifying him in duct tape and treating him to a one-way conversation. Rupert can never get to Jerry; even Jerry can't get through to his own people when he calls them with the toy gun to his head, for he is indistinguishable from a would-be comedian who does a Langford impression and who also plagues Jerry's office. The opening credits roll against Masha's hands splayed out against Jerry's car window desperately clawing at the glass shield that, like the television screen, separates her TV-idol from her. No one connects. True, Rupert and Masha find each other, but as indicated in the text each is contemptuous of the other; they are only united by the strange convergence of their psychoses.

<sup>16</sup>It is no wonder that he must struggle to find some place to rest his eyes. Places designated as waiting rooms are marked as waiting rooms by having old magazines available to ease the awkwardnesses that attend eye-parking. And, as Rupert has been told, he is waiting in a reception area, not a waiting room. But again, it is not that Rupert is utterly without some inkling of propriety. When he calls Burt Thomas, Jerry's producer, after kidnapping Jerry, he shows some awareness that he might not have a right as yet to first-name Burt: "No, Burt, if I could call you Bu. . . ."

<sup>17</sup>Jon Elster notes astutely that "although we have different feelings when a disaster just misses us, when a probable disaster fails to materialize and when an unpleasant state of affairs ceases to obtain, the single word *relief* covers them all. By contrast, the corresponding emotions defined with respect to positive core emotions are verbally distinguished as regret, disappointment and grief." *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>18</sup>This kind of benign contempt has a dark side to it also. It goes hand in hand with some pretty unsavory manifestations of power and hierarchy. It is thus also the contempt of the master for the servant, the white for black, the Christian for the Jew. But this kind of contempt also has its own reciprocity. The lower-status person might as well find the higher-status contemner a worthy object of her own contempt. Few of us have either not been the object or the agent of the blistering contempt of the black for the white, the Jew for the Christian, women for men, and teenagers for adults. The contempt of the high for the low differs in some respects from that of the low for the high. The former might involve disgust, but more often is characterized by a kind of indifference, a refusal even to see the other. If, as Hume theorizes, contempt is a mixture of hatred and pride, then the contempt of the high for the low is made more of pride than hatred, whereas in the contempt of the low for the high hatred would surpass pride; see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* Bk. II, Pt. ii, Sect. x.

<sup>19</sup>It is a commonplace that comics elicit laughter by breaking various norms of appropriate decorum. Thus Rupert tells about his mom and dad puking, makes jokes about his mother's death, and confesses to having kidnapped Jerry to get on the show. The mirth generated by watching someone break such norms is complexly motivated. There is contempt for the lack of decorum of the comedian vs. admiration for his nerve and insight, nervousness at the breach of deeply held rules vs. delight at the feast of misrule aspects of breaking them, relief over not being punished for breaking them vs. anxiety that we still might be, etc.