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SUBLIME RUPERT AND BEAUTIFUL LENNY:
AESTHETICS AND TEMPORALITY IN
SCORSESE'S THE KING OF COMEDY AND FOSSE'S LENNY

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Being announces itself in the imperative. [...] But being is not meaning.
(Jean-François Lyotard)

The development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the
effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself—which
once expressed an idea, but was liquidated together with the idea.
(Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer)

At the beginning of The King of Comedy (1983), a film directed by Martin
Scorsese, there is a key scene, which, however, seems so trivial that it
hardly attracts attention: Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis), a talk-show host,
tries to get rid of Rupert Pupkin (Robert De Niro), a pushy, aspiring
stand-up comic who wants to become a guest on Jerry’s TV show. Let us
give an ear to Jerry’s hackneyed recipe for how to become a star:

This is a crazy business but it’s not unlike any other business. There are
ground rules. And you don’t just walk on to a network show without
experience. [...] You’ve got to start at the bottom. [...] It looks so simple
to the viewer at home—those things that come so easily, that are so
relaxed and look like it’s a matter of just taking another breath. It takes
years, and years, and years of honing that and working it.

Later, in one of Rupert’s fantasies, Jerry expresses admiration after lis-
tening to his material:

At least once in his life every man is a genius. [...] It’s gonna be more
than once in your life for you, it’s gonna be a number of times because
you’ve got it. [...] It’s always gonna be there. Now, I know there’s no
formula for it. I just don’t know how you do it. [...] It’s humor based
on you. No one else could do it but you.

And, finally, let’s hear one of Rupert’s jokes toward the end of his mono-
logue on Jerry’s show—where he has arranged his performance by kid-
napping and blackmailing Jerry: “But, you know, my only real interest
right from the beginning was show business. Even as a young man I
began at the very top [here Rupert makes a meaningful pause, to be
discussed later]—collecting autographs.”

The first quote prescribes beginning at the bottom and moving gradu-
ally to the top. The second and third outline a different approach: start-
ing right at the top. These two strategies to stardom are, in fact, a mise
en abyme of two aesthetics with long histories in Western thought: those
of the beautiful and of the sublime. The tension created by their coexis-
tence in the movie may be perceived, in a broader aesthetic context, as one possible representation of the postmodern condition. Moreover, it is the relation between these two aesthetics in the film and in the viewer’s cultural memory that makes this movie a comedy of a peculiar quality: on the one hand, one that represents a preposterous diegetic world but, on the other, a diegetic world that closely resembles our own real world and therefore a true one. My first task here will be to analyze The King of Comedy as a film about the aesthetics of the sublime. Then I will show in what sense another film about stand-up comedy, Lenny, directed by Bob Fosse (1974), belongs to the aesthetics of the beautiful. And my third point will be to plead that despite the fervor with which postmodernists and modernists each defend their positions, the two aesthetics as enacted by the movies have their own proper domains: They do not exclude but complement each other today. For the present I leave aside the banal meaning of Jerry’s first quote (to which I will return in closing) and focus on the aesthetic paradigm that it suggests.

I. The Beautiful and the Sublime

According to the aesthetics of the beautiful, art presupposes artisanship—that is, rules, which need to be observed in order for a beautiful work of art to be produced. Beauty is formal perfection measured by rules. The rules constitute the poetics; the set of procedures for their practical application is techne. All poetics—from Aristotle and Horace, through Boileau, to Todorov—deal with the rules of beauty. In the aesthetics of the beautiful, the chef-d’œuvre requires an hors d’œuvre, that is to say the masterpiece emerges from a series of drafts. The paradigm of the beautiful has time—both physical/objective and existential/subjective—as its pivotal component: the work of art needs objective and subjective time in order to ripen to full perfection. The artist, as Thomas Mann shows with Aschenbach in Death in Venice, is a careful gardener who grows the fruits of his genius in secrecy; he carefully hides the pains of creation, and exposes only his triumphs to the public. This notion of art is so deeply rooted in the Western tradition that, for example, some of the best scientific minds at the end of the nineteenth century perceived natural processes themselves as gradual artistic creations that strive for perfection in the fashion of an Aschenbach. Sofia Kovalevskaya, the famous Russian mathematician, writes in her 1889 autobiography:

Fossilized specimens of fully developed forms are to be found everywhere in abundance; the museums are filled with them. But how overjoyed the paleontologist is if somewhere, by accident, he is lucky enough to unearth a skull, a few teeth, a fragment of a single bone of some transitional form through which he can reconstruct in his scientific imagination the course by which the development took place. One might suppose that nature had jealously expunged and smoothed over all the traces of her work. She seems to flaunt the perfected specimens of her creation, those in which she has succeeded in embodying some fully developed idea, but ruthlessly
extirpates the very memory of her first uncertain experiments. (146; emphasis added)

Kovalevskaya was married for fifteen years to the paleontologist Vladimir Kovalevsky, which gives added weight to the above passage's paleontologico-aesthetic imagery.

The aesthetics of the beautiful is an aesthetics of production, so its center is the work as an object. This focus on the object is embodied in a huge network of institutions: the Academy, which teaches technē; the Museum, which collects the masterpieces; the Expert and the Connoisseur, who judge the mastery and tell the original from the counterfeit; the Critic, who explains the meaning of the masterpiece through the rules of production; and the Enlightened Public, which is aware of the rules. Jerry's first quote refers to this aesthetic paradigm.

By contrast, the sublime—the aesthetic paradigm to which our second and third quotes refer—shatters the rules of technē. Longinus seems to have been the first to try to define the sublime in discourse and to locate its sources in rhetoric, specifically in a violation of the rules of rhetorical perfection: "sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt" (76); "in the sublime, as in great fortunes, there must be something which is overlooked" (92; see also 94). Boscovich, commenting on Longinus, breaks with the classical institution of technē and concludes that the sublime cannot be taught because it is not linked to rules (Lyotard 94-97). Such notions of the sublime shatter the whole edifice of the beautiful and technē, resulting in an entirely new aesthetics resting not on the artist and the work of art as object but on the responses of the audience. What matters, in this aesthetics, is not to please according to the rules, but to shock the audience at any price. The state of formlessness rejected by the aesthetics of the beautiful has its rights in the aesthetics of the sublime. Physical time and existential time, which in the aesthetics of the beautiful are the axes along which a draft matures into a masterpiece, are remodeled in the aesthetics of the sublime. Here, there are no temporal axes, and the continuity of time is fragmented into separate moments. The theorist of the sublime as formlessness is Kant; its theorist as timelessness is Burke.

Kant holds that the beautiful lies in a harmony between imagination and reason. The sublime, on the other hand, is based on a rupture between these two faculties. Absolutely large or powerful objects, like all absolutes, can only be thought of; they are Ideas of reason, but cannot be presented. This failure causes pain, which, in turn, engenders pleasure: first, because this impotence of the imagination nonetheless attests to an imagination attempting to figure out what cannot be figured, and which thus aims to harmonize its object with that of reason; and second, because the inadequacy of the images is a negative sign of the power of ideas. The sublime is pleasure that comes from pain. Kant calls this dislocation of the faculties agitation, and this extreme tension characterizes the sublime. The absolute nature of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant terms a negative presentation or even a non-representation.
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Burke's aesthetics is based on the possibility of nothing happening. This possibility is the privation of life and terror of death. The sublime in Burke can be described as follows: a very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any "it happens," thereby causing it to be struck dumb through terror and privation of life. Art, by distancing the menace, procures a pleasure of relief and delight. Thanks to art, the soul is brought back to life and agitation. So, for Burke, the sublime does not elevate (in contrast to Aristotle, who describes the effect of tragedy as a purgation of pity and fear in the sixth chapter of Poetics [53]), but intensifies.

Burke heralds the possibility of emancipating art from the classical rule of imitation. According to him, painting imitates its models. If art is to create intense feelings in the addressee, therefore, it cannot do so in painting, since the figuration of images works by recognition and thus constrains emotive expression. In the arts of language, which for Burke are not a genre with rules but a broader field involving the free use of language, the power to move the audience is not subject to the verisimilitude of figuration. Words are charged with connotations, thinks Burke, and so evoke matters that are not necessarily visible; their combinations, moreover, cannot be achieved by any other means. Therefore poetry, he concludes, is the ideal medium to produce intense effects and to shock. And this shock is the best evidence that something happens; it is a suspended privation.

In the aesthetics of the beautiful, the materiality of the work of art relates to its form. For Kant, form is the universal basis of taste and pleasure; it derives from the universal capacity of the mind to synthesize data and to gather up the manifold. Matter, on the other hand, is the empirical, the unstable, the idiosyncratic, and so it cannot be expected to be universally shared. In the aesthetics of the sublime, according to Lyotard who draws openly on Kant, and tacitly on Burke, interest shifts from the harmony between form and matter to matter alone. Matter, for Lyotard, cannot be grasped by intelligence, which deals only with forms and concepts. Matter is pure presence, which the mind cannot perceive or explain. Matter as pure presence represents nothing but itself. Matter's being here and now testifies to the fact that something happens and that life continues.

II. The Sublime Rupert

In this light, can The King of Comedy be interpreted as a film about the sublime hero of our time? (A sublime film would be one that ideally follows Sergei Eisenstein's ideas of montage—or editing—as a means of shocking the spectator; or, if we prefer real to ideal examples, consider every run-of-the-mill TV commercial, MTV video clip, Sports Center caption on ESPN, or blockbuster movie.) In his philosophical travelogue America, Baudrillard observes that Americans may not have an identity, but they do have wonderful teeth and smile, smile, smile (33-34). Had the French philosopher seen The King of Comedy, he might have made the
same discoveries without ever having to set foot in America, because Rupert is the paragon of this ever-smiling American. He smiles for all 105 minutes of the film. Whether Rupert loses or wins, whether he is praised or kicked out is of no importance. He is beyond good and evil, beyond any measure of normality held by other characters in the movie or the viewers. Timothy Corrigan defines one aspect of this normalcy thus: Rupert and some other Scorsese characters ‘reconcile—horribly and happily—a domestic utopia and its terrible violence only through the eyes of the public media’ (204). The fact that Rupert appropriates public spaces for his own private fantasies through the media is an act of (political) terrorism (Corrigan 203-10). Corrigan voices a moral norm that, in my interpretation, Rupert transcends because this norm belongs to the aesthetics of the beautiful, not to that of the sublime. Rupert cannot be measured by commonly accepted criteria of behavior. He is simply amoral, precisely because he is sublime. His smile, like the Cheshire Cat’s, stays apart from and beyond any common sense. It is just there. It happens. Its meaning is its very presence. Rupert is alive because he smiles.

Like his smile, Rupert’s bodily vigor is incredible. When De Niro’s hero is on screen, his physical presence is so overwhelming that all other details vanish from the spectator’s attention. Looking at Rupert is an ethical rather than artistic experience in the traditional sense of the term. That is, it is a “me—you” relationship. This type of communication supersedes the classical triad of sender (Rupert or the film director), receiver (the audience), and referent (what the audience has to see as Rupert’s or Scorsese’s meaningful message). In an ethical involvement, the viewer (like the movie’s other characters) is obliged to participate in communication without meaning. Rupert pesterers the audience and the other characters with his omnipresence and inextinguishable smile.

Rupert lives in a world of dreams. Contemporary theorists would say that his habitat is the hyperreal, the world of simulacra or the domain of pastiche. Rupert cannot distinguish between figments of his imagination and reality and between real objects and counterfeits. This ontological insufficiency, however, is not a reason for existential insufficiency, as might be argued by some critics of mass culture/culture industry from the Frankfurt School (Adorno; Adorno and Horkheimer; and Benjamin) or some champions of high art (Brecht; Macdonald; Greenberg; Eco, Open Work). The explanation of this paradox is that the aesthetics of the sublime does not operate on oppositions such as real versus counterfeit. Such criteria belong to the aesthetics of the beautiful and rest, as we have seen, on technē, that is, on poetic rules that regulate the production of the art object. The original masterpiece is the final goal of this aesthetics, and thus its ultimate referent. The counterfeit in the aesthetics of the beautiful is despised as a message that fraudulently hides its falseness, and thus plays an ideological role. It is this ideological lie that some critics of postmodernism castigate as an ontological lie.

The aesthetics of the sublime, however, is based not on technē, but on the intensity of the addressee’s feelings. Anything that enhances this
intensification is good within this aesthetics. In this respect, simulacra can be just as efficient as the original, or even more so. Rupert's fantasies and dreams are more powerful at intensifying his feelings than reality; hence interpreting them negatively would mean to misunderstand their character as vehicles of the sublime. For film theory, the fact that the sublime deals with feelings and not meanings suggests that the aesthetics of the glance is a subspecies of the aesthetics of the sublime, whereas the aesthetics of the gaze is a subspecies of the aesthetics of the beautiful. The glance means that in the era of DVDs, VCRs, satellite dishes, and cable, the viewer's film watching is fractured by all sorts of home activities and/or channel switching. The gaze refers to traditional film viewing in theaters.

Because the aesthetics of the sublime does not rely on criteria like original versus counterfeit or real versus hyperreal, the harmony between matter and form is irrelevant to it. This aesthetics is intersected only in matter or, more precisely, only in the presence of matter. For the aesthetics of the sublime, real things as well as simulacra are matter because they both exist. The proliferation of simulacra in postindustrial society is not just an ontological loss because it turns reality into hyperreality, as the aesthetics of the beautiful would argue. It is, for the aesthetics of the sublime, "an ontological dislocation" (Lyotard 101; emphasis added). The King of Comedy, from within the aesthetics of the beautiful, could be interpreted as a satire on mass media as an institution disseminating simulacra, that is, ideological lies. In my analysis, however, the media are part of the aesthetics of the sublime; they are just one instrument—but not the only one—of proliferating simulacra, and this fact does not necessarily have ontological implications. In Scorsese's film, media, in principle, do not differ greatly from Rupert's daydreams or his mispronounced name (discussed more fully below).

Let us consider an example. In America, writes Umberto Eco, there are many simulacra of Leonardo's Last Supper and other great works of art; according to the aesthetics of the beautiful, these simulacra would be Kitsch because they pretend to be the real thing (see Eco, Travels 16-21). For the aesthetics of the sublime, however, they are equivalent to what Lyotard, drawing on Burke's ideas of poetry as the art that produces the greatest intensification of the addressee's feelings, defines as nuance of color in painting and timbre of tone in music. "Nuance and timbre," Lyotard writes, "are what differ and defer, what makes the difference between the note on the piano and the same note on the flute, and thus what also defer the identification of that note" (140). Nuance and the timbre thus bring a sort of infinity to the finite character of color and tone. In the same way, simulacra differ and defer, that is, bring infinity to a finite original. Hence the Last Supper, according to the aesthetics of the sublime, can become infinite thanks to its simulacra. In The King of Comedy, Rupert's daydreaming, as shown by unexpected flashbacks, by his private world crammed with cardboard TV and movie stars and show audiences, or by his album with movie stars' autographs.
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that stand for the stars themselves, reveals different forms of simulacra and thus different forms of sublime infinity.

Rupert’s last name is incessantly misspelled and mispronounced (“Pupkin” sounds like “pumpkin” and “bumpkin” and is pronounced by the other characters—if I understand them correctly, which can be difficult—as “Pumpkin,” “Pipkin,” “Parkin,” “Putnik,” “Bupkin,” “P... [?], “P... [??]” or “P... [??]). But what matters in the aesthetics of the sublime is not correct pronunciation but the very act of mispronunciation. By this repetitive act Rupert’s funny name starts shining and sounding with all its phonetic, orthographic, and semantic overtones and nuances. The name, as it were, emblematizes the hero’s sublime nature because its misspelled and mispronounced variants and variations are simulacra of the correct name.

Rupert, in the aesthetics of the sublime, succeeds in becoming the new King of Comedy because, as a simulacrum of Jerry (who at times can himself seem to be his own simulacrum), he is just as “ontological” in his presence on the TV show as Jerry himself. Both Jerry and Rupert produce the same intense experience in the audience: Rupert with his idiotic smile and idiotic jokes, Jerry with his idiotic smile and idiotic look behind the idiotic eye goggles. Rupert’s eventual kidnapping of Jerry, according to the rules of the sublime, means that Rupert kills Jerry not only symbolically, but also virtually by preventing him from happening as a talk show host. A Jerry not on the TV screen is dead in the sublime meaning of this word. Since in the aesthetics of the sublime the key opposition is appearance (life) versus non-appearance (death), it does not matter whether or not Jerry is a better comedian than Rupert. The quality of their talents and training is irrelevant. The second quote in my introductory remarks expresses the rule that the only rule for being good is simply to be. That which is, is good and alive; that which is not, is bad and dead. The aesthetics of the sublime annihilates the hierarchy based on experience and talent, which belongs to the aesthetics of the beautiful. In the sublime, everybody who appears (on the TV screen or anywhere in the media) is already at the very top; and this is the meaning of the third quote—up to Rupert’s meaningful pause before he mentions autographs—at the beginning of this essay.

If Rupert is a sublime hero because he happens and is, Masha (Sandra Bernhard), his accomplice in chasing TV fame and TV stars, is a sublime anti-heroine because she fails to happen and be. The climax of Masha’s story is her attempt to seduce the kidnapped and tied up Jerry, whom she guards while Rupert appears on the show. This episode, like Rupert’s story, is a symbolic representation of some key principles in our world. In a consumer society, what matters with merchandise is not its use value but the moment of its sale/purchase. In this sense, consumer society is, paradoxically, not a consuming but a buying society. Objects are produced, first of all, not to be used but to be sold (as academic books can be written not to be read but just to be published to embellish their authors’ ‘vitas and colleagues’ bibliographies). The act of sale is a seduc-
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tion in which the object seduces the customer. In this sense, consumer society is erotic through and through. The orgasmic culmination of coming into being, of happening as merchandise, is the moment of purchase. In this context, when Masha tries to seduce Jerry, she behaves like merchandise that asks to be bought. And to be bought means to become merchandise or simply to be—in the sublime meaning of the word “be.”

Masha tries very hard to behave like a sublime heroine in one other sense, too. She has no identity of her own (just as Pupkin’s identity differs and is deferred by all the timbres and nuances of his mispronounced name), but she shines and sounds with all the nuances and timbres of her bodily matter. While guarding and seducing Jerry, she can be a homely wife of sorts who has knitted him a red sweater and keeps three framed pictures of him in front of her mirror, a romantic woman who has lit candles and set the table for an intimate dinner at her place, an insecure girl who wants to share her personal stories, a femme fatale in lingerie who wants “to do it” right on the table, a black singer (Tina Turner), a stripper (had Masha been played by a Demi Moore, which, if it had at least given the character a certain anatomical identity, would have ruined our sense of her multiplicity), and finally the noble liberator of the TV star who has been cocooned in tape. This variety of rules may be compared with the nuances of merchandise: Coca-Cola exists in different versions; besides, there is an infinite variety of other colas that also have their versions; what, then, is the original—Coca-Cola “classic”? Masha’s sublime infinity aims to shock Jerry in the same way that he has shocked her as a TV star. But she is a sublime anti-heroine because she fails to seduce him, that is, to “happen” as a fan in love, just as merchandise fails to become merchandise if it fails to seduce the customer (even if it is on sale). Masha’s production of simulacra fails to shock (she herself being the one who is shocked when she unties Jerry and he knocks her down). The seduction episode is an ingenious anti-model, first, of a basic mechanism in consumer society (buying as seduction); and second, of coming into being as pure occurrence and presence that do not need any meaning procured by identification. Because Rupert’s successful appearance on TV and Masha’s failed seduction of Jerry are shown in a series of simultaneous parallel scenes, the comparison between happening and being in his case and not-happening and not-being in hers is strikingly palpable.

III. The Beautiful Lenny

A comparison of The King of Comedy with Lenny reveals and illustrates not only some important differences between the aesthetics of the sublime and of the beautiful in cinema but also the complementarity of the two movies and their aesthetics for us today. Lenny belongs to the aesthetics of the beautiful and is based on intertwined aesthetic and artistic principles. The first is a combination of objective and subjective temporality. Objective temporality is measured by the movement of the
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celestial bodies and is theorized by Aristotle, Kant, and the supporters of the concept of “ordinary” time; subjective temporality is based on human consciousness and is treated by Augustine, Husserl, and Heidegger (Ricoeur, *Time* 3:12-96 and “Narrative Time”). The second principle is hermeneutic, defined as a gradual deciphering of experience that leads to increasingly adequate comprehension.¹ In Heidegger’s words, Being’s “unfathomable and unmanifest essence is vouchsafed us by Nothing in essential dread” (“What” 200). Coming to a progressive understanding of successive layers of phenomena presupposes time; hence understanding through unveiling is by necessity temporal. This understanding, which belongs to the aesthetics of the beautiful, is not being (as in the aesthetics of the sublime, which is based on the occurrence and the fragmented moment) but becoming. Or, as Jaspers puts it, “indirect communication [through concealment and masks], as expression, is appropriate to the ambiguity of genuine truth in temporal existence, in which process it must be grasped through sources in every Existenz” (192). Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* explores the meaning of Being, formulates as his provisional aim “the interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of being” (*Being* xix; see also “Way Back” 274-75). At the beginning of this essay, I sketched the role of time and *techne* in producing the beautiful work of art; now I will speak of temporality and meaning in relation to its interpretation.

Temporality in *Lenny* is represented in two major ways: on the level of genre and on that of plot. In generic terms, the film is a quasi-documentary biography of the comedian Lenny Bruce (1925-1966); as such, the film draws heavily on real archival material connected with the comedian. A number of artistic devices combine to create this sense of biography. First, the film is a stylized documentary in black-and-white evoking the 1950s and 1960s (the aspects of this stylization from editing and camera work to the handling of sound and verisimilitude are too complex to be developed here). The genre of biography suggests objective time, and the film indeed does follow Lenny’s life from the beginning of his career as an aspiring comedian in 1951 up to his controversial death in 1966. Second, this objective temporality of the genre is entwined with a subjective one: Lenny’s life is told by the people who knew him best—his wife Honey (Valerie Perrine), his mother Sally (Jan Miner), and his manager Artie (Stanley Bock). Hence, the film is a biography built out of personal memoirs that jump back and forth in time and complement each other. The biographical genre based upon memoirs has a third aspect: the investigation of Lenny’s life and death by an almost invisible Institution which asks questions and records every word of Lenny’s relatives and friends. The Institution stands for professional objectivity and thoroughness, and as a result personifies an ultimate truth reached by technology and expert procedures. The Institution transposes the subjective time of Honey, Sally, and Artie back into the objective chronological time of the document to be preserved for the future as the truth about Lenny Bruce. Yet the Institution’s relationship as guardian of objective
time and truth to the three narrators as carriers of subjective time and opinions brings conflict because the Institution cannot record all the stories about Lenny. In making the subjective objective there is always a residue of subjective temporality that cannot be turned into objective temporality. This point is suggested when the tape has to be changed in the tape recorder and Honey, in the pause, explains that she could not get custody of her and Lenny's child because of her drug addiction. She refuses to repeat that explanation when the recorder is running again. Similarly, later in the movie, Honey will not tell why she had to serve her full time of twenty-four months in prison instead of getting out earlier.

The second way that the film tackles temporality is through the plot. Honey, Sally, and Artie move freely through time in telling stories of Lenny. He is older, then younger, then older again (his age, among other things, is suggested by the alternation of his bearded or shaven face). This chaos of subjective time is ordered and kept under control by the Institution, which channels the recollections of the three narrators and tries to construct a coherent chronological plot out of their divergent subjective narratives. The transformation of subjective into objective time is in part suggested by the fact that the Institution's representative starts his interviews in the morning and ends them in the evening. The objective time of the passing day frames and straightens out, so to speak, the narrators' convoluted subjective times: at dawn Lenny is a young, happy-go-lucky fellow, while at dusk he is already dead. His life, as it were, has been rearranged to fit the objective temporal cycle of the sun's movement (purposely or not, in both morning and evening, the viewer sees above Honey a large clock in the form of a sun). Hence, the plot is a compromise between the incoherence of subjective stories about Lenny presented artistically as flashbacks and the ordering power of the Institution that rearranges these stories in strict chronology and objective time. In narratological terms, the Institution tries to achieve a plot that coincides with the fabula, that is, a plot/fabula based on pure chronology or objective time. Conversely, Honey, Sally, and Artie try to create a plot that differs drastically from the fabula, a plot based primarily on subjective times. The film's artistic strategy, as I clarify below, sides with the second tendency.

The hermeneutic principle of the film—which, as I explain in the next paragraph, is closely connected with the temporal one—is represented by the unfolding of two themes: the sexual and the social. These themes intertwine at the start of the film when the older, bearded Lenny tells a joke about Eleanor Roosevelt's clap. After this initial linkage, however, the first half of the movie shows Lenny as a "lousy" comedian poking fun at sexual hypocrisy, whereas in the second, he is represented mainly as a satirist of the hypocrisy of social institutions like the media, politics, religion, police, and law. The first theme is more restricted and, therefore, at a lower level of hermeneutic perspicacity, while the second is more universal and, therefore, at a higher level. The switch between the two themes occurs at the middle of the film, in the fifty-sixth minute.
of its running time of one hundred and eleven minutes. This is where Lenny tears to pieces Time's logic in portraying Jackie Kennedy's behavior during the Kennedy assassination. The hermeneutic character of this treatment of the sexual and the social consists in the fact that in both cases Lenny goes beneath the surface of accepted opinions and taboos and digs out what is hidden. What seems to be socially acceptable on the surface turns out to be morally unacceptable at its core. The mechanism of deciphering the logical and ethical essence by criticizing the discursive appearance can be illustrated by Lenny's words in the middle of the film which introduce the social dimension of his criticism: "You see, the trouble is that we all live in a happy-ending culture, a what-should-be culture instead of what-is culture. We were all taught that fantasy. But if we were taught 'this is what is,' I think we'd be less screwed up."

In narratological terms, the film's division into two hermeneutically ascending themes—the sexual and the social—departs radically from the fabula's objective time or chronology. According to the fabula, the younger, bearded Lenny tells both sexual and social jokes. According to the artistically reshaped time of the plot, however, Lenny starts with mainly sexual jokes, then greatly enlarges his criticism of bigotry with social satire. Such temporal organization, which turns the fabula's chronological time into the plot's artistic time, is the most powerful, purely formal vehicle of aesthetic and ethical meanings. By its means the film's narrative strategy tacitly represents the temporal, hermeneutic, and ethical position of Lenny and his friends and relatives as right, and the stance of the Institution and of the characters standing for the media, police, and law as wrong. It is the translation of the fabula's objective time into the plot's artistic time that, as mentioned above, links the aspects of temporality and hermeneutics in the film.

Hermeneutic unveiling tries to reach an ontological truth. Yet this truth is not ultimate. Rather, truth is the awareness that every new layer is but one more hurdle in the path to better knowledge. Heidegger's phenomenology and Sartre's existentialism both address the endless process of understanding existence in terms of a metaphysical "going beyond" or transcendence. Heidegger's Da-sein or Being and Sartre's man create themselves by perpetually going beyond what-is or himself, respectively (Heidegger, "What", esp. 256-57; Sartre, "Existentialism," esp. 368-69). Thus their meaning is continually created anew.

The idea that the hermeneutic quest is endless is represented, for instance, in the episode where Lenny and Honey, who have just married, visit Lenny's mother and Aunt Mena. Sally, the mother, starts telling Honey about her son's first stage appearance. Lenny knows his mother's story word-by-word but at one point interrupts her with a different version; his mother, also a comedian, introduced him not as "a funny funny guy," as she incorrectly remembers, but as "the funniest guy in the world." At this point the search for truth takes place on three levels of the plot: Honey telling the Institution about visiting Lenny's mother and aunt after Lenny's death; the mother narrating Lenny's past to Honey;
and Lenny himself continuing his mother’s story in yet another direction. The possibility in every circumstance to go one step further in what already seems to be known perfectly is a hermeneutic procedure, which suggests that truth in this film is never final. Subjective stories occurring in subjective time are intrinsically hermeneutic because they tell the same events about Lenny in different ways, thereby bringing out the inexhaustible meaning of the events themselves. Conversely, objective time leads to some ultimate truth; this time is teleological with regard to meaning. Objective time cannot in principle be associated with a hermeneutic discovery of meaning because once a last truth is reached, the hermeneutic search is over; the depth model of appearance and essence turns into a model only of appearances. (From a model of appearances to a world of simulacra and sublime excitements is but a short step. This is why, in a certain sense, the aesthetics of the beautiful contains the aesthetics of the sublime as one of its parts.)

In its temporal organization, we recall, Lenny embodies the tension between objective and subjective time. Similarly, the hermeneutic quest in the movie is structured by the conflict between a dynamic drive for discovering the truth and a static resistance which implies that the truth is already known in the form of public consent and taboos. If Lenny (and his wife, mother, and manager) stand for the first force, some of his fans as well as the social institutions that he criticizes (the media, religion, police, and law) stand for the second. In the last half of the film, a female admirer of Lenny kisses his hand while he performs and tells him: “You really are the truth.” Lenny as a rabbi or Messiah—as he is described by his manager at this point of his career—brings the search for truth to an end because the final truth has already been found. The media, the police, religion, and law, by labeling Lenny a “sick comic” (from the title of an interview in Time) and by arresting and censoring him or finally sending him to jail, do just the same as the sheepish fan: they put a final verdict on Lenny’s search for truth. With the fan and the institutions alike, the hermeneutic search has ended, either as by believing that truth is found in the depth of phenomena or by proclaiming that no such depth exists at all and that if someone like Lenny digs into it, he is a delinquent and drug addict on his way to madness. The second position is summed up by the invisible representative of the Institution who, toward the end of the film, presses upon Honey and Sally several statements, which they refuse to accept, as ultimate truths about Lenny. First, Honey rejects the insinuation that Lenny was a drug addict; second, Sally rebuffs an account of Lenny’s death as caused by psychic instability. In this struggle between Lenny (and Honey and Sally), who are trying to unweave something covered, and the forces that want to convince viewers that nothing is hidden because there is no depth at all, the film itself—by entwining the temporal and the hermeneutic through a radical differentiation of fabula and plot—sides with the former.

The movie ends by leaving the door open for deliberation about how and why Lenny died. The last thing that viewers see is a police photo-
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graph of Lenny dead, naked on his back at home, an image that recreates a real picture of the dead Bruce.11 Here is the naked truth, the photo implies; here is Leonard Schneider—stage name Lenny Bruce—without any trappings: a confused drug addict without the courage to face the consequences of his irresponsible actions. However, the moral sense of the viewer, stirred by the film’s artistic strategy, insists on the opposite: that the institutions that investigate Lenny’s death and cast into stone—that is, into photographs, recordings, and official documents—the ultimate truth of his life and death are the ones which he castigated and which finally killed him. By the viewer’s moral sense I mean not only what the film suggests as an artistic construct but also what his many admirers explicitly stated during the life and after the death of the real Bruce. One of them, for instance, wrote in Lenny’s obituary: “It is fitting that Lenny Bruce should be the victim, in the end, of police malignment and the final irony—being buried with an orthodox Hebrew service, after years of satirizing organized religion” (Gleason). According to some contemporarists, Phil Spector, reversing the official verdict of death from a heroin overdose, said that Lenny died from “an overdose of police” (Gleason). Defending the real Lenny’s right to free speech, some leading American intellectuals took him out of the sphere of petty police reports and propelled him into the orbit of universal human values achieved through the hermeneutic revealing of the truth in the form of satire: “Lenny Bruce is a popular and controversial performer in the field of social satire in the tradition of Swift, Rabelais, and Twain” (“Petition”).12

The finale of Lenny repeats in a reversed, satirical fashion one of the great hermeneutic myths of Western civilization, that of the wise Oedipus who searches for the truth but is blind to his own folly and, when he discovers the truth, plucks out his eyes to pay for his lack of hermeneutic insight with literal blindness. In Lenny, however, Lenny’s killers do not punish themselves; unlike Oedipus, they are axiomatically blind to the depth of phenomena and the meanings dormant there.

IV. The Sublime and the Beautiful

The analyses here of The King of Comedy and Lenny as cinematic specimens of the aesthetics of the sublime and of the beautiful suggest several conclusions. The first would be that while Lenny and the aesthetics of the beautiful thrive on a controversial union between objective and subjective temporality, on the one hand, and surface and depth, on the other, The King of Comedy and the aesthetics of the sublime favor objective temporality in the form of fragmented moments of emotional shock and surface/presence. The aesthetics of the beautiful relies on becoming and meaning; the aesthetics of the sublime on being and meaninglessness.

In genre terms, if The King of Comedy is clearly a comedy, Lenny veers toward tragedy. In tragedy, as Aristotle puts it in the second and fifth parts of Poetics (51-52), the main character is of higher type than the viewer (and viewers of the film to a great extent identify themselves

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with Lenny’s laughing and understanding audience). Lenny’s tragic overtones today—as in the 1860s—come from his intelligence and courage to explore the silenced meanings below the glossy discursive surface of conformity. In this film, the hermeneutic drive and subjective time are the tools for assessing social mores critically. This hermeneutic mechanism was felt by some of Lenny’s contemporaries, one of whom wrote: “Lenny Bruce had an incurable disease. He saw through the pretense, hypocrisy, and paradoxes of our society. All he insisted on was that we meet it straight ahead and not cop out or lie about it” (Gleason).

The King of Comedy’s comic effect arises from the clash between the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime. The point where the two aesthetics produce their comic short circuit comes in the pause in my third quote at the beginning of this paper. The characters in the film—except for Rupert and Masha—identify with the aesthetics of the beautiful. So do the movie viewers. By accepting traditional notions with the huck- neyed character of common sense, viewers and characters can look upon Rupert as a “moron”—to use Jerry’s expression about him. Viewers feel that Rupert is worse than normal characters and viewers; and this is how Aristotle defines comic imitation in Parts Two and Five of Poetics (51-52). On the other hand, we as viewers cannot but confess that Rupert is no moron; his final triumph is encountered all too often in our real lives. In America, after all, anyone can be famous for fifteen minutes. These fifteen minutes are the sublime act of occurrence, of “being there.” In this sense, Rupert is not an aberration from the traditional rules of the beautiful but incarnates the new rules of the sublime. The problem is that as a sublime hero he is a hero in a time of transition. This transition is characterized by the fact that the aesthetics of the beautiful remains very powerful, while the aesthetics of the sublime, despite having in many ways ruled our aesthetic lives since Romanticism and taken extreme forms in postmodernism, is, culturally speaking, still felt as new and is less popular. As a result, one could say that in 1983, when The King of Comedy was released, it was a comedy; in 1993 it was still felt to be a comedy; but in 2005 or 2015 it might not be perceived that way any more because the new generations will not respond to Rupert simultaneously as a moron and as the sublime hero of our time. For them, The King of Comedy might be a normal sublime film (not a film about the sublime) in the way that Casablanca, for Eco, soon may turn—or has already—from Kitesch into a pioneer postmodern film (Travels 197-211). Then Lenny would probably lose its tragic aura to become a didactic farce about a discursively disruptive madman who has to learn proper discursive manners the hard way. Then, one hopes, thoughtful viewers might recall Adorno and Horkheimer’s description of the audience’s state of happy slavery nurtured by the culture industry/mass culture: “Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them’” (10); or they might reread Clement Greenberg’s witty observation about this same audience: “The axioms of the few are shared by the many; the latter believe superstitiously what the former believe soberly” (45).
A third conclusion points out that the audiences represented in both films are also divided into those who accept the mass media uncritically (The King of Comedy) and those who are critical and seek to unveil hidden meanings (Lenny). Artistically, the first option represents the audience as passive and as an almost completely absent or cardboard entity that laughs at every banal joke of Rupert's; the second is shown in the many personal portraits of people in Lenny's audience. These portraits are hermeneutic case studies of the individual deciphering of meaning, of personal journeys from discursive surface to discursive depth. The audience in The King of Comedy laughs because they still are; the audience in Lenny laughs because they understand.

Next and fourth, the artistic meaning of a comedy à la Rupert is based on a discourse that refers to itself, whereas Lenny speaks a language that tests other, socially sanctified discourses. The subject of The King of Comedy is not how to become a successful comedian but how to be one. This being is self-referential; that is why it is reluctant to answer questions about meaning. The aesthetics of the sublime is beyond meaning; it does not answer the questions of the mind. In the film, this is expressed in Rupert's final comic monologue on TV, which is, predictably, about Rupert himself and how he had to tie Jerry up to get to the show; in the same way his eventual bestseller is an autobiography, that is, a sort of extended repetition of his comic act. Due to this self-referentiality in Rupert's comic style, Jerry tells him: "It's humor based on you." Rupert's monologue does not belong to satire, parody or irony, genres that presuppose relations to other discourses and produce meaning by referring to something outside. Rupert's genre is paronomasia or the pun, a linguistic mechanism to make words refer not to ideas outside, but to concentrate on their phonetic and semantic matter by playing with ambiguities and overtones. (Indeed, isn't paronomasia, in a broad artistic and cultural sense, the principle of postmodern art and culture?) In his monologue, Rupert says nothing; he does speak a lot and speaks well. His monologue is sublime emotional uttiliation via verbal tintinabulation. What I yotard says about the sublime meaninglessness of Barnett Newman's canvases applies to Rupert too: "A painting by Newman is an angel. It announces nothing; it is in itself the announcement" (79).

Rupert's monologue and Rupert himself arc angels of this ilk. To say is to make a reference, that is, to belong to the aesthetics of the beautiful. To speak in puns is to bring forth unrepresentable connotations, to shock with poetry in Burke's sense, and to postpone death.

Lenny's comic monologues do belong to the genres of parody and satire, which are discursive modes that refer dialogically to other discourses. Even when he does not say the "obscene" word that his censor forbade him to use in public, the very marked silence or "blah-blah-blah" in his act is meaningful as dialogical silence; in it, his thinking audience unmistakably discerns the second, official voice in the parodic and satirical dialog. Thus Lenny's dialogical silence can be meaningful, while Rupert's monological words are meaningless. The main editing principle in
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Lenny is the clash—in Eisenstein's sense, for whom "montage is conflict" (133)—between episodes that involve official private discourses (marriage, adultery, divorce, custody) or social ones (the media, police, religion, law, politics) and episodes where their parodic and satirical doubles are recreated on stage. For instance, a judge's verdict, followed by an authoritative and final bang of his hammer, is taken over visually as the bang of a drumstick in the club where Lenny challenges the ostensibly final verdict. Rupert's self-referential comic discourse is solely for amusement because it playfully repeats and thus perpetuates the official discourses. Shakespeare's formula in Twelfth Night, "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool" (3.1.67), does not apply to Rupert. Conversely, Lenny, who despises wordplay, does fit the Shakespearean paradigm suggested by another line from the same play, "But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit" (3.1.75). Lenny's folly consists in being a wise fool who sees the sad behind the funny—which is an archetypal hermeneutic role. Or, as one contemporary of the real Lenny put it: "Lenny was called a 'sick comic,' though he insisted that society was sick, and not him" (Gleason).

In historical terms, finally, the aesthetics of the sublime relates in many ways to what champions of high art used to castigate as Kitsch, but has been ennobled more recently as postmodernism. By contrast, the aesthetics of the beautiful connects with modernist high culture and art.

To round off this essay, let us reflect on the banal meanings of Jerry's first quote with which I began. What serious problem could lie behind using the aesthetics of the beautiful as a recipe for success in a world that aesthetically is already more sublime than beautiful? The answer is disgustingly simple—power. In the era of the sublime, the beautiful can be promoted as an obsolete, unproductive manual for success because it leads the competition into a blind alley by preventing it from happening and being. What a sublimely unbeautiful use of the beautiful! Yet Lenny offers an alternative to using the aesthetics of the beautiful solely in schemes of coercion: it is an antidote to complacency, conformity, and hermeneutic and moral blindness, no matter how discursively ornate they might be. What a sublime use of the beautiful!

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NOTES

1 Lyotard 88; Part I of this essay improvises on Lyotard's The Inhuman.
2 For objective and subjective temporality, see Part III of this essay.
3 Lyotard deals only with matter in painting and music for the last 200 years. Perhaps what Barthes calls the "third meaning" in film is synonymous with Lyotard's idea of matter in the other arts.
4 For J. Dudley Andrew, Eisenstein "thought art was reserved for those kinds of effects and messages not available in ordinary speech. That is, art is first of all

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directed at the emotions and only secondly at reason. It delivers an effect which is
not available to ordinary language" (70). In Andrew's view, this is a rhetorical fea-
ture in Eisenstein. For these ideas in Eisenstein, see, for instance, Eisenstein 148-
49.

5 Compare Eco, Travels 1-58 and Theory 204-05; Baudrillard, America and
Simulations; Jamesson, "Postmodemism" and "Nostalgia"; and Fjelmil.

6 For the distinction between glancing and gazing at films, see Corrigan 26-33.

7 To explain ordinary time, Ricouer quotes Heidegger: "ordinary time can be
characterized as a series of point-like 'nows,' whose intervals are measured by our
clocks. [. . .] Defined in this way, time deserves to be called 'now-time.' "The
world-time which is 'sighted' in this manner in the use of clocks, we call the "now-
time" [Jetzt-Zeit]" (Time and Narrative 3: 86). He adds that Heidegger gathers
"together under the heading of 'ordinary time' all the temporal varieties previously
aligned under the neutral concept of the scale of time" (91). Also: ordinary time is
"a succession of abstract instants" (120).

8 For some philosophical aspects of understanding as revelatory of a hidden
meaning or of meaning as the expression of something covered, see Ricouer, Main
Trends 35; Jaspers 191-92; Jameson, "Postmodemism" 69-71; and Taylor 537-71,
esp. 539-47. For semiotic and historical aspects of the problem, see Eco, Interpret-
tation 26-38, 45-53, Theory 192-200, Semiotics 147-57, and Limits 8-22. For lin-
guistic aspects, see Genette 326 and Todorov 170-72, 178-79, 286-87.

9 For fabula and plot, see Prince 30, 71-72.

10 This uncertainty corresponds to the historical facts surrounding the real
Lenny Bruce's death, which the police sensationalized as due to a drug overdose,
an account then repeated by the media. The medical report on the next day,
however, concluded that the cause of death could not be determined. See Gleason.

11 The picture is available online ("Petition").

12 Among the better-known names on the petition are Woody Allen, Paul
Newman, ElizaBeth Taylor, James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Lillian Hellman, Norman
Mailer, Arthur Miller, Susan Sontag, John Updike, Gore Vidal, Lawrence Ferlinghetti,
Allen Ginsberg, Malcolm Cowley, and Dwight Macdonald. Popular singers/songwriters
who praise Lenny in their songs are John Lennon and Yoko Ono,
Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and the bands Genesis and R.E.M. ("Petition").

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