

***The Illusion of Will and Desire
in The Gambler,
a film by Karel Reisz***

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Axel Freed, played by James Caan, is the protagonist in Karel Reisz' 1974 film, *The Gambler*.

Immediately one might think of the meaning of his surname given the word, “freed” as someone who was, is, or wishes to be made free. It is unlikely that the film's writer chose the name by accident. It is a good starting point to wonder about the experience of freedom within Axel. I suggest, having seen the film, to resist the urge to conclude that Axel is not free, and instead to examine the subtleties of the nature of freedom, our experience of it, our idealizations or criticisms of it, and of the barriers to freedom. For freedom is not simply present or absent, rather there are many nuances to consider, and if we do so, we may not only come to better understand the character, Axel Freed, but we may also realize things about ourselves.

In the opening scene of the film we are introduced to Axel, clearly in a frenzy of aggressive gambling, and losing. His friend and bookmaker, Hips (Paul Sorvino) reminds Axel of the \$2000 limit to bets, for his own protection, to which Axel replies, “Fuck my protection”, certainly a masochistic statement. He goes against the advice to bet black at the roulette table, and loses on red. We learn that Axel has lost more than \$44000 (approaching a quarter million in today's dollar) and even hoped to borrow more in an attempt to win it back... or maybe an attempt to lose more? As Axel drives away his expression is enigmatic. Note that his car is a coup, open – dare I say free - to the elements. In a foreshadowing scene, Axel stops to make a bet challenging a street basketball player, and loses again. Before his class at the college, Axel says to Spencer, his student, “I took over the country. A one man coup.”, a statement that belies his severe financial loss, but maybe it is reflecting some of his affect and internal experience having faced the fear and doubt that comes with the risk of betting.

In his teaching of Dostoevsky, Axel reveals a significant aspect of himself, an image of what he aspires to be, his ego ideal. Dostoevsky detests that two and two make four, and reserves his sacred right that it make five; Axel insists that any man who makes such an argument is riding on sheer will, implying that will could change reality and that this possibility is what makes tomorrow intriguing. He quotes Dostoevsky,

“Reason only satisfies man's rational requirements. Desire, on the other hand, encompasses everything. Desire is life.”

While Spencer argues the reality principle, Axel draws him in by discussing how Spencer will still take shots out of his range, highlighting the moment of certainty before the action, the secret connection between athletes and poets, and, of course, gamblers. Within Axel's ego ideal is the idealization of desire and will and a refuting of the reality principle, rationalized as true freedom. But he has confused freedom of thought, to have freedom from the thoughts of others, with the wish for freedom from reality.

Axel's idealization of freedom is also demonstrated when he is driven by Carmine to meet Bernie, the loanshark who wishes to vet Axel before lending money. On the way, Carmine lauds Axel for being a college professor, but Axel rejects the esteem of such an identity. Instead he retorts how the uneducated Carmine has fresh air, the open road and a free afternoon; in other words, Carmine has freedom. Of course this is challenged when they detour to see a “customer” of Bernie's who is late on his payments. Carmine unleashes a sadistic violence on the man and his wife. The “customer” is clearly not free, and we must also wonder about Carmine's freedom as his sadism is in servitude to Bernie, an unlikeable man from whom Axel walks away.

Another aspect of Axel's ego ideal is revealed in the relationship with his grandfather, the powerful businessman, A.R. Lowenthal. The very initial comments about Axel not wearing a tie, emulating his grandfather, speak to at least the wish for identification with him. The words of Axel's toast to his grandfather elaborate the ideals previously highlighted in his class on Dostoevsky, and bring in a theme of violent aggression. He begins noting we live in an age that subverts the breeding of men like his grandfather and, we may infer by extension, himself. Axel highlights the violence and will of his grandfather, from honourably killing a Cossack pig at age thirteen, surviving as a bandit in New York two years later, and rising to success as a powerful and wealthy businessman. Axel's identification also becomes a justification for his behaviour when he says,

“Because every time I think my reach has stretched too far, I remember the moves he has dared. This man who seized what he wanted with nothing there to back him up but wit and balls and will. This killer, this king.”

One might well imagine that this lauded version of A.R. Lowenthal is a man who insisted that two and two is five, a man who changed his reality and achieved freedom.

I state that Axel's desire to gamble, to risk everything and more, is a symptom of his ego ideal. When Axel makes his bet it brings him to the affect of certainty, not necessarily to the joy of winning, rather to the sense that he is a man with such will that reality must surrender to him, that he no longer must serve the struggles of ordinary life. There is only sparse information as to the possible origins of this strong ego ideal, so I will only very briefly offer one hypothesis. One historical element is that Axel's father died when he was young. I also interpret a somewhat psychologically incestuous relationship with his mother, potentially from the failure of his father to intercede within the oedipal drama. One might imagine Axel casting himself in his mother's ideal of his father – an image projected onto his grandfather as well; he would be conflicted, having been victorious over his father, but simultaneously needing the father he has psychically killed to intercede and break the oedipal tie to his mother. Achieving the ego ideal would allow him to psychically resurrect his father within himself, to change reality, and attain freedom.

Just as in gambling where the house always wins, the reality principle will always prevail, the fact of which Axel is ultimately not ignorant. While Axel tries to maintain the illusion, primarily for himself, that he is or can be his ego ideal, even that this ideal exists at all, he cannot absolutely ignore the reality of who he is. In another class he is teaching an essay about George Washington by William Carlos Williams, an essay that begins by declaring that Washington is a good man and the supreme symbol of America, but ends by declaring Washington “thoroughly disappointing”. As Axel instructs, Williams is telling us of ourselves, and it is easy to make the parallel between the idealized Washington and his ego ideal. But for Washington failure is absolute evil and all risk must be eliminated, the reality which opposes the attitude that the risk of failure could be dismissed by sheer force of will. Axel despises the thought that he could be like any other American, as described in the quote by D.H. Lawrence, among “the world's greatest dodgers because they dodge their own very selves”. Axel wishes to insist that he, as Lawrence's Americans, must grab his manifest destiny to make reality submit to his will, thus attain his ideal self. Ironically, it is healthy to accept the boundaries imposed by reality and seek to flourish by challenging the limitations we impose on ourselves. One cannot fly by flapping

one's arms and willing it, as gravity will prevail, but one need not submit to being earthbound if one learns about aerodynamics and builds oneself an airplane.

Axel, however, can only see loss and failure in not achieving his ideal for himself, a losing that is associated with tremendous shame that exists within him. The manifestation of this shame, in the film, reoccurs at points in the interaction with his mother. During the tennis game it seems that Axel seeks to humiliate his mother with his domineering play, but in the aftermath when he asks to borrow \$10000 he is averting his eyes from her gaze, hunched over, speaking softly; he quickly, and defensively, becomes aggressive again insisting he may not need the money. The shame shows itself again when on the beach with his mother, revealing that he is in severe debt. His mother's masochistic and narcissistic response is significant; she asks whether she has been such a failure to raise a son with such poor morals, of course inferring his weakness of character. (More on this later). Further shame is played out as his mother collects the money to cover Axel's debt. In this instance his mother embodies the shame when dismissed by the bank clerk, while Axel plays out the aggressive defense in confronting that same clerk. The shame is the crack of reality in the foundation of Axel's ego ideal, the symptom and signal that he is not what he wishes to be. It is the ultimate drama and narrative of this film that Axel is confronted with the reality of his true self.

Significant to the narrative are the two instances of important people in Axel's life, Billie and Spencer, being drawn into his fantasy world. From early in the narrative Axel seeks to seduce Billie to his vision of himself, for it is not enough that he believe his will could shape reality; he needs an other to recognize him, to confirm that his wish is real. In the first scene with Billie (Lauren Hutton), during some playful, sexual wrestling – a foreshadowing of Axel's assaultive behaviour toward the end of the film – when he reveals his debt of \$44000, Billie notes uncertainty whether she should be with him. Axel seeks to draw her in, noting that she actually loves it, “Strange smells. Unfamiliar hands. The possibility of blood.”, of course a projection of what he loves. And note the invocation of violence, again foreshadowing the blood at the end of the film.

Tragic for Axel is that the relationship with Billie offers love, potentially a resource if he decided to challenge his addiction to gambling. Axel does love Billie, and brings her to his grandfather in seeking his approval, and while his grandfather is admiring of her beauty, he declares that she is not for Axel, that she is meant for a playboy and not for a Jew. While such approval may seem old fashioned today, Axel is actually seeking to confirm his identity as a man of will in his identification with his grandfather. The unconscious message to Axel is that he cannot realize his desire, neither in having the love object, nor in becoming his ego ideal. Prior to the meeting with his grandfather Axel had painfully confronted his gambling sufficiently to acquire the money to be free of the debt. Immediately after his grandfather's rejection Axel is highly agitated, driving wrecklessly and desperately hungry to make a bet, which pushes Billie to get out of the car and walk away. Once Axel has made the bet he is again calm, and his seduction of Billie resumes.

In Axel's attempt to bring Billie into his world, they fly to Las Vegas, and things seem to go very well, Axel seemingly unable to lose. A wild play in blackjack of drawing a three with eighteen points in his hand seems to confirm that he can, in fact, control reality. Yet, despite his tremendous success, Axel's expression seems to be one of dissatisfaction, even more apparent in the hotel room when he and Billie are alone. At this

point Billie tells the story of her previous relationship with Eugene, who's gambling led to a violent end to the relationship; she is very aware of the destructive – and self-destructive - realities of a gambling addiction. Axel even invites her to leave him and go find Eugene, but she wants to stay with him. Billie was not seduced into this world by Axel, rather she was willing to accompany him out of love. In this moment of hope Axel insists they leave before “this place gets to us”.

It is not the external world of Las Vegas that is the danger, rather it is Axel's internal world that he cannot help but bring with him. The consequences of this danger immediately make themselves known on his return, the bookmaker, Jimmy, coming to collect as he has lost all the basketball bets. Billie confronts Axel directly, that he doesn't have to do “whatever it is you're out there doin' with those morons”. She is exposing all the proof that Axel cannot be his ego ideal, that there is no honourable violence in the aggression, that he is self-destructive, how he seems to be throwing it all away and making sure he has nothing left. She is exposing the reality of who Axel is, and is still offering him the potential certainty of her love as an alternative. But Axel cannot accept giving up his hope to be the powerful man of will,

“I like the uncertainty of it. I like the threat of losing. And the idea that I could lose, but that somehow I won't, because I don't want to. That's what I like. I love winning. Even though it never lasts.”

Axel makes his last, desperate, even fatal, bet and loses. In the morning Billie is gone.

However, Axel's story is not over, his destruction is not complete. Spencer is the other person brought into Axel's world, and this too begins with a poetic seduction early in the film, during the class on Dostoevsky, when Axel shows Spencer's willingness to take a risk, shooting from outside of his range, because of a certainty that he can change reality. Axel highlights how the athletic Spencer shares this idealized certainty with poets. But the mobsters to whom Axel is indebted are not poets, they have no interest in tomorrow's possibility that two and two can be five; they want their money today, and they insist Axel have his student influence the outcome of the game. So Axel's seduction of Spencer at this point is crass, an offer of money. Spencer is drawn in, not to the isolated fantasy of will controlling reality, rather the truth that reality can only be subverted by cheating. Spencer also addresses Axel as William Carlos Williams' George Washington, Axel as both the idealized American Spencer can admire, and the disappointment in the man who is dodging because of fear. And Axel know the truth, that he is acting out of fear for his life, subverting reality rather than changing through his desire and will. Spencer does willfully play poorly, and while there is dramatic tension as to whether the point spread will be low enough, the results are in Axel's favour. After the game Axel feels remorse for bringing Spencer into his world, and he insists to Hips that this was a one time thing. However, Hips predicts that Spencer will continue to serve the mob out of greed when he states, “Once you ain't a virgin no more, you're a whore.”. Axel of course knows that if Spencer has become a “whore”, then he is the pimp.

In a drama the hero will face adversity and transform, often discovering a strength that was not known at the beginning of the tale. In this drama of the anti-hero, Axel is transformed by adversity, but only to learn that the kind of strength and power he thought was achievable, was actually a myth. If he cannot be the great man of desire and will, who is he? The answer is declared when he visits Monkey's lair where the group is drinking, using cocaine, and Axel is offered sex with his “girlfriend”, a prostitute. From this morally

questionable position, Monkey still declares that Axel is a degenerate. This resonates with Axel's mother earlier questioning the morals of the son she raised. It is further reinforced by Hips when he explains to Axel why he has never made a bet, because he has observed addicted gamblers and they are all the same. But Hips is surprised that Axel knows all these gamblers are looking to lose. Further, Axel explains that if all his bets were safe, "there wouldn't be any juice". He needs to lose to maintain the fantasy that he can change reality and win, an impossible paradox.

As Axel is being confronted with the reality of who he is, he does seek out Billie once more. This is probably a desperate attempt to make the better choice, but it is too late for that. A polar opposite to the sexual playfulness in the earlier scene, Axel is assaultive, displaying a degenerate violence. Billie remains completely flat, unresponsive to Axel, underlining that there is no turning away from facing who he is.

Another important visit is to his grandfather, after Axel has learned that the mobsters have already spoken to him, that his grandfather has ties to these men. Axel admonishes him, "You let me down. The first time in my life I needed you behind me, and you were not there.". But Axel also notes he is not there for the money; the actual failure, from Axel's perspective, is that his grandfather is not the image Axel had wanted him to be, is not the ego ideal that he projected. His grandfather confirms the reality, that achieving success was not a matter of sheer will and desire, but that it involved dealing with vipers. This breakdown of the image Axel has of his grandfather parallels his internal breakdown.

The game of basketball is continuous within the narrative of this film, from the game he plays early in the film, to the bets that lead to devastating financial loss, to Spencer as both a star athlete and sellout to fix a game. After the game Hips observes Axel make a shot, and recognizes that he could have been something as a basketball player. Axel states that he knows, just as earlier he stated to Hips how he knows all gamblers are looking to lose. This symbolizes a choice that Axel made in the past, rather than investing in effort and practice to become a good man, like a basketball player, he sought to be a great man through desire alone, and now with all his defenses broken down, Axel realizes he has never been the great man, he has squandered his opportunity to be a good man, which leaves him as a degenerate who consorts with vipers and whores.

I have not ventured to make an argument that Axel is a masochistic personality, though there is definite support for this. As we have seen, and has been stated, Axel can be happy about winning but it does not provide satisfaction. And his losing may bring misery and a host of dangerous consequences, but he needs to lose – he needs the pain – in order to be satisfied in having something to overcome. In the final scene Axel very conscientiously not only takes a risk, he orchestrates it. He seeks out the prostitute and her pimp, he makes sure the door is open, he antagonizes them to the point at which his life is threatened and actually encourages the man to kill him. And when he unleashes his rage, the retaliation leads to a deep wound on his face. Axel predicted that owing the mob a huge sum could lead to a new face, yet it is he who arranged his new face. Looking at himself in the mirror, Axel appears triumphant.

At the beginning of this paper I raised the question of freedom, and warned that it could be a complex issue. Axel believed himself a free man because he thought he could control reality through the force of sheer will and desire, the ideal described by Dostoevsky. Yet from the very beginning of the film he was indebted,

bound by his financial losses. More importantly, Axel was trapped by his insistence of trying to realize his ego ideal, and thus he sabotaged every opportunity to escape his bonds. Wild bets ensured he would stay indebted, but also cost him everything else, the love of Billie, the respect of Spencer, and any honour and wellbeing that could come from being a good man making good choices. Axel finally has the satisfaction of actual freedom, but only because having lost everything, there is nothing that binds him.

Thank you.