



# Diverse Perspectives On Curriculum & Pedagogy

## 2015-2016 Seminar Series

hosted by William E. Doll, Jr., Donna Trueit, William Pinar

February 12th

### When the Phallus Appears: The Politics of Comedy in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*

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Friday, February 12th, 2016 | 12:30-2:00 p.m. | Scarfe Room 310

Sandwiches and informal conversation at noon | The lecture commences at 12:30 p.m.

To capture in a nutshell what Jean Genet's varied lifework is about, one might suggest that it attempts to understand the complex interplay between images, both "real" and poetic, and the everyday violence, "real" and symbolic, that saturates social relations in late capitalism. In his play *The Balcony* (1957), three classic figures of authority – Bishop, Judge, and General – act out carefully choreographed erotic scenarios with prostitutes in a high-class brothel while political insurrection threatens outside. In a reading developed in his seminar following the play's first performances in Paris, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan draws attention to a curious fact: Though there is no shortage of brothel clients asking to don the elaborate garb of the three figures in order to stage their rituals of perversion, no one shows interest in impersonating the figure of the Chief of Police, who also features as a central character in the play.

Lamenting the discrepancy between his social power and the public's lack of investment in his image, the Chief makes a shocking suggestion: that he "appear in the form of a giant phallus, a prick of great stature," in the hope that it might secure his standing for eternity, and that he might join Bishop, Judge and General in the great pantheon of emblems of the social order. The crucial moment in the play when the chief makes his pronouncement is clearly a comic one, and Lacan argues that *The Balcony* effectively literalizes the essence of comedy, namely that it "makes the phallus appear." But Genet's ridiculous – if vaguely subversive – image of the chief's desire for immortality undergoes significant modification when, at the play's conclusion, a more dignified mausoleum is constructed in place of the phallic monument. *The Balcony* concludes on a note of conservative reconciliation when Roger, a leader

of the insurrection, puts on the police chief's uniform and disappears into the mausoleum. The revolution is thereby exposed as a naïve and ineffectual strategy for transforming the social order.

Taking his cue from Lacan, philosopher Alain Badiou argues in his own 2001 seminar that *The Balcony* theorizes how a dominant political order creates a regime of visibility upheld by idealized emblems that works to keep the forces struggling for change socially invisible. Strangely, however, Badiou never makes mention of the phallus episode in his interpretation, focusing instead on the mausoleum's representation of revolution's failure, and hinting that Genet's play flirts with a neo-Nietzschean nihilism. "When the Phallus Appears" argues that Badiou's oversight should not keep us from drawing a different conclusion about the significance of Lacan's provocative intervention for our understanding of *The Balcony*. For when the phallus appears, Genet's play suggests, it becomes possible to recognize our complicity in the social perversions that perpetuate the efficacy of even delegitimized authority figures. There is more than one way to respond to the comic moment when the regime of dominant images falters; there is nothing that requires us to build a mausoleum to symbolize the entrenchment of the status quo.

**James Penney** is the author of *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (2014), *The Structures of Love: Art and Politics beyond the Transference* (2012), and *The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Absolute of Desire* (2006). Currently at work on a new book called *The Poetic Acts of Jean Genet*, he is Professor of Cultural Studies and Modern Language and Literature (French) at Trent University.

