



Doctoral Program in English and American Literary Studies

# Comedy, Mimesis and Avarice

Doctoral Workshop with Mladen Dolar  
(Ljubljana), 7-8 November 2014

The workshop will address three different topics, seemingly completely divergent, but having a common plot in the background. The focus is the foundational shift of modernity which will be addressed through three perspectives, the aesthetic, the economic and the sexual. In the realm of aesthetics, modernity largely saw itself as a departure from mimesis, in all its different facets, and the workshop will explore the paradoxes that this entails, arguing rather for the persistence of mimesis and its intractable kernel. In the realm of economy, the workshop will explore the underlying fantasies that conditioned the advent of capitalism, going back to *The Merchant of Venice* as the source of foundational structures, scrutinizing the subsequent shifts that can be discerned on the basis of the plot which is proposed there, examining the mysterious nature of what could be called 'the debt drive'. In the realm of sexuality, the workshop will pursue the particular shift that psychoanalysis has given to questions about the nature of sexual difference, the inflection that conceiving sexual difference gives to conceiving classification as such, arguing against some common misconceptions.

Mladen Dolar is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana.



**Friday 7 November, 4-7 pm: "Mimesis and ideology –  
from Plato to Althusser" (PLH-102)**

The moment one imitates something, it sticks, it marks the imitator, there is no innocent imitation. Imitation necessarily affects the one who imitates, for better or (usually) for worse, and making a simple copy of something

necessarily affects the original. This is perhaps the briefest way to describe Plato's concerns about the nature of mimesis in the *Republic*. The purpose of the paper is to give a brief account of the mysterious magic powers of mimesis and of attempts to counteract them. The topic is massive, so the paper will concentrate on a few perspectives, starting with the theatrical parable of St. Genesius, leading to Pascal and to Althusser's theory of



ideology, then scrutinizing the ways in which modernity tried to disentangle itself from mimesis (Brecht's estrangement, Irigaray's femininity as mimesis, Badiou's anti-mimetic stance, Freud's account of magic and Lacan's account of enjoyment). What is the real of the mimetic spell which has so vastly ramified aesthetic and political consequences? The paper proposes a defense of mimesis, claiming that modernity, by relegating the traditional art to the past of mimesis and representation, thereby maintained a disavowed kernel of mimesis at its core.

7 pm: Apéro at the English Department

## Saturday 8 November, 10 am – 1 pm: “The quality of mercy is not strained” (PLH-102)

*The Merchant of Venice* pits against each other two kinds of logic: on the one hand Shylock, the merciless usurer, the miser, the Jew, extorting a pound of flesh to collect his debt; on the other hand Portia, the harbinger of Christian charity and mercy. Shylock, a figure announcing capitalist



modernity, would thus stand for the cruel and ruthless part of the budding capitalism, accumulation and exploitation, based on interests and extracting the pound of flesh – Marx often referred to him in this light. He is inscribed in the long line of misers, stretching back to Plautus and forth to Molière's Harpagon, Balzac's Gobsec and finally Dickens's Scrooge, the last miser who miraculously converted to charity and mercy. Portia seems to stand for a pre-modern logic of mercy, a magnanimous free gift not expecting anything in

return, yet a gift which opens up a debt that cannot be repaid. In a historical reversal Portia could be seen as the figure announcing the new stage of capitalism, the economy of endless debt, of being at the mercy of an unfathomable Other, constantly falling short, unable to acquit one's debt, grateful for one's means of survival. Maybe one could read Shakespeare's parable as a two stage-scenario: first the economy of avarice conditioning accumulation and extortion, then the economy of mercy and infinite debt.

**1-2 pm: Lunch** at the English Department

## **Saturday 8 November, 2-5 pm: "Officers, maids and chimneysweepers" (PLH-102)**

The title stems from Kierkegaard's humorous proposal that the whole of humankind could be divided into just three categories, officers, maids and chimneysweepers. The proposal was meant as a joke, but Kierkegaard sees in it a speculative value of contingency and maintains that one would be hard put to come up with a better one. This proposal is taken as a cue. One can read in it the traditional sexual division into men par excellence, the officers, and women par excellence, the maids, with the contingent addition of chimneysweepers, which could be read, in psychoanalytic light, as the phallic element. It poses the very basic problem of how to conceive the 'one', the difference, the Other, sexuality, antagonism etc., thus some basic assets of psychoanalytic theory. Kierkegaard's adage raises the general question of classifications, particularly of the kind of classifications where the last term presents the odd one out, an element which doesn't belong to the series but at the same time presents its hidden spring or points to the assumptions on which the classification is based. Examples, apart from Kierkegaard, are taken from Heine, Marx, Shakespeare etc. The paradoxical element, seemingly superfluous and contingent, raises the question of phallus as the 'contingent addition' aiming at the very notion of the difference that underlies various types of classification, and in particular the sexual difference and the real it involves. The conclusion argues strongly against the notion of phallocentrism as one of the common criticisms of psychoanalysis.

### **Preparatory Reading**

- Plato, *Republic*, Book 3\*
- Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"\*
- Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

## Additional Reading

- Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2012
- Soeren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*
- Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Cambridge, Polity Press 2007

The texts marked with an asterisk\* are available for download on OLAT. Search for "Workshop Mladen Dolar" or use the following link: <https://www.olat.uzh.ch/olat/url/RepositoryEntry/11564318721?guest=true&lang=de>

*All interested students, members of staff and other guests are cordially invited to the workshop. Please register by sending an e-mail to Johnny Riquet (johannes.riquet@es.uzh.ch) by 1 November.*