
7.4 Trials

CHAIR Sara Murphy
NYU/Gallatin

DISCUSSANT Sara Murphy
NYU/Gallatin

PANELIST 1 Marco Wan
University of Hong Kong

Charlot s'amuse, Onanism, and the Question of Literature

This paper examines the obscenity trial sparked by the publication of Paul Bonnetain's *Charlot s'amuse* (Charlot plays with himself), a late nineteenth-century French novel about the life of an onanist, or compulsive masturbator. Bonnetain's lawyer argued that the novel should not be considered as an obscene text because it was a work of scientific merit contributing to the medical discussion of onanism. This paper examines the interpretative assumptions behind this argument, and posits an alternative reading which suggests that the novel in fact interrogates some of the fundamental ideas in the scientific discourse on onanism in the late nineteenth century. It concludes that this interrogation can be said to form the foundation of the novel's 'literary' status, and that Bonnetain's text emerges from the trial as a site in which the possibility of judging another human being becomes problematised.

PANELIST 2 Kate Sutherland
York University

Law, Literature, and Film: Adaptation and Interpretation in Theodore Dreiser's 1931 Suit Against Paramount Pictures

In 1931, Theodore Dreiser sought an injunction to prevent Paramount from releasing its film adaptation of his novel, *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser had sold the film rights to Paramount, but argued that the film it produced departed so far from the spirit of his novel that it violated the terms of their contract. It was the early days of the film industry, and Dreiser was making a bid for some power for authors within it. The case raises in microcosm many issues related to adaptation and interpretation that have long preoccupied law and literature scholars. Dreiser and Paramount put forward competing visions of adaptation, of law into fiction, and fiction into film. Literary critics aired competing views in the form of legal affidavits. Judge interpreted novel, and novelist interpreted contract. In my paper, I tell the story of the case, and consider what it reveals about adaptation and interpretation.

PANELIST 3 Christine Alice Corcos
Louisiana State University