

Tragic Power and the Comic Self

a lecture by Timothy Campbell

Different people of course speak differently about power, but over the last decade, one particular way of speaking about it has enjoyed more intellectual and editorial success than others.

First coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault more than forty years ago, the term "biopower" continues to launch more dissertations, more essays and more conferences than Helen launched ships.

In this lecture, I'd like to take up some distance from the term by translating biopower dramatically as a form of tragic power and then attempt to sketch a response in the creation of what I call "the comic self." The difference between tragic power and the comic self, I argue, can be measured in how tragic power depends upon possession (of self, of others) while the comic self works precisely against a notion of self-hood by softening conceptions of what is considered proper or not, mine or not.