

When we say that a literary work is gimmicky we mean we “see through it”; that there is an unwanted transparency about how an aspect of it was created and why. The gimmicky artwork thus confronts us with an object that would seem to undermine its own aesthetic power simply by drawing attention to the procedures by which its effects have been devised. Extending my previous book’s focus on equivocal aesthetic categories (such as the merely “interesting”) and with an eye to the special difficulties posed by the very idea of an aesthetics of production (as opposed to reception), this talk explores the repulsion that the gimmick produces and its ideological implications across a range of cultural forms, including a prestigious literary genre we might not immediately associate with such a compromised aesthetic device: the so-called philosophical novel or novel of ideas.

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The English verb ‘to err’ has largely lost its positive connotations. It no longer invokes wandering, rambling, or roaming, and is now understood negatively in relation to a prescribed path or goal. To be sure, errors are acknowledged to play an important role in the pursuit of knowledge and happiness, but usually only to the extent that their recognition allows for their elimination, correction, and avoidance. Recognizing that a critique of ideals of productivity, success, goal-orientation, and determination is necessarily paradoxical, the **ICI Lecture Series ERRANS** will take the shifting meanings of ‘erring’ – connoting the violation of norms as well as the activity of wandering – as a prompt to explore the critical potentials and risks of embracing error, randomness, failure, and non-teleological temporalities, and to do so across different disciplines and discourses.

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Theory of  
the Gimmick



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