

Against Enclosure
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ON JEAN GENET'S
UN CHANT D'AMOUR (1950)

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Jean Genet, *Un chant d'amour*, 1950 (still). Video; 25:22.

Image description: Two hands interact from separate barred windows of neighboring jail cells. The left prisoner's hand swings a bouquet of flowers tied to string towards the other inmate's hand which is open and ready to grasp.

BIG WINDOW

Un chant d'amour (1950), the only film that Jean Genet directed, is a testament to desire under conditions of confinement. Shot on 35mm by Jacques Natteau and originally intended to be completely silent, the erotic, all-male fantasy revolves around a white guard and his prisoners, who are cast across a racial spectrum of lighter- to darker-skinned bodies. While much has been said about the spectacle of the body in this film, I am interested in the language of the wall and what it can tell us about the nature of enclosure.

Nearly every shot in *Un chant d'amour's* twenty-five minutes is framed by a wall, usually cropped to appear unending. With the exception of a few outdoor scenes of amour between the two prisoners who constitute the film's main, interracial couple (the older played by a Tunisian barber from Montmartre whose name remains unconfirmed, and the younger by Genet's own lover, Lucien S nemaud), there is no sky. From cell to perimeter, walls are everywhere.

Our starting point here is not punishment, but pleasure and desire. Indeed the most erotic scenes of the entire film involve a straw reed used to blow cigarette smoke from one prisoner to another through a hole in their shared wall (Figure 1). As the smoke is ravenously consumed by the prisoner on the other side, we are reminded of the pleasures that arise from, and not in spite of, walls and other boundaries for the body. Sight is just one sense among others that is put into play here.

This is not to minimize the questions of control and surveillance always at hand in carceral settings. Strikingly, as spectators of this film, we are often asked to identify with the perspective of the guard character, a figure most closely aligned with the state. In contrast to the prisoners, who never actually look at each other, the guard's sense of sight is a seat of power. Through windows, doorways, and peepholes, he surveils and is drawn in by what he sees: dancing, ecstatic bodies caught in autoerotic throes.

In the film's most conventional moments, Genet uses continuity editing to show us the world from the guard's perspective; his gaze structures the film's narrative logic. This setup is established in the opening shots (Figures 2 and 3). The first person introduced to the viewer is the guard at the perimeter looking up during his patrol, with the next cut to the prison's exterior showing us what the guard sees: two prisoners in adjacent cells attempting to exchange flowers between their barred windows. Like the guard, we are afforded a perspective denied to the prisoners themselves.

But, when a prisoner turns in address, he breaks the illusion of the guard's unidirectional, surveillant gaze. The subsequent close-up, a motif of the guard's left eye isolated through a burrowed peephole, revolves upside-down to mark this breach. The encounter triggers flights of homoerotic fantasy in which the guard finds himself complicit in every scene, no longer able to remain a passive observer. As the guard is driven to violence, the montage implies that he is undone by what he sees, pleasure beyond his possession or control.

Genet was no stranger to carceral settings. As a sex worker and a thief, he spent much of his early adult life in and out of various prisons. This pattern began in 1926, when the sixteen-year-old Genet was sentenced to the Mettray Penal Colony, a French prison farm advertised as a reformatory for young boys.¹ Although he eventually enlisted in the army (the only option available for early release), Genet remained an inveterate criminal. As an adult, Genet came to see Mettray as a state-sponsored training ground for colonial soldiers under the guise of philanthropic reform.² By 1948, after his tenth conviction for theft, Genet faced the prospect of life in prison—a fate from which he was saved by a coterie of prominent French intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre and the filmmaker Jean Cocteau, who successfully petitioned for a presidential pardon on Genet's behalf.

In the decades after making *Un chant d'amour*, Genet became a prominent activist and traveled to both Palestine and the United States.³ In 1970, the Black Panther Party invited him to live with the organization for three months, and Genet even delivered a May Day address in New Haven during the group's trial in the city. Around the same time, Genet's film, which had never before been publicly exhibited, began to circulate on the underground film circuit in the United States, France, and England. Perhaps due to his increasing visibility on the international stage, Genet was embarrassed by *Un chant d'amour* and opposed its display.

One can see why Genet may have cringed at the thought of Bobby Seale watching his film. Made at a time when Genet was safe in the knowledge

1 The full name in French is *La Colonie Agricole et Pénitentiaire de Mettray*. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1976) famously cited Mettray as the ultimate model of discipline: "Dans la normalisation du pouvoir de normalisation, dans l'aménagement d'un pouvoir-savoir sur les individus, Mettray et son école font époque."

2 The institution was a recurring motif in his work. At the time of his death in 1986, he had been working on a script for a three-hour long historical documentary on Mettray commissioned for television.

3 *Prisoner of Love* (1986), Genet's last book published posthumously, is a memoir of these travels.

that he would never go to prison again, *Un chant d'amour* was too soft, too romantic, and, though he did not say it, altogether too pleasurable. The sole Black character (played by a dancer cast from the cabaret nightclubs of Montmartre and known by the stage name Coco Le Martiniquais) appears in an interstitial scene, his flaccid penis dangling from his pants like a banana on one of Josephine Baker's skirts.

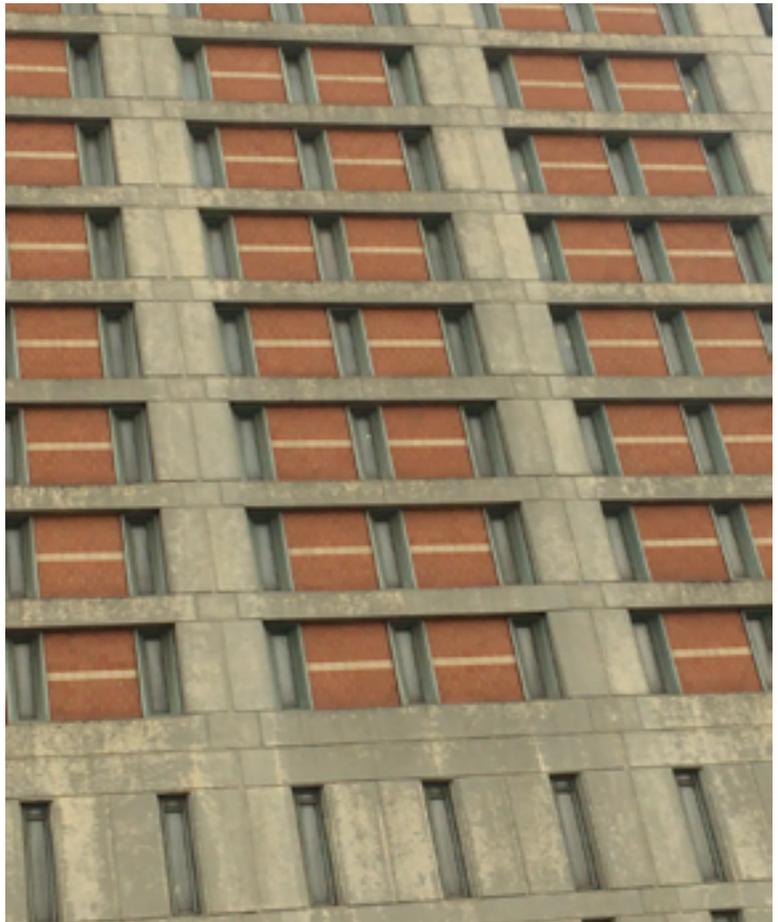
Rather than dismiss this scene as a white man's wet dream about Black bodies, I ask: Who is allowed to take pleasure, how, and in what? Who can afford not to think about this question? When it comes to Coco Le Martiniquais, who (perhaps due to his familiarity with the stage) performs for the camera in a way that none of the other actors do, we are reminded that the performance of pleasure is not the same as its reciprocation.

Yet, the question of desire and its entwinement with power in the visual realm is precisely the reason for the film's enduring relevance today. In this respect, there is still much to say. By introducing desire into the carceral equation, *Un chant d'amour* gets at an aspect of the modern prison that Michel Foucault never addressed, which is not discipline, but adjacency and its concomitant intimacy. Where Foucault emphasizes separation, both physical and visual, as the prison wall's primary function, Genet highlights connection, and the impossibility of complete enclosure.

I was reminded of the latter trait this past June, at a protest outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC), a federal prison in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Like Genet's first reformatory, the MDC is a prison that, on the outside, gives no indication of its function. Located by the waterfront off of the 278 underpass, it looks and feels like what it is: a converted shipping warehouse. Growing up, my mom and I frequented the Costco a few blocks away. I had driven by my entire life, thinking it was another building of self-storage units (Figure 4).

We were asked to bring sounding instruments for the protest, so that the people inside MDC would hear us, even if they could not see us. One by one, prisoners at the MDC responded in kind, tapping out staccato beats in call-and-response. When the crowd paused to let someone give a speech, I looked up. From inside their cell, through a thick pane of frosted glass, someone was flashing a light. At the same time, the beat was starting up again, only this time, I realized, the prisoners were not just responding to us, but calling out to each other through their walls. I am haunted by this memory.

In Foucault's view, the individuated cell was designed to produce regimented and atomized subjects. However, can you truly maintain separation with all those adjoining walls? *Un chant d'amour* implies that you can't. Like bodies, walls are shown to be permeable entities. One can be out of sight and yet not out of sound, taste, or touch.



Top left: Figure 1. Jean Genet, *Un chant d'amour*, 1950 (still). Video; 25:22. Image description: Smoke billows through a steam reed that pokes through a small hole in the wall of a prison cell.

Middle left. Figure 2. Jean Genet, *Un chant d'amour*, 1950 (still). Video; 25:22. Image description: A white prison guard stands in front of a brick wall and gazes into the distance.

Bottom left. Figure 3. Jean Genet, *Un chant d'amour*, 1950 (still). Video; 25:22. Image description: Two hands interact from separate barred windows of neighboring jail cells. The left prisoner's hand swings a bouquet of flowers tied to string towards the other inmate's hand which is open and ready to grasp.

Right. Figure 4. Image description: The facade of a concrete building with a repeating pattern of slender vertical windows and orange brick work.