

Althusser's Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology

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*H*ow should we explain that, in certain languages at least (notably English, Italian, and Spanish), a renewed interest is taking place in the works and ideas of Louis Althusser, a philosopher widely known as the “inventor” of the “structuralist” brand of Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s who died in 1990 but had already retreated from the public and intellectual scene by 1980, when, in a scandalous episode of criminal madness, he murdered his wife and was confined, at least for some time, in a mental hospital? A very simple reason, and I want to begin with this because it is also a way to acknowledge my debts, lies in the fact that in recent years, several scholars of various generations—some who knew Althusser personally or had met him, like Emilio de Ípola, others who knew him indirectly through common friends and professors, like Warren Montag and Vittorio Morfino, or still others who “simply” encountered him in the course of their investigations, like Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, and Mikko Lahtinen—have published

an impressive number of commentaries and interpretations. These works deliver a new, and in some respects more exciting, picture of the author of *Reading Capital* than simply a contributor to the historical debates on dialectical materialism that are indeed very far from us today.¹ These new readings were to a large extent made possible by the fact that posthumous publication of Althusser's writings has considerably added to the existing corpus, expanding his work in many different directions, making his relationship to theory and to politics appear a more complex one, and highlighting at the same time the continuities and the discontinuities between different "periods" of his activity. All this takes place at a conjuncture that I believe makes it possible to better understand what formed the convergent interests but also the deep fractures within the "philosophical season" of the 1960s in Europe. The time for learned academic commentary has come, no doubt, but unexpected turns of intellectual history, and political history in the broad sense, have also taken place, which have largely neutralized the effects of a philosophical reaction that—perhaps prematurely—proclaimed that we had better forget the old issues of structure and *praxis*, discourse and power, dialectics and genealogy, if we wanted to think in the present.

It is in this spirit that I want to offer a partially new description of Althusser's quest for a critical concept of *ideology*, clearly one of the central aspects of his contribution to "theory" and the linchpin of his project of destabilizing Marxism from the inside. While a critique of ideology no doubt formed the core of the idea of "historical materialism," Althusser always insisted that the concept Marxist theorists (and others) needed to achieve such a goal should be *anything but* the concept of "ideology" that Marx had used; it should be a different one if not an antithetic one. This is, of course, the old *topos*: for Marx, against Marx. It would account for only half of my title, and it is not in this general epistemological manner that I want to return to the issue in the current context.

What strikes me in particular in recent commentaries on Althusser is the place, apparently disproportionate with the dimensions of the texts, that is now granted to some of Althusser's writings about *art*, particularly theater and painting. These commentaries propose not that we read Althusser's texts as *applications* of theory within a particular field (say aesthetics or culture), but rather that we view them as "analyzers," theoretical *dispositifs* or *machines* constructed by Althusser to resolve theoretical problems and identify the objects of theory. This is probably not unique to him—remember in particular Lyotard's use of Duchamp, or Deleuze's use of Proust and Kafka, or Derrida's of Artaud. But in his case, the reversal of the

“normal” philosophical attitude is particularly striking because although his essays do not avoid a few considerations on art in general, its social and cognitive functions or its specific mode of being, they are in fact essentially descriptions of singular *experiences* resulting from an “encounter” with a work or a group of works, an “event” in other words, but from which general consequences are drawn for a much larger field. This proves particularly adapted (but also uneasy, from an epistemological standpoint) in the case of a reflection on the issue of ideology, ideological domination, and the “dominant ideology” because, in a symptomatic circularity, such a reflection requires both a description of the processes or procedures of *subjection* and *subjectivation* that form the essence of ideology and a “performative” gesture allowing for a “subject” to become located, as interpellating interpellator, within the ideological mechanism itself in order to reveal its coherence and insecurity. This is, Althusser seems to suggest, something made possible not by art *in general*, as an institution or a cultural phenomenon, but only by specific works of art in specific circumstances.

I can readily mention two major examples, both drawn from essays written in the same crucial years between 1961 and 1965, where what would become known as “Althusserianism” was taking shape. The first is an essay from 1965–66 on the canvases of Althusser’s friend, the Italian painter Leonardo Cremonini, called “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” to which I will, regrettably, make only a quick reference here.² The second (chronologically first) is an essay (first published in 1962 and included as a chapter in *For Marx* in 1965) on a performance by the Piccolo Teatro di Milano in Paris in July 1962 with the title “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theater.” I had once somewhat blindly remarked, when asked to write a preface for the new edition of Althusser’s *Pour Marx* in 1996, that this essay formed the “geometrical and theoretical center” of the book, although it was never acknowledged and treated as such (“Avant-propos” viii). But this is no longer the case, since fascinating commentaries have been produced by, in particular, Banu Bargu, Marc-Vincent Howlett, Warren Montag, and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc.⁵ It is from the Piccolo Teatro essay that I want to start again in order to sketch a more general problematic, or rather an aporetic trajectory following an example provided by Althusser himself in his essay on Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, a trajectory in which, through successive *décalages*, he moves away from a particular articulation of theater, politics, and ideology toward a different one. From the Piccolo essay, I will draw the idea that theater—not theater in general, but, as he was keen to insist in a subsequent commentary called

“On Brecht and Marx,” a specific *practice* of theater illustrated by Giorgio Strehler and his productions at the Piccolo Teatro—represented for Althusser not only an effective critique of ideology, particularly the dominant “humanist” ideology of bourgeois society, but also an *alternative way* of understanding the structure of ideological relations, compared to the *scientific* one otherwise advocated in his works as an “epistemological break” with *theoretical humanism*. From there, I will begin exploring the hypothesis that, in fact, the intrinsic relationship between the structure of ideological processes and the *dispositifs* of theatrical representation was displaced to a new field when, immediately after 1968, Althusser embarked on the project of sketching a “general theory” of ideologies, the best-known result of which is the essay from 1970, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” where the central notion (which is also a metaphor) is “interpellation.”⁴ I will also suggest, through recourse to the posthumous book *Machiavelli and Us*, the manuscript of which was essentially completed in the years immediately following, that Althusser was not unaware of the aporias of his model of ideological interpellation, particularly when considered from the point of view of a revolutionary politics. Surprisingly, the way he sought to overcome the aporias was through a new philosophical detour: this time not through Spinoza but through Machiavelli in the form of a definition of the “political practice of the *Prince*” as “ideological policy” whose principal instrument is a staging or *mise-en-scène* of his own passions. Taken together, I suggest that these two constructions form a *dramaturgic model* of the political function and political transformation of ideology.

“Je me retourne . . .”: *The Interpellation from Milan*

I cannot summarize in full detail Althusser’s essay on the Piccolo Teatro. That could be useful, but it would also be complicated because it would add a third layer of narration to what is already, at least in part, a description of the experience of a production that was touring Europe after being inaugurated in the city of Milan. It should be recalled that, in the postwar period in Italy, France, Britain, and Germany, theater was a popular art mixing high cultural and, most of the time, political ambitions with a genuine appeal not only to the bourgeois elites but to the educated middle classes and the politically motivated aristocracy of the working class. This was also a moment of heightened ideological passions, marked not only by the vicissitudes of the Cold War and the interrupted “de-Stalinization” of the Communist bloc but also by the dramatic developments of the colonial

wars of liberation. Giorgio Strehler, an Italian director of Italian-Austrian origin who had founded Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano just after the war, was already considered one of the greatest figures of European theater. Although not officially a “Brechtian,” he had offered remarkable performances of some of Brecht’s plays, in particular a famous *Life of Galileo*. In Paris in 1962, he presented an adaptation of a relatively obscure “realist” Italian playwright from the late nineteenth century, Carlo Bertolazzi’s *El nost Milan*, which described rather than properly narrated the story of a poor young girl from the slums who, after being raped by some scoundrel subsequently murdered by her loving father, abandons the father when he is about to be jailed, apparently to look for money in the “real” world, that is, to become a prostitute. The spectacle had been scorned as bad melodrama by the critics, but Althusser’s lengthy and elaborate interpretation rehabilitated it and, by the same token, played an important role in aesthetic discussions of the time about realism, critique, and irony in art (this being also the period when the avant-garde theater of the “absurd” with Beckett and Ionesco was blossoming in France). Althusser and Strehler became friends and encountered one another in Italy in the following years, together with Strehler’s close associate, Paolo Grassi.

Althusser’s article consists of two parts of roughly equal length. The first is devoted to a description of the play, highlighting the paradoxes of a succession of three acts, each of which reproduces essentially the same dramaturgy, by juxtaposing rather than articulating two kinds of pictures with different visual content and rhythm: on the one side, a static and neutral presentation of the immobile, desperate, and silent world of the subproletarians, who expect nothing because nothing can happen in their lives, neither work nor struggles nor history; on the other side, taking place in the margins of this world of misery and resignation, or as Althusser writes (retrieving an old category of classical theater), “in the wings” (*à la cantonade*) (“Piccolo” 138), the dramatic moments of conflict between the idealist generosity of the father and the cynicism of the rapist, with whom the daughter will side (albeit after his death), in the form of a spectacular transgression of human feelings, which is also shown onstage as an escape from the night of impotent dreams into the risky violence of the day: “Erect, Nina goes out into the daylight” (qtd. in Althusser, “Piccolo” 135). With this description goes a double argument: First, that the critics have been unable to perceive the real effect of the production, which is not to endorse a melodramatic perception of the life of the poor, but to radically criticize the melodramatic form of consciousness by juxtaposing it optically, but without explicit interaction, with the description of the *existence* (or conditions of

existence) of which, in Marx's words, it is but the ideological aroma. Second, that the critical effect of the play as restructured and interpreted by Strehler and its emotional capacity to affect the spectators both arise from what Althusser calls an immanent or *latent structure* of the dissociation of times, experiences, and imaginaries, which is not pedagogically *explained* to the spectators but is *inherent* in the antithetic visions of the silent crowds and the agitated protagonists and is communicated to the audience almost physically by virtue of the discrepancy of their respective rhythms and the heterogeneity of their actions.

In the second part of his article, Althusser uses the same idea of the latent heterogeneous structure—where the conflict endowed with a critical and political meaning is represented by the paradoxical display of a “non-relationship that is the relationship”—to propose a rectified interpretation of the critical function of Brecht's “epic theater.”⁵ He argues that in Brecht's major plays, particularly *Mother Courage* and *The Life of Galileo*, the critical effect does not proceed from a psychological phenomenon, which would be the “distanciation” of the spectator from the spectacle (“distanciation” being the word into which Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, literally, “effect of estrangement,” was rendered in French), allowing us to break our “identification” with the characters in the play in order to be able to criticize politically the society of which they are the products and the victims. Rather, the critical effect would come from the fact that the same kind of latent structure, a structure of disjunction or even disruption of consciousness, is incorporated in the scenario, the distribution of characters, situations, and actions, and therefore in the performance itself. It is this shift from psychology to structure, from intentionality to a latent dissociation of consciousness, that should be not only described but actively performed by the theater, giving rise to a critique of ideology that consists not in arguing discursively against its subjection to power or domination, but in making paradoxically “visible” or “perceptible” what is in principle invisible, namely, ideology's grip on the consciousnesses of its subjects (as well as the limits of this grip in certain situations of exception). This is what Althusser called the emergence of a materialist theater, where “materialist” has the sense of destitute of ideology. Note that the idea is very similar to what, in “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” Althusser also attributes to certain encounters with painting, except that—in the case of Cremonini—painting makes it (relatively) easier to understand what it means to display the invisible (or the relationship of subjects to their imaginary conditions of existence) because the alienated character of this invisible relationship is

allegorically displayed in the uncanny redoubling of mirrors, or the mirror-effect of inhuman pictures of the human. In the case of Strehler's theater, however, it is the *active* dimension of the critique that is (relatively) easier to understand, or the *transition from passivity to activity*, from powerlessness to empowerment, because a certain practice of the theater appears as a "machinery" or "dispositive" that has the power to *attract* the spectator's consciousness into its fictitious "world" only to *eject her into the real world* after it has been dislocated by the machine itself. The power of *fiction* is to dismantle or invert the *imaginary* in order to allow for the acknowledgment of the *real* and to produce a "real effect."

At this point, it would, of course, be interesting to discuss several questions of interpretation and criticism that are linked to the "dialectical" models between which Althusser is moving. An important point regards the exact nature of his relationship to the Brechtian doctrine of epic theater. This point is all the more intriguing because in a later text, "On Brecht and Marx," which remained unfinished but was published posthumously, Althusser drew an explicit parallel between Brecht's practice of theater and Marx's practice of philosophy, arguing that they both wanted not to overcome theater or philosophy but to introduce a dislocation or a "play," a disjointedness or out-of-jointedness, in the relationship between their constitutive elements that was the condition for their being turned around against the effects of the dominant ideology to which, in a sense, they still belonged.⁶ Put briefly, it seems to me that Althusser's intention was to use the lessons he would draw from Strehler's spectacle not only as a critical instrument against the dominant interpretation of Brecht's theater as "critical theater" but against Brecht's own consciousness of the critical mainspring of his theater, insisting in particular on techniques of distancing in the play of the actors. Much more important, of course, are the references to a system of Freudian concepts, even if freely used, which take their departure from the allusion to a "scenic" structure of the unconscious, where, according to Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "contradiction is ignored," which Althusser translates as "the opposites are simultaneously given" or "displayed" as if theater, or something of the theatrical machine, would bring into the open the—normally imperceptible—logic of the psychic conflict. This holds as well for the rather insistent—but never fully admitted—analogy between the process of the dissociation of ideological consciousness produced by the theater and a psychoanalytic cure, either a Freudian re-enactment of the libidinal fixations that allows their disentanglement or, even better, a Lacanian "crossing of the fantasy" (*traversée du fantasme*) that, during the

same period, as indicated by Safouan, Lacan was giving as the formula explaining what it means to achieve the goals of a cure. But probably the most interesting reference is to Hegel, whose dialectics of consciousness and self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is omnipresent in Althusser's text, where it nevertheless appears at the same time as both instrument and object of the critique. It is as if Althusser had wanted to explain that theater, by virtue of its spatial conversion of the structures of time and the shifting positions it assigns to its heterogeneous subjects, the actors and the spectators, paradoxically makes it possible to materialize the impossible, namely, the presentation of what Hegel called "the back of consciousness," or the scene on which its limitations and distortions are defined but also subject to refutation. From this point of view, Althusser's essay is an astonishing counter-Hegelian reformulation of Hegel himself.

Finally, although this account of Althusser's argument is truncated, it allows us, I believe, to understand a central point of Althusser's critique of ideology, which remains true throughout his successive attempts with different models and from which important consequences derive. This is the fact that what a "materialist" experience of theater (which is the experience of a "materialist" theatrical practice) provides is not so much a "representation" of the ideological phenomenon of *misrecognition* of the social reality (particularly class antagonisms), to which a materialist or scientific or communist "critical" consciousness, awakened among the audience in Brechtian fashion, could be opposed. But it is, rather, a *presentation* on the stage (in short, a *staging*) of the singular event or moment in which a "distanciation" (or "estrangement") with respect to *recognition*—therefore with the basic mechanism of ideological conviction or belief or subjection—is *taking place* as an action or a performance. In turn, the presentation of this action calls for a very special sort of participation, provided it is internally supported by the latent structure that attracts all the subjects and divides each of them.

Here we may remember that linguistic factors play a role: in French, *représentation* names both what the English call a "representation" and what they call a "performance" or a production (for a spectacle). But Althusser, following the Hegelian-Marxian terminology, is also thinking of the difference between a *Vorstellung*, which is cognitive and psychological, and a *Darstellung*, which is dialectical and theatrical. He suggests that the machine that makes the ideological fabric visible is also the one that forces a subject called a spectator to break with its conformism, if only momentarily or instantaneously. What derives from this is a strategic shift

in the understanding of critique. It is not, in fact, *recognition*, whether as acceptance of a belief or authority or as mimetic association with others, that is built on the basis of some “misrecognition” of reality, but just the reverse: misrecognition is made possible by the deep structure of recognition, the “specular” process taking place in the back of consciousness that is consciousness itself. Therefore, to break with the contents of the dominant ideology, or to liberate oneself from its power, from the “stories” that it tells us and has us tell ourselves permanently, always presupposes a capacity to disrupt recognition, in other words, one’s identity. To put it more clearly, it presupposes *situations* in which such a capacity is prompted, if not forced. But, according to Althusser’s description of his experience in the audience of Strehler’s production, “theater” is a social and aesthetic machine that not only shows how such a disruption or dislocation can happen but may make it happen. And this is because it duplicates (or iterates) the representation of the imaginary in a manner that may make it impossible to recompose. Such a theater, of course, is not the classical theater where, according to Althusser (who is, nevertheless, forced immediately to allow for “exceptions,” mentioning Shakespeare and Molière), the relationship between stage and audience is precisely a specular one, or one of ideological recognition, with the stage displaying for the audience its own idealized identity; and it is also not exactly the Brechtian “epic theater,” where it is supposed that the spectacle and the critical consciousness are divorced, repelling instead of attracting each other. Rather, it seems to be a disposition of several “scenes” on the stage (in French, it would be a single word: *des scènes sur la scène*) or, we might say, a “double installation,” whereby the spectator is brought on the scene in order for the scene to intrude into the consciousness of the spectator and produce aftereffects in her life. This is again the idea, or the metaphor, of a “distanciation” that is also a “dislocation,” which becomes a “displacement,” displacing “agency” as such or displacing the agents in order to displace their actions. We may call this the “play” in the mechanism or the farewell to identity and stability.

No doubt, there is something in Althusser’s text at the same time fascinating and enigmatic that various readers have tried to express (as I did myself). It is as if he were not just describing a mechanism or a process but recalling an experience, an interpellation: not the interpellation *of* (by) ideology, as he would later theorize, but the interpellation *out of ideology*, by “the real,” as it were, which is presented or embodied on the stage by the *character* called Nina and her opposition to the crowd. This is expressed in a quick but lyrical phrase at the end: “Je me retourne” (152). I turn back or I

look back. There is no rupture with ideology that is not accomplished in the first person, that is, as a subject, denoting a *conversion* in both the physical and the spiritual sense. But this takes place because theater forces a subject to identify in a contradictory manner, simultaneously, with antithetic “others” who nevertheless appear the same as oneself: in this case, “we,” who eat “the same bread” and share “the same history” as the poor on the stage, and “she,” the rebel whose instant rage against the myths of reconciliation we come to adopt. This is why Althusser is so insistent on the “unresolved alterity” that lies at the heart of such a dramaturgy, but also why he remains attached, more than ever, to the dramatic image provided by Hegel—that of a consciousness fatefully turned against itself: “Hegel was right: [the hero’s] destiny was consciousness of himself as of an enemy” (147).

Moses or Caesar: Politics of Ideology

What I want to offer now is not exactly another general presentation of the topic of subject-formation in Althusser’s well-known essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” which remains, perhaps, of all his contributions to critical theory, the most frequently discussed and referred to in our academic programs. This essay has an interesting characteristic: although its internal aporias, or perhaps its weaknesses, are repeatedly indicated, the general theme of the essay, and particularly the specific “performative” effect to which Althusser attributed the name “interpellation,” keeps returning in reflections that combine the two issues covered, in French as well as English and other “Latin” languages (English being, in this case, also a Latin language) by such terms as “subjection” and “subjectivation.” This is what I have called elsewhere the great historical wordplay, or portmanteau word of European transcendental philosophy, namely, the conjunction of self-reference, or identification of the subject, and subjection to power or authority, therefore a phenomenon of constitutive domination (Balibar, “Citizen”).

Among the many commentaries, of course, I single out Judith Butler’s detailed discussion in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where Althusser’s notion of interpellation occupies the whole of chapter 4 and returns in other chapters, counterposing Freud and Foucault.⁷ I do this for two reasons: the first is that Butler particularly emphasizes the *circular* character of the mechanism, or the ideal model of subject-formation, which is subsumed by Althusser under the formula “Ideology interpellates individuals as (or perhaps better: into) subjects.” The circle comes from the fact that within the

field that Althusser is describing there is no way to identify what “individuals” are, if not as already existing subjects, so that the effect presupposes its own result. This is immediately illustrated in the allegorical scene through which Althusser introduces his notion, that of an individual hailed in a street, from behind, by a police officer who simply calls “Hey, you there!,” immediately prompting a reaction from the individual who turns back or looks back (*il se retourne*) as if he were already certain that he is exactly the person interpellated; this would show that the elementary mechanism of recognition, associated with an originary guilt, is presupposed by the constitution of ideology. But interestingly, Butler does not see this as a weakness of the model *per se*; on the contrary, she interprets it—rightly in my opinion—as an indication of the fact that Althusser is assuming the circularity, describing a retroactive effect and more generally analyzing what she calls a *tropological space*, playing on two meanings of the word *trope*: First, as a rhetorical figure or an effect of discourse but also etymologically a conversion or an action of turning oneself—in this case toward the figure that one was already but that was located, so to speak, behind one’s back. The second is that, having assumed a circularity beyond what Althusser himself recognizes, Butler feels able to suggest a way out of what most readers have perceived as the utterly deterministic and for that reason also fatalistic character of Althusser’s account of subject formation, or recognition of the subject that one was already, which seems to allow for no margin of interpretation, no line of escape—except for a tragic notation in passing, where Althusser refers to the fact that there are “bad subjects” who refuse to turn around, to answer the call of the subjecting authority, at the risk, in fact, of their lives or their mental integrity. Butler’s solution, as we know, is based on the idea that if a trope or a discursive gesture needs to be actually enacted and reiterated again and again to assert its power (as Althusser indicates a little later by provocatively borrowing from Pascal a “materialist” model of the creation of belief through the infinite reiteration of ritual gestures of subjection in the practice of prayer, whether physical or mental), this reiteration by its very nature also involves a possibility of disturbance or trouble (*subject trouble*, as it were), even the possibility of a *reversal* that she calls “counter-interpellation.”⁸

This poses important problems, both from the point of view of an internal interpretation of Althusser’s argument and from the point of view of the political meaning of the whole idea of “interpellation”—I am tempted to say simply the *politics* that is engaged by the fact that one refers the power of ideology to this kind of performative effect. It seems to me that Butler’s

rewriting of Althusser's model, arising from a deep understanding of the structure of the "scene," is made possible by the fact that, like most commentators outside of Marxist theory, she focuses on the *second half* of Althusser's essay, which describes the "ideological mechanism," leaving aside the first half, where Althusser defines the function of ideology as a "reproduction of the relations of production" ("Ideology" 148), that is, a reproduction of the type of subjectivity and identity that is necessary for individuals to work as "voluntary" bearers of an exploited or subjected labor force. More precisely, it is as if Butler had kept a formal notion of "reproduction," understood as repetition or reiteration, to import it into the field of discourses and affects, leaving aside its relationship to *production* in the Marxist sense. It is important to recall here that Althusser's essay—in fact, a *collage* or product of cutting and pasting portions of an unfinished manuscript—really consists of two separate parts, widely different in style and object, whose enigmatic unity was indicated in the original text through a series of dotted lines and which precisely generated the fruitful character of the essay because they made it impossible for interpreters to use or discuss it without transforming it. Once again, important translation effects are at play here, since in French *répétition* also means "rehearsal" of a performance and thus, in a sense, always already takes place on a stage, whereas the standard equivalent in German, *Wiederholung*, is also for us indissolubly associated with the Freudian problematic of the death drive and its symbolic effects. No wonder, of course, that in a highly overdetermined gesture, Butler titled her chapter on Althusser with a parody of a famous phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Conscience doth make subjects of us all" (3.1). She would thus indicate that Althusser's seemingly marginal remark in the essay, *à la cantonade*, referring to his description of the policeman's interpellation as "my little theoretical theater," should be taken entirely seriously and pursued as an investigation of its structure and prerequisites.

This is what I want to do myself, in a manner that is partly complementary, partly divergent from hers, by returning to Althusser's text and trying to extricate more of its intrinsic dramaturgy to suggest a possible *displacement* of the reading that is made possible by the insertion of the essay in its context. Let me first recall that the circularity of the procedure of interpellation "as subjects" and the theatrical "element" in which the model is located, namely, the fact that such "actions" as interpellation (and *nomination*, "calling" in the double sense, to begin with) and answer, response, responding, and assuming responsibility are clearly always taking place *on a stage*. This is the whole problem with the issue of the institutional

“conditions” of possibility of performative statements, namely, the fact that the speakers must *play their roles*. But here, with the question of the effectivity of interpellations, we are immediately forced to take into account a much wider spectrum of experiences, social forms, and institutions, where the theatrical stage at the same time occurs as a *general model* for the staging of discourse and as *one case* among many others, where the “scenes” are not only located in theaters but also in civic spaces, agoras, tribunals, temples, private meetings, and ceremonies, or also metaphorically on the “world’s stage,” which is the encompassing space for the staging of life and the assumption of roles, *personae* in Latin, which also means “masks.” So we can see that Althusser (and Butler) are in fact taking part in a very long tradition, offering *variations*, as it were, of a theme, the *theatrum mundi*, that has a long existence in philosophy and art from the Stoics to Shakespeare and Descartes, and indeed in Hegel, Marx, Freud. On the other hand, returning to the aporia that is widely identified by readers in Althusser’s “scene of ideology,” or model of the ideological mechanism as a scene of interpellation, what I want to emphasize is the fact that this aporia is not separable from the assumption that Althusser’s explanations have a *political* intention, that they are supposed to indicate why processes of *reproduction* of the social order and the social structure, based on certain forms of domination, are cemented by ideology, whose intrinsic coherence would act as a *guarantee* for the class relationship. At the same time, this “ideological reproduction” would form a place of revolutionary intervention, marking not a deterministic necessity but rather an intrinsic fragility or contingency. Now the fact is that as it is presented in the text, the mechanism of the ideological constitution of subjects, or the transformation of individuals into subjects, which has always already taken place since there is no *originary place outside of ideology*, is a mechanism that offers no way out (“Ideology” 175). Even the “bad subjects” are trapped—perhaps more than the others.

It is quite clear to me that Althusser’s description is deeply influenced by Freud’s analysis of the “identification processes” that shape, at the same time, the ideal construction of the ego-ideal and the formation of social groups or “masses” (*Massenbildungen*).⁹ But Freud’s analysis leaves no room, except madness, for a subjectivity that would become liberated from every identification, and this is also formally the case in Althusser. There is “freedom,” of course, but only in the sense of *shifting from one identification, one interpellation*, to another, for instance letting oneself become interpellated and subjectively constituted by the “Revolution” instead of the “State” or the “Nation” or the “Market” or the “Republic” or, indeed, “God.” There

is no “anarchic” freedom in the sense of living, thinking, and acting in the void, the absence of every interpellation, every ideal, that Freud calls an ideal object of love, and Althusser a “Subject” with a capital S. It could be argued that this other circularity, the infinite circularity of the imaginary “Others” from which, qua subjects, we expect interpellation, forming like a prison with many cells and no release, reflects the deep pessimism that invaded Althusser (and others) after ’68. But it should be noticed as well that he doesn’t say (and in fact nothing in his text says) that different interpellations, which *have the same ideological structure, the structure of “ideology in general,”* produce the same historical and political effects. The theory doesn’t say that the political effects are the same if your model of interpellation is patriotism or internationalism or the Subject is God as inflexible Legislator or God as suffering Servant. Perhaps it says just the opposite: that the effect remains essentially *indeterminate* until it becomes determined in a given conjuncture, both by the internal “logic” of the specific discourse of interpellation and by the external conditions of its insertion into the processes of reproduction of the existing order—a combination in which there must probably always remain something *aleatory* or contingent. It remains now to be seen if this could be investigated by means of a fuller use of the “dramaturgic” model that, in agreement with Butler, I have identified in the text.

The first element that I find striking in Althusser’s examples of interpellation concerns his insistence on the *staging of the voice* that “interpellates” the subject as a voice whose origin—or, if you like, whose speaking “mouth”—is concealed or *hiding*, not only behind a *mask* as in the ancient model of the *persona*, which keeps governing so much classical reflection on the theater (including Diderot’s and Brecht’s theories on the *paradoxe du comédien* and the “distanciating techniques” borrowed from non-Western theater),¹⁰ but behind a *veil* or a *curtain* (or a *cloud*), which is the veil of transcendence. To put it better so as to keep within the limits of a “materialist” description of the theatrical machinery: it is the veiling effect that produces an effect of transcendence, the effect of *withdrawing the origin* of the interpellation, removing the possibility of identifying an author, except through the tautologies asserting his authority. *I am who I am*, says the voice that interpellates Moses from behind the Burning Bush. Here, of course, we need to move from one “theater” to another, from the everyday scenes of authority, identification, and interpellation to the grand historical and cosmic scene where the source of the dominant ideologies—perhaps only the dominant ideologies *of the West*, which are based on a certain representation of the Law—are traditionally staged. And this produces two

consequences. The first consequence is that the concealment of the origin of the voice becomes part of a generic machine, the *Machine*, as it were, that will have to be indefinitely reproduced *within* the ideological world, at the same time setting the pattern that everyday interpellations reiterate. (All judges and police officers stage their interpellation in order to reenact the arch-interpellation of the Law; each priest or pastor stages his admonitions as repetitions of the Revelation; *each of us* stages the “voice of conscience” in the internal theater as one that speaks unconditionally but from nowhere.) And second, it means that the little subjects cannot receive the voice, respond to it, or transmit it to others without *filling the void* with some sort of imaginary, if only the projection of their own desire for subjection. This is why Althusser explains that a new *circle* must take place: that of the imagination of the Other Subject by whose mediation or intermediary a given ideology would interpellate individuals as *its* subjected subjects. This circle—which is a circularity between the stage and the backstage or a re-creation of a backstage each time a subject imagines herself called by (and toward) a transcendent Subject (that is, a power whose authority is beyond contestation or even comprehension)—is theatrical in its very nature, but it is also *fragile* in the sense that, circumstances permitting, it arouses skepticism and rebellion or heresy as easily as obedience and devotion.

Here we think of Lacan (whom Althusser had partly read), of course, and his thesis (since the Seminar on psychoses from 1955–56) that “there is no Other of the Other” which would warrant it—except that, as we know, Althusser’s thesis, right or wrong, was always that the symbolic orders of authority and law are no more than formations crystallizing the social imaginary. The stronger inspiration of this model, in fact, which the reference to Moses clearly indicates, is the description and interpretation of the revelation on Mount Sinai proposed by Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is from there that Althusser may have borrowed not only the idea that the Prophet or Legislator can enunciate the Law as an Absolute only on the condition of adapting his own imaginary to the dominant imaginary of the people or the mass (an idea that we will retrieve in Althusser’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s *Prince*) but also the idea that the *interpellated* Legislator or Mediator can transmit the interpellation that he has received to those for whom it is ultimately destined (that is, ordinary men, the people or the “herd”) only at the risk that this challenge may *backfire* onto the imagination of the originary voice, or the Hidden Mouth itself—as in the episode of the Golden Calf (another staging, or form of “performative reversal”). Perhaps Althusser does not entirely say this, but his

example, with the religious and philosophical connotations that it carries, says it for him. And this, of course, is where we could locate his own virtual introduction of a counterinterpellation, or the idea of a “play” that *diverges* in an unpredictable manner from the written script.

But to this we must now add another element. If we reassemble the separated developments of the two “parts” in the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) essay—the one on “social reproduction” of the structures of domination and the one on “interpellation of individuals as subjects” through the mediation of an imaginary Subject (or Other)—we reach the supposition that there is indeed *someone or something*, some “force,” acting behind the scene or, rather, behind the theater itself (perhaps in some hidden box, as in Walter Benjamin’s allegory of the automaton chess player of Maelzel). This instance or agency, in Althusser’s conception, is *the state* in its broad or generic sense—that of a concentrated political power securing the reproduction of the dominant class structure and also, we are led to understand, *selecting the individuals* within society to return them as “subjects” adapted to their productive functions. This would be a banal Marxist (or, more generally, anti-authoritarian) indictment of the political function of the state as instrument of class domination if it were not for a strange internal dislocation: the State, like God himself, is efficient in “identifying” its own subjects and imposing on them the circularity of recognition *only* on the condition of *withdrawing* from any visible place in the process or the circuit of reproduction. This is particularly developed in a later text: a public lecture delivered in Grenada, Spain, in 1976, with the title “The Transformation of Philosophy,” where Althusser explains that the ideological power of the state lies in imposing on the subject’s consciousness a “unity” or “identity” that it does not necessarily possess at all but is always *supposed to possess*. In order to be active within reproduction as an “ideological power,”¹¹ the State must in fact be *absent* from the processes of reproduction—or it must, like the Freudian unconscious, according to Lacan, be acting (that is, it must think, or make think) “where it is not . . .”

You will say: this transposition of the structuralist idea of the “absent cause” into an allegory of the power that dislocates or “decenters” itself in order to remain an empty place of attraction for the imagination of the subjects does not really solve the *political* problem of liberation *from ideology* as such. At the very best, it indicates in political-theological terms where a counterinterpellation or a heretical gesture could “interrupt” the play, deviate it, or “cut” into it. But on the other side—the “Marxist” side, we might say—it seems to introduce a redoubtable *dilemma*: since the

mechanism of “interpellation” from which derives the imaginary circle of specularity, binding together the Big Subject and the little subjects, therefore the hypothesis of the “absent State” installing the machine for its own retreat, is presented as a description of “ideology in general,” independent of historical transformations (or “eternal,” as Althusser writes provocatively in the same essay), would this mean that we should look elsewhere for an *interpellation without a State*? Or should we admit that the “State” is just as eternal as ideology itself, albeit perhaps with other names and other forms of organization, such as—why not?—“Revolution” or “Communist Party”? Would “Revolution” perhaps be the new name of the State, thus calling indefinitely for its own “counterinterpellations” or “revolutions within the revolution,” not to say “counterrevolutions”?

It is here that, to provide an ultimate *décalage*, I want to refer to the posthumous book *Machiavelli and Us*. With the exception of some marginal corrections and additions, it was written mainly between 1972 and 1976 and then kept private by Althusser (who would show it only to a few friends and interlocutors).¹² I have written previously that this was in a sense Althusser’s *point d’honneur* during a period of bitter struggles, of personal and political misfortunes, and of failed attempts to adapt orthodox Marxist categories to an increasingly escaping reality. It is a book that has the same stylistic qualities, sharp and passionate, as only one or two others in Althusser’s career (the book on Montesquieu and the *For Marx* collection, in particular). But what interests me more in this circumstance is the fact that it provides a transformation of the problematic of the ISAS, which is also a way of once again rewriting the dramaturgy of ideology and its internal tensions. Considering Machiavelli’s *Prince* from the beginning as a *work of art* but also an *artifice* or a textual “machine” that “grips us” readers (“Il nous saisit”)—that is, it interpellates us today (as it did in the past for Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel, and others) and leaves us uncertain and troubled with respect to its exact intentions—Althusser would also suggest that not only had Machiavelli written his book *in the conjuncture*, under its specific constraints and urgencies (which, according to him, is very different from writing *on the conjuncture*), but he can also only be read *in a conjuncture*, where, depending on the specific problems of the time, it will produce incommensurable effects. The “theaters” involved here are theaters of politics, which also very much resemble *theaters of war* in a generalized sense.

Let us now jump directly to the final section of *Machiavelli and Us*, called “The Political Practice of the New Prince.” What we find there is not only a speculation on the uncertain combinations of *fortuna* and *virtù*

in the aleatory situations of history, but the idea that this “war” (whether a “war of movement” or a “war of position”) essentially presupposes the invention of a politics of ideology. This is linked with a presentation of the prince (or rather the *new Prince*, who *inaugurates* a regime of power and seeks to stabilize it) that makes him neither the embodiment of the State, the bearer of the monarchic or presidential function exercising *leadership*, nor a “Legislator” in the ancient sense, repeatedly discussed in political theory after the privileged example of Moses. Rather, the new Prince is presented as an *agent* who is also an *actor* on the historical stage. And in fact this is possible only because he is at the same time the *director* who sets the stage for his own *acting* or *performing*. This is necessary because, according to Machiavelli as Althusser reads him, the determining element in securing “national” support for his own power and project is the capacity to change, channel, and control the *opinion of the people*. More precisely, what matters is the opinion of the *majority of the people*, which is always made of ordinary, relatively poor people (the *popolo minuto* of the Italian cities, as opposed to the rich and the noble class, the *popolo grasso*). It is the opinion or representation that the people have acquired of the person and the actions of the Prince, therefore the “figure” of the Prince as a ruler in the imagination of the people, that is decisive for the success of his own action—as long as it can last (which, as we know, is never *ad infinitum*). This leads Althusser to insist on the fact that, in the Prince’s *art*, which aims not so much at attracting the *love* of his subjects (a highly ambivalent affect, easily turned into its opposite) but rather at inspiring *fear without hatred*, the Prince must be able to “play” in public with his own passions, to offer them for elaboration in the imaginary of the people (we are tempted to say identification and counteridentification). A very difficult task indeed, which seems to require quite antithetic capacities and dispositions: a political passion subjecting the other passions (including the passion for power, riches, and admiration), on the one hand, and a “ruse of the ruse,” on the other, indicating *when to feign and when not to feign*, or, in other words, when to speak the truth and when not to speak the truth to the people—following a “rule of veridiction and dissimulation,” *norma veri et falsi*, we are tempted to say with Spinoza (another careful reader of Machiavelli). But the ultimate condition, according to Althusser’s reading, remains an *objective* one, albeit one entirely located in the *material field of ideology*: this is the negative condition of never offending the “general ideology” of the poor, the ordinary people, which is defined here as religion and morality, or the idea of the holy and the idea of justice.

Let me conclude briefly by saying that this new description sketches a “politics of ideology” in the double sense of the genitive (using ideology itself as an instrument in the field of ideological formations) based on the perception of its subjective constitution. It could be defined, therefore, as a play with interpellation and the limits of interpellation. Clearly, it is “aleatory” both in its conditions and its results: this is a politics without guarantee, hence without certainty. The most interesting question to ask, however, concerns its political orientation in terms of where this kind of “autonomy of the political” would lead: whether toward the *conservation* of or a *revolution* in the existing social order. In fact, it is certainly not “conservative.” Althusser was continually returning with more or less sympathetic feelings to Gramsci’s attempts to “translate” Machiavelli into the language of a revolutionary strategy for the contemporary Communist Party endowed with a “hegemonic” capacity. He was also an avid reader of Montaigne’s and Pascal’s considerations on the costuming of magistrates and a commentator of seventeenth-century theorists of the *apparatus of the state* in the sense of pomp and ceremony (whence he may have borrowed his terminology as much as from Marx’s and Lenin’s “State apparatus”), combining thus a machinery and a show. It seems to me that his reading of Machiavelli has certain affinities, on a different terrain, with Benjamin’s distinction between “mythical” and “divine” violence (an author he certainly had not read), except that here what is at stake is conservative versus disruptive uses of the imaginary, or the collective figurations of ideology. But none of this, it seems to me, entirely resolves the “aporia” of an action of the masses (or the people) *upon their own imaginary* that would use the artifices of visualization and representation in order to orient it toward actions that are in their own interest, following ideals in which they believe—without believing “blindly,” as it were, or in which they believe *with a distance*. The difficulty seems to be the same as the one already encountered by Spinoza at the end of the *Theological-Political Treatise* when asking how it could be possible that a “power of the multitude” not be terrorized by the multitude, or by the enormity of its own power.

This allows me a final, very formal remark. In a sense, what I have read in two series of texts was, first, a description of *theater as politics* and, then, an attempt at conceptualizing *politics as theater*. In both cases, what appears is that the key—or *one key*, but an important one—to understanding Althusser’s ruminations about ideology lies in the fact that, for him, *ideology is always already a dramaturgy*. History appears not only as a succession of “modes of production” but as a series of “productions”

in the sense of performances, where one *staging* (or *mise-en-scène*) can become corrected and its effects transformed only through another *mise-en-scène*, and so on indefinitely. He had written toward the end of the preface to *Reading Capital* that, from a materialist point of view, “history” should be conceived as “a theater without an author.” I am not sure whether this was Marx’s view—not so much because of the repudiation of the “author,” but because of the “theater,” although it is striking to see how often Marx speaks in terms of stages, scenes, intrigues, and genres, notably in the famous assertion that historical events always occur twice, “first as tragedy, then as farce.”¹⁵ But it was certainly one of Althusser’s obsessions. And he may have fancied himself at times not as an author (I believe that he hated authorship as much as Foucault did, if not more), but as a *metteur en scène*, a stage director in the field of theory or in the field of that specific politics of ideology with which he identified philosophy under the name of “class struggle in theory,” a director whose action is incorporated and occulted in his own production (“Philosophy” 19–21).

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Notes

- 1 See Butler, *Psychic and Excitable*; de Ípola; Lahtinen; Montag, *Althusser*; Morfino; Žižek.
- 2 A complete history of the Cremonini essay’s elaboration, along with an analysis of its relationship to other “encounters” between French philosophers and painting mediated by politics, can be found in Sarah Wilson’s beautiful book *The Visual World of French Theory*.
- 3 See Bargu; Howlett; Montag, *Louis*; Sibertin-Blanc.
- 4 “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” first appeared as a separate essay in the journal *La Pensée* in 1970. This is the text that has been used and discussed for years (as translated into English by Ben Brewster and published in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* in 1971). The longer manuscript from which it was extracted has been published posthumously in French as *Sur la reproduction* and translated into English by G. M. Goshgarian as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. I use the original French version here and have retranslated quotations from it.
- 5 It can be recalled here that Brecht, who had created his own theater in East Berlin, Das Berliner Ensemble, after leaving the United States under the pressure of the McCarthy prosecutions, had come to Paris in 1955 on a tour with

- Mother Courage* and other plays, where he had been hailed by the left intelligentsia, particularly Roland Barthes in an enthusiastic series of articles, as the bearer of a genuine aesthetic “revolution.” For a complete set of references to the articles written by Barthes on Brecht and an illuminating commentary, see Carmody.
- 6 I am relying here on the commentary offered by Warren Montag in his first book on Althusser, *Louis Althusser*.
- 7 See also Butler, *Excitable*. On Butler’s reading of Althusser, see Macherey.
- 8 See Butler, *Psychic* 109, 129–31. See also Butler’s introduction to *Excitable*.
- 9 Althusser’s personal notes on Freud’s *Massen* are dated the same year as the writing of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. See note 4.
- 10 See Barthes; von Held.
- 11 “The State is the first ideological power,” Engels wrote in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.
- 12 I was not one of them, hence my surprise when it was published after his death in 1994.
- 13 From Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

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