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Althusser's dramaturgy and the critique of ideology

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How should we explain that, in certain languages at least (notably English, Italian, Spanish), a renewed interest is taking place for the works and ideas of Louis Althusser, a philosopher widely known as “inventor” of the “structuralist” brand of Marxism in the 1960’s and 70’s, who died in 1990, but had already retreated from the public and intellectual scene in 1980, when, in a scandalous episode of criminal madness, he had 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 the last years several scholars of various generations - some who knew Althusser personally, or had met him, like Emilio de Ipola, others who knew him indirectly through common friends and professors like Warren Montag or Vittorio Morfino, or “simply” encountered him in the course of their investigations, like Judith Butler, Slavoj Zizek, Mikko Lahtinen, have published an impressive amount of commentaries and interpretations, which 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 which are indeed very far from us today.¹ As you probably know, these new readings were to a large extent made possible by the fact that posthumous publications of Althusser’s writings has considerably added to the existing corpus, expanding his work in many different directions, making his relationship to

¹ References to publications

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 in a conjuncture which I believe makes it possible to understand better what formed the convergent interests but also the deep fractures within the “philosophical season” of the 1960’s in Europe. The time for learned academic commentary has come, no doubt, but also unexpected turns of intellectual history, and political history in the broad sense, took place, which have largely neutralized the effects of a philosophical reaction which – perhaps prematurely – had 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 you 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 a lever of his project of destabilizing Marxism from the inside. There was no doubt at the time that a critique of ideology formed the core of the idea of “historical materialism”, but 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, 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 struck me in particular in recent commentaries of Althusser was particularly the place, apparently disproportionate with the dimensions of the texts, which was now granted to some writings of Althusser about *art*, particularly theater and painting. What is proposed to us is not to read them as *applications* of theory within a particular field (say aesthetics or culture), it is to 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 proper to him (remember in particular Lyotard’s use of Duchamp, or Deleuze’s use of

Proust and Kafka, or Derrida's use 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 terms, 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* which form the essence of ideology, *and* a "performative" gesture allowing it 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 that not art *in general*, as an institution or a cultural phenomenon, but specific works of art in specific circumstances only make possible.

I can immediately mention two major examples, which are drawn from essays written in the same crucial years between 1961 and 1965 when what would become known as "Althusserianism" was taking shape. The first is an essay from 1965-1966 on the canvasses of his friend, the Italian painter Leonardo Cremonini, called "Cremonini, painter of the Abstract", to which I will only, with regret, make a quick reference today.² The second (chronologically first) is the essay (published first in 1962, then included as a chapter in *For Marx*, 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 remarked, somewhat blindly, that it formed like the "geometrical and theoretical center" of

² The article is translated into English in the volume *Lenin and philosophy and other essays (references)*. A complete history of its elaboration along with an analysis of its relationship to other "encounters" between French philosophers and painting, mediated by politics, can be found in the beautiful recent book by Sarah Wilson: *The Visual World of French Theory*, Yale University Press 2010

the book, although never acknowledged and treated as such.³ This is no longer the case, after fascinating commentaries have been produced in particular by Marc-Vincent Howlett, Warren Montag, Banu Bargu, and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc.⁴ It is from this essay that I want to start again in order to sketch a more general problematic, or rather - following an example which was provided by Althusser himself in his essay on Rousseau (*The Social Contract*) – an aporetic trajectory in which, through successive *décalages*, he would move from one way of articulating theater, politics, and ideology. From the essay “Il Piccolo”, 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”,⁵ 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 the bourgeois society, but 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 68, Althusser embarked on the project of sketching a “general theory” of ideologies, whose best known result is the essay from 1970 on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” where the central notion (which is also a metaphor) is “interpellation”. I will also suggest, through recourse to the posthumous book *Machiavelli and Us*, whose manuscript was essentially completed in the immediately following years, 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 aporia was through a new philosophical detour: this time not through Spinoza but through Machiavelli,

³ Reference EB Préface de la réédition de *Pour Marx*

⁴ references

⁵ See English translation in Warren Montag: *Louis Althusser*, Routledge

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 article on *Il Piccolo Teatro*, which could be useful, but also 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 which was touring Europe after being inaugurated in the city of Milan. It should be recalled that, in the post-war period, in Italy, France, Britain, Germany, theater was a popular art mixing high cultural and, most of the time, political ambitions, with a genuine appeal to not only 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, with not only the vicissitudes of the Cold War, the interrupted “de-Stalinization” of the Communist bloc, but the dramatic developments of the colonial wars of liberation. Giorgio Strehler, an Italian director of Italian-Austrian origin, who had founded just after the war *Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano*, was already considered one of the greatest figures of European Theater. He was not a “Brechtian”, although he had offered remarkable performances of some plays of Brecht, particularly a famous *Life of Galileo*. He presented in Paris in 1962 an adaptation of a relatively obscure “realist” Italian playwright from the late 19th century, *El Nost Milan* by Carlo Bertolazzi, which described, rather than properly narrated, the story of a young poor girl from the slums who, after being raped by some rascal who thereafter was murdered by her loving father, abandons the father when he is about to be jailed, apparently to look for money in the “real” world, i.e. to become a prostitute. The spectacle had been scorned as bad melodrama by the critic, but Althusser’s lengthy and elaborated interpretation rehabilitated it

and, by the same token, played an important role in aesthetic discussions of the time around realism, critique and irony in art (in France this was also the height of the blossoming of the avant-garde theater of the “absurd”, with Beckett and Ionesco). Althusser and Strehler became friends and had some other encounters in Italy in the following years.

Althusser’s article essentially 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 reproducing 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 sub-proletarians, 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 he writes (retrieving an old category of classical theater) “in the wings”, *à la cantonade*, the dramatic moments of conflict between the idealist generosity of the father and the cynicism of the rascal, for whom the daughter will decide (albeit after his death), in the form of a spectacular transgression of human feelings, which is also shown on stage as an escape from the night of impotent dreams into the risky violence of the day: “Erect, Nina goes out into the day light”. 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, but also its emotional power on the spectators, arises 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”.⁶ 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 through which Brecht’s *Verfremdungs-Effekt*, literally “effect of estrangement”, had been rendered into French), allowing us to break our “identification” with the characters in the play, in order to become able to criticize politically the society of which they are the products and the victims. But 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, 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 does not consist in arguing against its subjection to power or domination, but in making paradoxically “visible” what is in the principle invisible, namely ideology’s grip on the consciousnesses of its subjects (but also the limits of this grip in certain situations of exception). This is what Althusser called the emergence of a materialist

⁶ It can be recalled here that Brecht himself, who had created his own theater in East Berlin, *Das Berliner Ensemble*, after leaving the US under the pressure of the McCarthy prosecutions, had come in a tour to Paris in 1955 with *Mother Courage* and other plays, where he had been hailed by the left intelligentsia, particularly Roland Barthes in an enthusiastic series of articles [references], as the bearer of a genuine aesthetic “revolution”.

theater, where materialist has just the sense of a destitution of ideology. Note that the idea is very similar to what, in the article on *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 the subjects to their imaginary conditions of existence), because the alienated character of this invisible relationship is allegorically displayed in the uncanny redoubling of the mirrors, or the mirror-effect of inhuman pictures of the human, whereas in the case of Strehler's theater, 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” which has the power to *attract* the spectator's consciousness into its fictitious “world”, only to *reject her into the real world* after it has been dislocated by the machine itself. It is, thus, the power of *fiction* to dismantle or invert the *imaginary* in order to allow for the acknowledgment of the *real* and produce a “real effect”.

At this point, it would be of course interesting to discuss several questions of interpretation and criticism which are linked to the “dialectical” models between which Althusser is moving. An important point, of course, regards the exact nature of his relationship to the Brechtian doctrine of the epic theater. This point is all the more intriguing because, in a later text, *On Brecht and Marx*, remained unfinished but published posthumously, Althusser drew an explicit parallel between Brecht's practice of the 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.⁷ 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 the techniques of distanciation 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 turn 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-enacting of the libidinal fixations which allows it to disentangle them, or even better a Lacanian "crossing of the fantasy" (*traversée du fantasme*), which, along the same period, Lacan was giving as the formula explaining what it means to achieve the goals of a cure.⁸ But the most interesting reference, probably, is to Hegel, whose dialectics of consciousness and self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is omnipresent in the text, where it nevertheless appears as the same time as 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, makes it paradoxically 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

⁷ I am relying continuously here on the commentary offered by Warren Montag in his first book on Althusser (*Louis Althusser*, Routledge).

⁸ References (and commentary by Safouan)

this point of view, Althusser's essay is an astonishing counter-Hegelian reformulation of Hegel itself.

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 the help of 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 the class antagonisms), to which a materialist, or scientific, or communist "critical" consciousness, awoken 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. And in turn it is the presentation of this action which calls for a very special sort of participation, provided it is internally supported by the latent structure that attracts the subjects and divides them.

Here we may remember that linguistic factors play a role: in French, "representation" 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 which make 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 an 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 terms one’s identity. Better said, 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, nevertheless, is 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 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. What it seems to be is a disposition of several “scenes” on the stage (in French it would be a single word: *des scènes sur la scène*) or, if you like, a “double installation” whereby the spectator is brought on the scene, in order for the scene to be intruding in the consciousness of the spectator, and producing after-effects in her life. This is again the idea, or the metaphor, of a “distanciation” which is also a “dislocation”, to become 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.

There is something, no doubt, at the same time fascinating but also enigmatic in Althusser's text, which various readers have tried to express (and I did it 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 theorized by him later, 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", I turn back or I look back. There is no rupture with ideology that is not accomplished in the first person, i.e. 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 as the same with 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 remains attached, more than ever, to the dramatic image provided by Hegel, that of a consciousness fatefully turned against itself: "Hegel was right: his destiny [that of the hero] was consciousness of himself as of an enemy".

Moses or Cesar: politics of ideology

What I want to offer now is not exactly another general presentation of the topic "subject-formation" in Althusser's well-known essay on "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. It 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 he attributed the name “interpellation”, keeps returning in reflections which combine the two issues covered, in French as well as English and other “Latin” languages (English is, in this case, also a Latin language) by such terms as “subjection” and “subjectivation” (what I called in another place 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 to authority, therefore a phenomenon of constitutive domination.⁹

Among the many commentaries, of course, I single out Judith Butler’s detailed discussion in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where it occupies the whole of chapter 4 and returns in others, in contraposition to Freud and Foucault.¹⁰ I do this in particular 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 allegoric 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!”, 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 the right 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 *per se* a weakness of the model, on the contrary she interprets it – rightly in my opinion – as indication of the fact that Althusser is assuming the

⁹ Reference EB on « subject »

¹⁰ References (including *Excitable Speech*). On Butler’s reading of Althusser, see Pierre Macherey

circularity, describing a retroactive effect, and more generally analyzing what she call a *tropological space*, playing herself on two meanings of the word “trope”: a rhetorical figure or an effect of discourse, but also etymologically a conversion or an action of turning oneself – in this case towards the figure that one was already, but which was located so to speak in one’s back. The second is that, having assumed the circularity beyond what Althusser had recognized himself, she 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 life 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, 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* which she calls “counter-interpellation”.

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 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, that which describes the

“ideological mechanism”, leaving aside the first, where Althusser defines the function of ideology as a “reproduction of the social relations of production”, more precisely a reproduction of the type of subjectivity and identity that is necessary for individuals to work as “voluntary” bearers of an exploited or subjected labour 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, but 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 manuscript¹¹, really consists of two separated 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 made the fruitful character of the essay, because they made it impossible for interpreters to use it or discuss it without transforming it. It should be recalled as well that, once again, important translation effects are at play here, since in French “repetition” also means “rehearsal” of a performance, thus in a sense always already takes place on a stage, but in German the standard equivalent, *Wiederholung*, is also for us indissolubly associated with the Freudian problematic of the death drive and its symbolic effects. No wonder, of course, if in a highly overdetermined gesture, Butler titled her chapter on Althusser with a parody of a famous phrase in Hamlet: “Conscience doeth make subjects of us all”. 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 and suggest a possible *displacement* of the reading which is made

¹¹ (now published in French as *Sur la reproduction*, and also in English, translated by Michael Goshgarian)

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 role*, 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 place 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 Hegel, Marx, Freud. On the other hand, returning to the aporia which 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, 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 the subjects, or “transformation of the 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. 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 “identification processes”, which shape, at the same time, the ideal construction of the ego-ideal and the formation of social groups or “masses” (*Massenbildungen*).¹² 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 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 which 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

¹² Reference to the personal notes of Althusser on Freud’s *Massen*, dated the same year as the writing of *On Reproduction*

a given conjuncture, both by the internal “logic” of the specific discourse of interpellation, and 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 of the 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)¹³, but behind a *veil* or a *curtain* (or a *cloud*), which is the veil of transcendence. Let’s say better – in order 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, which 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

¹³ Reference Barthes and Phoebe von Held

stage their interpellation in order to re-enact 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” on 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* by some sort of imaginary, if only the projection of their own desire. 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 recreates a backstage each time a subject imagines herself called by (and towards) a transcendent Subject (i.e. a power whose authority is beyond contestation or event comprehension) is theatrical in its very nature, but it is also *fragile* in this 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 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 the Sinai Mountain 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 the 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 (i.e. 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 a form of “performative reversal”). Perhaps Althusser does not completely say this, but his example, with the religious and philosophical connotations that it carries, says it for him. And this is of course where we could locate his own virtual introduction of a counter-interpellation, 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 re-assemble the separated developments of the two “parts” in the 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 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 Grenade (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*.¹⁴ In order to be active within the reproduction as an “ideological power”¹⁵, the State must be in fact *absent* from the processes of reproduction – or it must, like the Freudian unconscious, according to Lacan, be acting (i.e. 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 dis-locates 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 a liberation *from ideology* as such. At the very best it indicates in political-theological terms where a counter-interpellation or a heretic gesture could “interrupt” the play, deviate it or “cut” into it. But on the other side – the “Marxist” side if you like – 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), 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 perhaps “revolution” be the new name of the State, thus calling indefinitely for its own “counter-interpellations”, or “revolutions within the revolution”, not to say “counter-revolutions”?

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 72 and 76, and then kept private by Althusser (who would only

¹⁴ Althusser : the Grenade Lecture

¹⁵ Engels had written in *The End of Classical German Philosophy*: “The State is the first ideological power”.

show it to a few friends and interlocutors).¹⁶ 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 failed attempts at adopting the orthodox Marxist categories to an increasingly escaping reality. It is a book that has the same stylistic quality, 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 right from the beginning Machiavelli's *Prince* (the book) as a *work of art*, but also an *artifice* that "grips us" readers ("*Il nous saisit*"), i.e. interpellates us today (as it did in the past for Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel and others), and leaves us in uncertainty and trouble with respect to its exact intentions, Althusser would also suggest that not only Machiavelli had 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 be read also only *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 jump now directly to the final section of the book, 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, it is 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 the *new Prince*, who *inaugurates* a regime of power and seeks to stabilize it), which makes him not the embodiment of the State, the bearer of the monarchic or presidential function,

¹⁶ I was not one of them, hence my surprise when it was published after his death, in 1994.

exercising *leadership*, and also not 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 an *actor* on the historical stage. And in fact this is possible only because he is also the *director* who sets the stage for his own *acting* or *performing*. This is necessary because, according to Machiavelli as Althusser comments him, the determining element in securing the “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 minute* of the Italian cities, as opposed to the rich and the noble class, the *popolo grosso*). It is the opinion or representation that the people has 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 determinant 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 counter-identification). 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, admiration) on the one hand, and a “ruse of the ruse” on the other hand, indicating *when to feign and when not to feign*, in other terms 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 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 indeed sketches a “politics of ideology” (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 in 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 towards the *conservation* or a *revolution* in the existing social order. In fact it is certainly not “conservative”. Althusser who was continuously returning with more or less sympathetic feelings to Gramsci’s attempts at “translating” Machiavelli in the language of a revolutionary strategy for the contemporary communist party, endowed with a “hegemonic” capacity, was also an avid reader of Montaigne and Pascal’s considerations on the costuming of magistrates and a commentator of 17th century theorists of the *apparatus of the State* (in the sense of pomp and ceremonial) (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 of “mythical” and “divine” violence (an author he certainly had not read), except that here what is at stake is conservative vs. 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 towards actions which 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 that the one already

encountered by Spinoza at the end of the *Theologico-political Treatise*, when asking how it could be possible that a “power of the multitude” not be terrorized by the multitude, or by 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 a 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 indefinitely. He had written towards 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”.¹⁷ I am not sure whether this was Marx’s view – not so much because of the repudiation of the “author”, than because of the “theater” (although it is striking to see how often Marx speaks in terms of stages, scenes, and intrigues, and genres, notably in the famous assertion that historical events always occur “twice”, “first as tragedy, then as farce”).¹⁸ 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, 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.

¹⁷ Althusser et al. *Reading Capital*

¹⁸ Reference in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*... See the commentary by Slavoj Žižek