Filozofski vestnik | Volume XLI | Number 1 | 2020 | 7–59 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.41.1.01

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Disjecta Membra: Althusser's Aesthetics Reconsidered

Introduction[1]

When it came to the arts, Louis Althusser considered himself "uncultivated" and, by multiple measures, it can be argued that neither art nor aesthetic theory played a significant role in his philosophy.[2] Gauges include the paucity of publications in this domain and the comparatively minuscule number of words he devoted to writing about art. In addition, when artistic production is mentioned in his major works, art is always one among a list of practices: political, economic, ideological, scientific, philosophical, each of which is elaborated upon in much more detail. An index of interest is also provided by the art-related contents of Althusser's library, which, apart from Hegel's and Tolstoy's aesthetics, consist exclusively of Marxist works (Bogdanov, Brecht, Casanova) alongside a few art books of the most banal sort.[3] For their part, after a very typical childhood drama of being forced to learn violin, his biographies make no mention of the positive influence of music, dance, theater, painting, cinema, or sculpture on his intellectual or personal development.[4]

With two exceptions, a fragmentary chapter on artistic production in *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* (1976–78) and an anti-humanist polemic directed at André Daspre (1966), the motivations for Althusser to reflect upon, and write about art

1 The authors would like to acknowledge their debt to Massimiliano Tomba and Ivo Eichorn for help with sources; Stefano Pippa, Jordanco Jovanoski, Dave Mesing, and Joseph Serrano, for their valuable comments; and to Olivier Corpet, without whom much of Althusser's work would have remained inaccessible.

2 Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca: 1961–1973*, ed. François Matheron and Yann Moulier Boutang, Édition posthume d'oeuvres de Louis Althusser 6, Stock IMEC, Paris 1998, p. 181, p. 284, p. 799.

3 IMEC, "Louis Althusser (1918–1990), Bibliothèque Personnelle : Monographies", *Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine*, March 2018.

4 Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier-Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey, New Press, New York 1995, p. 59, p. 296, p. 394.

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and aesthetic theory were exogenous. Friendships with fellow-traveler Giorgio Fanti, the critic Pierre Gaudibert, and the gallerist Inna Salomon brought him into contact with contemporary visual art and motivated critiques of the painters Lucio Fanti (Giorgio's son), Leonardo Cremonini, and Roberto Álvarez Ríos.[5] For example, it is clear that Althusser's interest in establishing a relationship with Álvarez Ríos' brother Renato, a Cuban cultural attaché, and, thereby, with revolutionary Cuba was a primary impetus for his 1962 piece on the surrealist painter and, further, that Gaudibert provided the connection.[6]

Another, even more consequential example: a year and a half prior to meeting "the Cuban," Gaudibert had introduced Althusser to Leonardo Cremonini and to the painter's partner, Giovanna Madonia.[7] This encounter provided the impetus for Althusser to engage with the arts in a deeper manner than he had ever before. Charmed with the French philosopher, Madonia invited Althusser to visit her family compound near Ravenna. There, in an idyllic setting and amidst an extended intellectually and artistically cultivated family, he met Franca Madonia, a childhood friend of Giovanna's, who had married one of Giovanna's brothers. A passionate dramatist, intellectual, and student of philosophy, "Franca" was to become Althusser's friend, lover, and passionate interlocutor.[8] Barring Álvarez Ríos and Lam, the majority of his aesthetic writings grew directly out of his relationship with Franca and to the Madonia family. These writings include the essay on Cremonini but, also, the most detailed textual developments of his aesthetic theory: "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)" and "On Brecht and Marx (1968)." These dramaturgical works owe their genesis and elaboration to the epistolary and amicale links established among Althusser,

5 Louis Althusser, "Sur Lucio Fanti (mars 1977)", in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques, Tome II*, François Matheron (ed.), Stock IMEC, Paris 1995, pp. 591–96; Louis Althusser, "Entretien avec Giorgio Fanti", April 1980, Fonds Althusser 20ALT/46/36, Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine; Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, p. 261, p. 274; Harry Bellet, "Pierre Gaudibert, écrivain et critique d'art", *Le Monde.fr*, (January 23, 2006); Yann Moulier-Boutang, "L'interdit Biographique et l'autorisation de l'oeuvre," *Futur Antérieur/L'Harmattan*. Numéro Spécial : Lire Althusser aujourd'hui (avril 1997); Bécquer Seguín, "Mute Cries: Louis Althusser Between Roberto Álvarez Ríos and Wifredo Lam", *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 93; Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2010, p. 100.

6 Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, pp. 261–62, p. 374.

7 *Ibid*., p. vii, p. 374.

8 *Ibid*., pp. vi–xi.

the Madonias, Pierre Gaudibert, and the theater critic Bernardo Dort.[9] There are also at least two transcriptions of relatively informal talks that Althusser gave on literary history and art, both dating from approximately the same time. One, "A Conversation on Literary History," is, as G.M. Goshgarian has put it, "more exactly, a monologue of over ten thousand words," interrupted only in three places by an unknown interlocutor.[10] Even though Althusser dates the transcription to 1965, Goshgarian notes that it might date from 1963. Second, more or less contemporaneous is the transcription of a talk delivered at the invitation of Il Teatro Minimo in Forli in the fall of 1963, published in the arts supplement of a provincial Italian newspaper.[11]

Despite Althusser's interest in the arts and aesthetic theory being externally motivated, temporally limited, and at the margins of his philosophical output, there are important reasons to engage with the scattered pieces of art criticism and aesthetic theory authored or directly influenced by Althusser. First, these reflections are worth our interest because they help us understand and flesh out Althusser's political and philosophical project. This apprehension includes his method of symptomatic reading, whose development Althusser attributed to his "initiation by Cremonini into the visual world of painting and its discourses."[12] As his anti-humanism was largely a reaction to the grandiose claims about art and culture made by those competing for intellectual influence within the French Communist Party, familiarity with his rival aesthetic theory is likewise essential for understanding this intervention and what it says about science, subjectivity, and history. Further, delving into Althusser' aesthetics also helps to make sense of the relations between productive practices: economic, political, ideological, political and scientific, which are as crucial to his thought as they are obscure and contradictory. For example, particular ideologies are often presented by Althusser as totalizing and insurmountable. If they are able to be overcome, it is only by the challenge of a rival ideology based on a different class and the struggle between classes. An essential support of (proletarian)

9 *Ibid*., pp. 39–42, pp. 50–51, pp. 181–2, p. 200, p. 384.

10 G.M. Goshgarian, "Note on the Text", in Louis Althusser, *History and Imperialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK and Medford MA 2020, p. xii.

11 Louis Althusser, "Perché il teatro : Conferenza dibatto promossa dal 'Teatro Minimo' di Forli deI Professore Louis Althusser", *La Provincia di Forli* (January 8, 1964), sec. Supplemento al. n/ 1.

12 Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, p. 50.

class struggle is scientific analysis, correct political intervention based on this analysis, and the fortune of a good conjuncture. How the necessary ideological transformation for revolutionary practice happens at the level of the individual subject and how it is communicated to others remain cloudy. In its similarities to and differences from ideological and scientific practices, artistic practice may suggest solutions to these mysteries.

In addition to helping us understand parts of his overall project and its development, Althusser's aesthetic theory is itself a powerful and original contribution to Marxist aesthetics.[13] Implicitly Kantian in its twin emphases on the (relative) autonomy of the work of art and on the power of art to transform subjective experience, it bears significant resemblances to Adorno's aesthetics.[14] Despite this, it is unsympathetic to the liberatory thrust of Frankfurt school aesthetics as well as to its characteristic Hegelianism.[15] Another part of its originality is that Althusser's aesthetic theory departs from Lenin and Brecht rather than from German Idealism. Like the Russian revolutionary and Berlin playwright, Althusser sought neither to reduce art to ideology nor to exaggerate art or the artist's role in socio-economic transformation. Instead, he attempted to develop a materialist theory of art which would explain both the specificity of aesthetic production as part of the cultural "level" in a social formation – irreducible to other levels – and its potential role in the development of a revolutionary consciousness.[16] In the meantime, he developed an original approach to aesthetics that is worth thinking with. Considering the foundational role Althusser has played for cultural studies, critical, and poststructuralist theory, especially with this theory of ideology, as well as his centrality to postwar continental philosophy and Western Marxism, it is particularly surprising that his approach to art and literature has remained relatively underexplored.[17] If part of this arises

13 Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York 2003.

14 Murray W. Skees, "Kant, Adorno and the 'Work' of Art", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37 (8/2011), pp. 917–20.

15 We do not have the space here to develop how Althusser's approach compares to that of other Marxist thinkers, such as Lukács, Adorno and Benjamin. We note this as a future direction of research.

16 Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York 2001, p. 155.

17 Althusser's contributions to literary theory fare better than his writings on art. In this area, important works include Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, University of California Press, Berkely 1976, as well as various article-length studies: James Kavanagh,

because of the relative marginality of his aesthetic engagements in his oeuvre, this neglect is also a result of an underappreciation of his extant remarks on art as they relate to his contributions to Marxist theory.[18]

Althusser's writings on art point us to the idea that we need to take aesthetic practice seriously as a practice with its own specificity – one that has its own logics of determination, rituals of production, circulation, and consumption, one that commands effects that need to be theorized on their own terms. In other words, analyzing Althusser's position on art suggests that aesthetics constitutes a different register, one that does not fit easily into ideology or science. This difference is not meant to imply a complete autonomy. Althusser insisted that art produces ideological effects and is itself an arena that stages ideology.[19] Further, he claimed that a scientific approach to art (meant in the sense of systematic knowledge) was possible as much as the dominant ideological approach.[20] The often repeated and strict distinction in Althusser's thought between ideology and science, a distinction that undergirds his famous thesis of the "epistemo-

"Marxism's Althusser: Towards a Politics of Literary Theory", *diacritics* 12 (1982), Francis Mulhern, "Message in a Bottle: Althusser in Literary Studies", in Gregory Elliott (ed.), *Althusser: A Critical Reader,* Blackwell, Cambridge 1994.

18 More recently, scholarship that considers Althusser's reflections on theater has made strides in connecting his aesthetic theory with his philosophical contributions, particularly on ideology and materialism: Banu Bargu, "In the Theater of Politics: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and Aesthetics", *Diacritics* 40 (3/2012), pp. 86–113; Banu Bargu, "Althusser's Materialist Theater: Ideology and Its Aporias", *Differences* 26 (3/ 2015), pp. 81–106; Thomas Carmichael, "Structure and Conjuncture Literary Study and the Return to Althusser", *E-Rea. Revue* Électronique *d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone* (3/2005); Sean Carney, *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and Contemporary Aesthetics*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, London and New York 2013, pp. 50–52; Alejandro Fielbaum, "Materialismo y distancia. Brecht en Althusser", in *Actas del Coloquio Internacional Althusser hoy: estrategia y materialismo*, Marcelo Starcenbaum et al. (eds.), Universidad de la Plata, Santiago, Chile 2020, pp. 187–214; Mohammad Kowsar, "Althusser on Theatre", *Theatre Journal* 35 (4/1983), pp. 461–74; Stefano Pippa, "A Heap of Splinters On the Floor", *SoftPower* 7 (1/2020), pp. 125–44; Malcolm K. Read, "Towards a Notion of the Ideological Unconscious: Marx, Althusser, Juan Carlos Rodríguez", (January 16, 2018); Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc. De la théorie du théâtre à la scène de la théorie : réflexions sur « Le "Piccolo", Bertolazzi et Brecht » *d'Althusser*, *Le Moment philosophique des années 1960 en France*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2011, pp. 255-72.

19 Louis Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York 2001, p. 165.

20 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 154.

logical break"[21] and a point that has attracted endless criticism, does indeed come under pressure when aesthetics is considered as a third register that is in relation to both ideology and science but reducible to neither. Althusser's relatively understudied position on art also affords a perspective that enables challenging empiricist theories of representation (the discourse on art as a "mirror"), on the one hand, and an alternative strict separation between reality and knowledge (as adumbrated in *Reading Capital*), which veers back into idealism in the name of negating empiricism, on the other.

All these advantages recognized, it is also true that Althusser's theory of art is contradictory, underdeveloped in places, and it needs to be situated more closely within his overall political philosophy. This paper attempts to provide a clear exposition of this theory while still calling attention to its tensions and shortcomings. In particular, Althusser's penchant for pure philosophical concepts supportive of a Marxist science of artistic production was in full force when the greater part of his aesthetic theory was produced. Ultimately, the clear separations Althusser delineated among artistic, ideological, and scientific practices were unsuitable to the description of artistic practice he sought to highlight and to understand. While he had a chance to revise his metaphilosophy, theory of history, and philosophy of science, Althusser never returned seriously to his aesthetic work with a self-critical eye. One can, as this essay does, abstract a core insight from his aesthetic theory and one can trace its development away from Marxist-Leninist reflection theory. This core insight is that the transformative effect of art on a subject's ideology is the result of a perceptible dislocation between ideology and the real and that this subjective outcome results from a parallel displacement visible in the work of art. On either side of this core, things remain fuzzy. On one side, one is left with contradictory statements about the qualities of the artist and of the art work necessary to this transformation. On the other, one has discordant claims about what the subjective outcome of art is and whether it transforms ideology, knowledge, or politics. This essay does not attempt to resolve these antagonisms. Rather, by calling attention to them, it attempts to give an accurate picture of the development of Althuser's aesthetics

[21] Balibar maintains that the "epistemological break" is "the philosophical object of Althusser, that which distinguishes his philosophy." Étienne Balibar, "Althusser's Object", trans. Margaret Cohen and Bruce Robbins, *Social Text* 39 (July 1, 1994), pp. 157–58.

and to show how the tension between 'pure' and 'impure' concepts evident in his broader philosophy also characterize his theory of art.

Authentic Art

Even though Althusser recognized the complexity of the relationship between art and ideology, he nonetheless retained a rather unrefined and common distinction between "real art" or "authentic art" and art that is "of an average or mediocre level."[22] He dedicated most of his scant remarks on the subject to the former kind, the art of great artists. He had little to say about the latter, which probably appeared to him as merely the mechanism of reproducing ideology.[23]

The kind of high literature, which came out of the hands of a Tolstoy, Balzac or Solzhenitsyn, and not the mass-marketed low-brow novel, in his opinion, qualified as "authentic" and could lay claim to the complex relationship with ideology that Althusser wanted to amplify. Similarly, it was only exceptional forms of theater (Brecht, Bertolazzi, Beckett), painting (Álvarez Ríos, Cremonini, Fanti, Lam), and film (for example, Alain Resnais's *Muriel*[24]) that qualified as genuine art, based on their "decentering effects, that is, their subversion of humanist ideology."[25] If most art is simply the uncritical reproduction of ideology, according to Montag interpreting Althusser, "the other art, genuine art, begins with ideology … only to define itself against it. Indeed, its meaning and purpose derive from the distance it places between itself and ideology."[26]

This strict distinction between two kinds of art finds strong expression in Althusser's early writings on the matter. In his reflections on the first major exhibition of Álvarez Ríos in La Cour d'Ingres in Paris (1962), for example, there is an obvious exaltation of the great artist, when he refers to the "masters" of surrealism (Lam, Ernst, and Matta). Further, it permeates the way he writes of the "profoundness" of Álvarez Ríos's painting and casts the young Cuban, in a

22 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", pp. 221–22.
23 Louis Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, trans. G. M Goshgarian, Bloomsbury, New York, 2017, pp. 153–54.
24 Althusser, *Lettres á Franca*, p. 571.
25 Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 30.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

somewhat patronizing manner, as "that painter *who can be great*."[27] Similarly, in his famous essay on "The 'Piccolo Teatro'" (1962), Althusser refers to Piccolo Teatro's performance of *El Nost Milan*, a play by Bertolazzi, directed by Strehler for a critical Parisian audience, as "extraordinary" and consistently praises it, along with Brecht's *Mother Courage* and *Galileo,* as distinct from classical theater.[28] In "A Conversation on Literary History," Althusser points out that "it's not in everyone's power to produce a cultural object."[29] In fact, contemplating how literary history takes for granted existing works that are already given cultural recognition, he ponders what a counter-history, based on "literary miscarriages" that go without any notice, might look like. "No one knows the thousands and tens of thousands of young ladies who, now, write novels every day," Althusser writes. "Their boyfriends know them and they can render service to their boyfriends. As authors, however, they don't exist."[30] In the mainstream hierarchy of aesthetic recognition, which Althusser unquestioningly adopts with a gendered contempt toward the ordinary that is difficult to hide, literary history is bound up with an "ideology of the aesthetic" that considers the work of art as something sacred.[31] Althusser critically notes this as a starting point of a Marxist approach, but, at least in the early 1960s, remains captive to it in his exaltation of great art. Great art, in this approach, is where aesthetics meets philosophy. The problem of separating art into two camps is, as Warren Montag has forcefully put it, that it actually functions to erase the specificity of art: "in one case it lapses into ideology and in the other it disappears into the practice of philosophy."[32]

However, according to Montag, this approach begins to shift, or is at least strained, due to the influence of Pierre Macherey. Early on in his letter to André Daspre, Althusser approvingly cites Macherey's essay "Lenin as a critic of Tolstoy" (1965) as adumbrating the relationship between art and ideology, inviting Daspre to "read [it] carefully"[33] in response to the questions Daspre has

27 Louis Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)", *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 112.

28 Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre", in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London and New York 1969, p. 131.

29 Louis Althusser, "A Conversation on Literary History", in *History and Imperialism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA 2020, p. 14.

30 Althusser, "A Conversation on Literary History", p. 15.

31 *Ibid*., p. 5.

32 Montag, *Louis Althusser,* p. 38.

33 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 222.

raised in his prior letter to Althusser which occasioned his response.[34] Montag writes: "Macherey's arguments are incompatible with many of Althusser's previous statements. While he has taken certain concepts and terms from Althusser (and has thus appeared to many readers to have simply extended or continued Althusser's theoretical approach), he has in fact given them a new and different meaning."[35] For example, Macherey calls into question the big distinction between ordinary and exceptional art, views *all* art to be in a complex relation with ideology, moves away from the great artist's "talent" toward the process of artistic production, and locates the aesthetic effect less in politics than in relation to the field of knowledge.[36]

Pace Montag, and despite our agreement with him regarding the important influence of Macherey on Althusser's ideas (as we will discuss below), Althusser never gives up on the distinction between exceptional and ordinary art, which largely guides his interest in specific artists and authors and dominates his interpretations of their work. This is the case when he first begins to write about art; it continues to hold during the mid-60s when he is at the height of his intellectual productivity now marked by a specifically Althusserian stamp; and it remains the case in the late 70s when he pens his last occasional pieces on art. For example, when Althusser analyzes Cremonini's work, especially the figures of the human with the deformation of their faces, only to conclude that his painting is "profoundly anti-humanist, and materialist,"[37] he likens Cremonini to "great revolutionary thinkers, theoreticians and politicians, great materialist thinkers." He locates Cremonini's works in their path and as a "great artist" attributes him an understanding, a knowledge, of the ideological impact of his own work comparable to the awareness of revolutionary philosophers and politicians of the impact of their own political positions.[38] Wilfredo Lam, whom Althusser had earlier referenced in his Álvarez Ríos essay as one of the "masters" of surrealism,[39] is praised, fifteen years later, for "paint[ing] at the limits,

34 First published as André Daspre and Louis Althusser, "Deux Lettres Sur La Connaissance de l'art", *La Nouvelle Critique* 175 (avril 1966), pp. 136–50.

35 Montag, *Louis Althusser,* p. 39.

36 *Ibid*., pp. 39–40.

37 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 239.

38 *Ibid*., p. 242.

39 Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos", p. 110.

just as a few others have thought at the limits."[40] The "great" artists are only matched in their greatness by "great" revolutionary and materialist thinkers, who give us, each in their own way, knowledge of the world, an account of the laws by which human beings are governed such that they remain unfree, despite the ideologies that paint them as "free."

However, Montag is absolutely right to underscore how a more sophisticated appreciation of art's complex relation to ideology emerges in Althusser's later writings, in large part due to the influence of Macherey and because of Althusser's own intellectual trajectory, with his changing philosophical positions reflecting on his assessments on art and vice versa. It is possible to trace the shift in Althusser beginning with his letter to Daspre (1966), as well as in "Cremonini" (1966), "On Brecht and Marx" (1968), and eventually on his late writings on the painters Fanti and Lam (1977). While in the response to Daspre, Althusser still retains the distinction between the two forms of art, he recognizes that even authentic art is not immune to the humanist ideology that permeates art itself. At the same time, however, real art could at least offer an "allusion to reality," the reality of the ideology "from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes,"[41] in the form of an internal distance, thereby introducing a possible site for generating a critical or oppositional consciousness. Thus, Althusser finds that works of art bear a "privileged relation" to ideology, with the specific function of making it visible, by "establishing a distance from it."[42]

As Thomas Albrecht has noted, Althusser's privileging of "authentic" art as having a critical relationship with ideology, with potentially transformative effects, has been "routinely criticized by the Marxist literary critics who followed Althusser, in particular by British Marxists writing in the late 1970s and

40 Louis Althusser, "'Lam (1977)'", trans. Alberto Toscano, *ARTMargins* 6 (2/2017), p. 113. Althusser's text, solicited by Lam himself, was for the catalogue of a retrospective on Lam's work at the Nanterre Maison de la Culture in April 1978. Althusser sent his text to Lam, but it was not published because the retrospective was cancelled. Althusser's text resurfaced in 1982 as part of the catalogue of a posthumous exhibition of Lam's work.

41 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 222.

42 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", pp. 241–2.

early 1980s, as *unreflected formalism*."[43] This interpretation, which has done much to discredit Althusser's overarching approach to aesthetics, comes out of Althusser's emphasis on the "specificity of art" in distinguishing its relationship with ideology from the relationship of science with ideology. According to Albrecht, the critique of Althusser's formalism takes issue with his ascription of the specificity of art to the formal attributes of the artwork, misunderstanding what Althusser's actual distinction entails. For Albrecht, this specificity concerns less an attribute of the artwork itself than the effect of the artwork, i.e., in giving a perception of ideology rather than a conceptual knowledge of it, which is what science does).[44] However, most interpreters stop short of offering what this "perception" of ideology entails and analyzing the mechanisms of its production. Further, this aspect of aesthetics is often obscured by the designation of literature, as well as other forms of art, as "ideological forms."[45]

If even great art is precarious to the effects of ideology, all the more is the thinking about art. For Althusser, art criticism that does not take into account the processes of artistic production and that cannot develop a knowledge of the "aesthetic effect" would remain particularly prone to the distortions of humanism.[46] Avoiding a naive humanism in art criticism meant building on Marxist principles in order to propose alternative concepts to analyze artistic production and its effects. In effect, this was a call for a "science" of art – one that could accurately theorize and gauge its aesthetic effects. Particularly important was to avoid the language of "creation," which glorified the artist at the expense of artistic practice and the mechanisms by which authentic art produces effects.

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43 Thomas Albrecht, "Donner à Voir l'idéologie: Althusser and Aesthetic Ideology", *Bulletin de La Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française* 14 (2/2004), p. 3.

44 *Ibid*., pp. 9–14. Examples of critiques that focus on Althusser's formalism include: Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, Verso, London 1982, pp. 82–86; Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, Methuen, New York 1979, pp. 120–149, among others.

45 Albrecht's interpretation is confirmed by the position taken by Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar in an interview (1978), where they caution against confusing form with formalism: "the historical materialist concept does not refer to 'form' in opposition to 'content,' but to the objective coherence of an ideological formation." However, by characterizing literature as an "ideological form," they also collapse aesthetics into other forms of ideology, thereby obscuring the specificity of the aesthetic form. Pierre Macherey and Étienne Balibar, "Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions", trans. John Whitehead Mcleod and Ann Wordsworth, *Oxford Literary Review* 3 (1/1978), p. 5.

46 For an overview of different approaches to art criticism, see Aleš Erjavec, "Art and Criticism", *Filozofski Vestnik* 40 (3/2019), pp. 147–160.

The conception of the artist or author as creator renders the artwork the result of a miraculous, even theological process, an inexplicable act of bringing into being. Such a perspective idealizes the subjectivity of the author/artist as having the ability to actualize themselves in their work as the outcome of a process that resists theorization.[47] For Althusser, this orientation in art criticism is reflected in the coupling of an aesthetics of creation and an aesthetics of consumption, revolving around the subjectivity of the artist qua the creator and the recipient qua the consumer of art and the view that art itself as an object created and consumed. Such an approach reproduced a subject-object dualism (between the artist and the work of art and between the consumer and the work of art), which had to be left behind for a truly materialist appreciation of aesthetics. The latter could only be achieved by criticism that could bring out the knowledge specific to art – the "type of critique and knowledge it inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see."[48]

Challenging the Ideology/Art/Science Trinary

If art's difference from ideology does not reside in its formal qualities, what then is the specificity of the authentic work of art and how does it differ from science, which also enjoys a privileged relation with reality? From ideology, the difference is slight.[49] With science, however, the differences are larger and revelatory of how art "works." To identify art's specificity then, we have to understand it in its similarities to and difference from both ideology and science. One of the clearest definitions of ideology Althusser provides is in *Philosophy for Non-philosophers* (1976). Abstracted from the habits, embodiments, and institutions of which it is equally composed, he labels ideology: "ideas endowed with a capacity for social action."[50] Putting this definition into motion as one form of cognitive reproduction, ideological practice is further specified "as the transformation of existing ideology under the impact [*sous l'effet*] of the direct action of another ideology, distinct from the first."[51] A generic example of this transformation would be that of existing beliefs about the individual and their

47 Louis Althusser, "Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966", *Historical Materialism* 15 (2/2007), pp. 163–65.

48 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 241.

49 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 152.

50 Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, p. 112.

51 *Ibid*., p. 110.

inalienable right to the products of their labor. This illusion is distinct from, and potentially replaced by, the competing communist notion that value, being socially produced, should be socially shared. Both dominant and the oppositional ideologies are realized and communicated with "gestures, modes of behavior, feelings, words and … other element[s] of other practices."[52] Though never "pure" and always constructed out of and in relationship to other worldviews– especially the one in dominance, a discrete ideology bears the mark of the social class whose associations it supports. It also always stands in tension with the ideologies of competing classes. Further, specific ideologies are inseparable from institutions, which form part of their material support.[53] In "Cremonini," Althusser, citing Establet, cuts to the chase and simply states that ideology is what the Marxist tradition calls "culture."[54]

Is not art, then, as a fraction of culture, just a part of ideology? In the main and as mentioned above, Althusser agrees with this reduction. Most art serves only to reproduce existing ideologies and the substance of even "great art" is almost entirely ideological. In terms of its objective content, art can be said to consist predominantly of existing ideologies as these are expressed through the transformation of existing material ("words, sounds, colors, *etc*."[55]) into new assemblages recognizable as art. Like its content, art's form is dictated almost entirely by existing ideological conventions. In addition, it is this conventionality which allows its audience's identification or "misrecognition" of themselves in the illusion produced by the artist.[56]

If its production, form, and consumption "take place" in ideology, what, then, is the specificity of art? Althusser follows Aristotle and the greater part of the "western" philosophical tradition in stating that art provides pleasure to its viewer.[57] In terms of art's specificity, is art therefore distinguished from ideology

52 Louis Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67*, François Matheron (ed.), Verso, London and New York 2003, p. 51.

53 Althusser, *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, pp. 112–15.

54 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 165.

55 Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", p. 50.

56 Étienne Balibar, "Althusser's Dramaturgy and the Critique of Ideology", *Differences* 26 (3/2015), pp. 8–9.

57 Warren Montag and Louis Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", in *Louis Althusser*, trans. Max Statkiewicz, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York 2003, pp. 146–47.

by the pleasant affect it induces? No, Althusser avers implicitly in many pieces and explicitly in the "Reply to Daspre" that authentic art is distinguished not by its ability to provide pleasure but by its "aesthetic content." As noted above, this content or, better put, the relation among the ideological and aesthetic content of a work and the ideology of those who regard it evokes an "aesthetic effect" in its spectators.[58] It is this effect and the ability of the artwork to summon it that distinguishes authentic art from average art. Albrecht thus correctly contends that there is no identifiable formal element inherent in the artwork necessary to this effect.[59] Althusser makes this clear with examples: avant-garde works are arrayed alongside classics as possibly–but not necessarily–productive of aesthetic effects. For example, where Ionesco's absurdist iconoclasm fails to achieve an aesthetic effect, Brecht's beer hall melodramas and Balzac's realist taxonomies succeed.[60] More proof: among the instances of authentic art Althusser surveys, one finds no common formal element (such as self-referentiality, complexity, symmetry, spontaneity, temporal abstraction, discontinuity, polyphony, unreliable narration, conceptuality, meter, novelty, *etc.*) capable of formally distinguishing authentic from average art. The quality of "greatness" too is insufficient. As Althusser cheekily confides in a 1962 letter to Franca Madonia, Racine's linguistic innovations transform "mediocre contents, … the 'pulp romances' of his day" into works to be revered. This formal transformation, however, is also that which allows his theater to play "a mystificatory role.[61] For Althusser, as for any Marxist shaped by *The German Ideology*, "mystification" is synonymous with "ideological."[62] Therefore, greatness may be an element of authentic art but, as with any formal element, is not that which distinguishes it from the mediocre.

If neither greatness nor any formal aspect differentiates authentic from average art, then what more can we say about this relation? As mentioned above, average art serves merely to reproduce existing ideologies –and this is part of their pleasure- or to flirt with their disruption before restoring the accord between artistic

58 Althuser almost always appeals to the visual register in his analyses but there is no reason that this critique should not equally apply to works of art that are heard, felt, or tasted.

59 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 154.

60 Althusser, "Perché il teatro : Conferenza dibatto promossa dal 'Teatro Minimo' di Forli deI Professore Louis Althusser", p. 10.

61 Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, p. 294.

62 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London 1969, p. 74; Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", p. 140.

representations of the world and the subject's ideological representation of the same. Authentic art, by way of contrast, manages to open up a space within the artwork and in the mind of the spectator. This "void" is the space between the mystified world the audience inhabits (and which equally provides the form and content of the artwork) and the "real" world. "Allusion" made, the real is perceived or felt in the consciousness of the spectator.[63] Following Brecht, the internal distance taken is sometimes referred to as the "aesthetic effect."[64] Notwithstanding its inspiration, this occurrence is offered in counter-distinction to the "alienation effect," which Althusser identifies as a body of theatrical techniques conducive to these psychological effects but not sufficient to their production.[65] He also signals something about its production by referring to its work variously as distantiation, void, uncanny, non-space, rupture, break, or displacement.[66]

To rehearse: the difference between authentic art and average art is that the former, while mostly or entirely formed by its creator's ideological beliefs, manages–in an unspecified way–to interrupt the ideology of its spectators. This interruption is a perception, feeling, or view of the distance between the real, material processes that produce ideology and ideological beliefs about these processes. The space displayed can equally be evident in the work and that discernible in the viewer's own consciousness.[67] Of course, art in its production is so closely related to ideological production as to be nearly indistinguishable from it. Therefore, it may be better understood as a species of ideological production, rather than a different kind. Nonetheless, it is its identity in terms of object and process but difference in terms of its reception that permits art to have an "aesthetic effect," that is, to change existing ideologies.

Affected by the glimpse of the material real to which authentic art "alludes," a spectator's self-satisfied consciousness is troubled. This disturbance, Althusser

63 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 66.

64 *Ibid*., p. 154; Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, NLB, London 1970, p. 66.

65 Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", pp. 142–44. For a detailed analysis of how Althusser modifies the Brechtian method of "distanciation," see Bargu, "In the Theater of Politics", 98–102.

66 Montag and Althusser, p. 142, p. 144; Althusser, "'Lam (1977)'", p. 114; Louis Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 142; Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)".

67 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 153.

contends, has the potential to modify the spectator's political consciousness and, with this modification, to initiate a new political agenda. Despite this allusion to the real and its potential associated change of consciousness, Althusser says outright in the "Reply to Daspre" that authentic art is insufficient on its own to achieve political change. For this to happen, he adds, one needs to be able to "define the means" of political change.[68] As is well-known, the only practice Althusser specifies as capable of identifying the causal means to political transformation is science and science does so by producing true or correct knowledge of its object, the real.[69]

Based on this summary, it is clear that science, art, and ideology resemble one another inasmuch as each is a social, material, and intellectual practice actually and potentially constitutive of one's lived relation to the world. Ideological beliefs about the world, a psychological constant, can be variously affected by the intellectual influence of art and science. Average art, for instance, reinforces ideological beliefs and provides an objective example of these beliefs' reproduction. Authentic art, on the contrary, interrupts ideology. Allowing one to glimpse the world demystified, it transforms and re-orders the subject's web of existing beliefs. Inasmuch as it is successful in this effort, art may motivate political action focused on changing the world in accordance with this new orientation. But there are no guarantees.

Science, too, transforms ideology and it also does so in relation to the real. However, instead of being a felt or perceived relation, this change is conceptual: ideology is replaced with knowledge or knowledge is reordered. Althusser's take on the relationship among science, ideology, the real, and truth has been much discussed and will only be rehearsed here in order to draw the distinctions between it, art and ideology.[70] The concise story is that scientists begin

68 *Ibid*.

69 Pierre Macherey, "Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists", trans. Robin Mackay, *Parrhesia* 6 (2009), p. 16.

70 Andrea Cavazzini, *Scienze, epistemologia, società: la lezione di Louis Althusser : Venezia, 29-30-31 ottobre 2008 : atti del convegno*, Mimesis, Milano 2009; Isabelle Garo, "The Impossible Break: Ideology in Movement between Philosophy and Politics", in *Encountering Althusser: Politics and Materialism in Contemporary Radical Thought*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013, pp. 277–80; William S. Lewis, "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge': Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology", *Rethinking Marxism* 17 (3/2005), pp. 455–470; Macherey, "Althusser and the Concept of the Spontane-

with ideological or "metaphysical" notions about the world. Then, through scientific practice which includes engagement with the material real, metaphysical notions are transformed into true, scientific conceptions of real objects, their causes, and relations.

This essay will not get too into the subtleties of scientific production and how Althusser's ideas about truth and scientific practice changed over the course of his career.[71] One revision though is crucial to challenging the ideology-art-science trichotomy. This is Althusser's abandonment of the division characteristic of his classic work between science and ideology. By the late 1960s, Althusser did not think that philosophy or any other intellectual practice could separate science and ideology in terms of their relationship to truth and reality. Whereas before he had argued that philosophy could parse them, he now contended that the difference between the two could only be known by their employment. Scientific knowledge, once acted upon, leads to correct results, while ideology based strategy results in mistakes. Importantly, as with art and ideology, scientific knowledge and ideological beliefs became formally indistinguishable and their difference only able to be grasped by their effects.[72] In the case of authentic art, this effect is psychological and agential, disturbing the spectator's easy conscience and possibly motivating inquiry or action into reality and its transformation.

As François Matheron has eloquently shown, Althusser's philosophy vacillates between "pure" concepts and "impure" ones.[73] As in the above example, this is evidenced in his thought's diachronic development. However, this inconstancy also occurs in discrete texts where a lucid, analytic definition of a concept is provided and distinguished from other concepts before its clarity and distinc-

ous Philosophy of Scientists"; Maria Cecilia Padilla and Facundo Roberto Bey, "La Ciencia Es Ciencia de La Ideología En Louis Althusser", *Desafios*, 28 (1/2016), pp. 371–98; Geoff Pfeifer, "On Althusser on Science, Ideology, and the New, or Why We Should Continue to Read 'Reading Capital'", *Crisis & Critique*, Reading Capital and For Marx: 50 Years Later (2/2015) pp. 124–41.

71 William S. Lewis, "Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism", *Décalages* 2 (1/2016), pp. 6–26.

72 Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*, *A Philosophy for Communism*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 232–39.

73 François Matheron, "'Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept", *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Brill, Leiden 2004, pp. 503–27.

tion from others is subtly (or not-so-subtly) undermined during the rest of its exposition. The power of Althusser's thought and its debility lie in this manner of exposition.

To take this discussion back to art, when Althusser focuses at one time on the producer of the art work, at another time on the art object, and at another time on the art object's reception, we can see this compulsion to identify, explicate, and separate in his aesthetic theory. This disjunction gives rise to the claim that the form of the artwork or the great artist is responsible for the distance taken within the mind of the spectator. We also see this drive for purity in Althusser's analysis of intellectual production. There, ideological, scientific, and artistic thoughts are neatly separated according to their objects and according to the effects that these thoughts have on a subject's activity. Both science and authentic art, he claims, interrupt ideology and therefore "the reproduction of a society's mode of production"[74] but they do so in different ways. Through scientific practice, the first has the effect of producing true or correct knowledge of the real useful to its transformation. Through genuine artistic practice, the second generates a perception of or feeling for the real which differs from the subject's previous attitude.

Alternately and as an example of a rigid analysis becoming more supple, maybe it is *knowledge* of the real that art produces? In "On Brecht" and in most other aesthetic texts, he states that art produces no knowledge of the real.[75] However, in "Cremonini," written in-between the two pieces on Brechtian theater, he says of the Italian's paintings that "we cannot 'recognize' ourselves (ideologically) in his pictures. And it is because we cannot 'recognize' ourselves in them that we can know ourselves in them, in the specific form provided by art." In the next paragraph he adds the line already quoted "when [art] exists as a work of art it produces as a work of art (by the type of critique and knowledge it inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see) an ideological effect."[76] How to make sense of these contradictory statements? If one sticks to the crystalline concepts Althusser delineates or to what he predominately states about art's aesthetic effect, one cannot make sense of them. In many cases, art is said to

74 Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", p. 146.
75 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 146, pp. 152–53.
76 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 165.

affect perception or sentiment, not understanding. In one case, he states that it has a knowledge effect. If one does not want to dismiss the theory entirely, then one must notice the moments of impurity, the moments when Althusser muddies concepts and sends them in relation to one another. This is what he does in the second "Cremonini" quote. Here, the artistic work, painted by someone who may have no "lucid" knowledge of reality,[77] "inaugurates" knowledge. Sticking to its concept as outlined in most of the aesthetic pieces, art cannot reveal the real, it can only ever change sentiment or perception. With Cremonini, though, we see it functioning as critique and inaugurating knowledge, a function with which science and philosophy are exclusively charged.

Reading non-pedantically, the solution seems obvious: in changing the subject's perception of the world, authentic art may not only inaugurate philosophical critique and suggest the need for political change, it may also inaugurate scientific inquiry necessary to that transformation. Althusser's very impulse to clarity, his Spinozist formalism or rationalism,[78] often prevented him from acknowledging that productive practices are not totally distinct one from another. That they are intermixed, though, almost always slips through either via contradictions within texts, as self-conscious revision, or when the matter is stated more clearly in another text. The division between science and ideology, for instance, was subject to revision.[79] Moreover, in a text which adopts the language of Lacan and of psychoanalysis from 1966 and which replaces the various cognitive capacities Althusser usually associates with intellectual practice with the word "discourse," the common effect of science, ideology, and art is clearly stated when Althusser writes:

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77 *Ibid*., p. 166.

78 Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014, pp. 149–90.

79 Matheron quotes a revealing passage from a 1962 letter to Franca Madonia when Althusser was working on Machiavelli: "I even sketched a description of Machiavelli's consciousness, his will to realism in contradiction with his 'derealising' situation (to have hit upon this word was the solution: thus giving the impression that there was something there to understand which I didn't succeed in expressing ina conceptual, clear, exhaustive fashion, but saying at the same time that there was nevertheless something to sense and understand, identifying a presence that did not manage to grasp itself …), and then, thinking about this formulation again, I was extraordinarily and ironically struck by the fact that, in the guise of the supposed consciousness of Machiavelli, I'd spoken about myself." Matheron, "Louis Althusser, or the Impure Purity of the Concept", p. 512.

> If we compare the different existing forms of discourse–that is, the forms of unconscious discourse, ideological discourse, aesthetic discourse and scientific discourse-we can demonstrate the existence of *a common effect*: *every discourse produces a subjectivity-effect*. Every discourse has, as its necessary correlate, a subject, which is one of the effects, if not the major effect, of its functioning.[80]

A problem with Althusser's aesthetic theory is that art is never put back together with science and ideology to show their overlappings and to trace their common effect on a subject's conscious and unconscious thought. Prima facie, one sees only inconsistency.[81] This lack of accord makes it difficult for the reader to piece together how an artist–working with their own mystified consciousness and existing materials–can fabricate an artwork characterized by a tension between the real and the ideological. Seen in terms of the object and its reception, it is likewise an enigma how a work of art may inaugurate a knowledgeable critique of real situations. Nonetheless, by looking closely at the development of Althusser's aesthetics, we can see him wrestling with these self-caused obstacles and becoming more sophisticated in their resolution, albeit without ever resolving them and while often slipping back to his earlier formulations.[82] A singular example of this, detailed in the next section, is Althusser's overcoming (with the help of Pierre Macherey) the limitations of Engels' and Lenin's aesthetics. In a way that is impossible if we consider only the elements of his aesthetics in their purity, we can also turn to his analysis of specific artists and their output for an understanding of how art works that is more subtle, philosophically tenable, and illustrative of his theory's originality. Unlike the rigid demarcation of artistic, scientific and theoretical practices just rehearsed, the critiques of Cremonini and Bertolazzi, Solzhenitsyn and Fanti, Álvarez Ríos and Lam provide examples of the ways in which artists fabricate works of art capable of inaugurating knowledgeable critiques of existing, concrete situations.

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80 Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", p. 48.

81 Indeed, even in "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses" Althusser is inconsistent. In Note 2, subject-effects seem to be primarily attributed to ideological discourse. See Althusser, "Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses", p. 50.

82 In this slippage, comparison can be made to Althusser's mature judgement of Marx, continually struggling but ultimately unable to free himself from the Hegelian dialectic. Louis Althusser, "Marx in His Limits", in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, Verso, London and New York 2006, p. 42.

Elements of a Materialist Aesthetics

Despite Althusser's inconsistencies, slippages, and reliance on "impure" concepts, his writings on aesthetics do present us with original insights, both conceptually and in terms of the challenge they present to already existing formulations, especially within Marxism. However, it must be noted that the conceptual innovations Althusser made in approaching aesthetics and the ways in which he posed the problem of aesthetics, namely, in relation not only with the usual elements of art criticism (especially its focus on the artist and their creative expression) but with history, ideology, subjectivity, and the possibility of knowledge, have developed in conversation with the important work that Pierre Macherey carried out in the domain of literary analysis. When Althusser cites Macherey in his response to Daspre, he indicates that Macherey's article on Lenin's reading of Tolstoy is "only a beginning" but indicative of the "direction in which *we* are working."[83] Macherey's intervention thus stands as the result of a collective discussion of Althusser and his students/cothinkers, or at the very least, its results are endorsed by this collective "we."[84] In the same letter, Althusser promises further studies on this subject that are shortly forthcoming, a promise that never materializes except for Macherey's work on the subject.[85] As a result, it is important to turn to Macherey's work in order to identify the significant points of contact, convergence, and confluence for the specifically Althusserian approach to art and to trace Macherey's role in its development.[86]

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83 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 222, our emphasis.

84 Recognizing the collective nature of the intellectual and political work that Althusser and his students at the École Normale Supérieure carried out in the 1960s, Warren Montag writes that it "ought to be regarded as a collective body of work whose writers functioned more as scribes than as authors, recording ideas that had so thoroughly circulated between individuals that their originator could no longer be discovered." Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, p. 15.

85 The exception is Macherey's book-length intervention, which was published later in the same year. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Routledge, London 2006.

86 According to Montag, Macherey's approach is profoundly shaped by Spinoza whose relevance for the field of aesthetics has not simply been neglected but, rather, necessarily "excluded." This implicit influence of what Montag provocatively names a "counter-aesthetics" may also be one of the sources of the "impurity" of Althusser's concepts, especially as the Spinozist thematics stood in tension with the influence of Kantian concepts in Althusser's thought. See Warren Montag, "Spinoza's Counter-Aesthetics", *Intellectual History Review* 30 (3/2020), pp. 411–427.

I. From Author as Creator to Author as Traveller

When we turn our attention to Macherey's essay on Lenin as a reader of Tolstoy, then, what do we find? Macherey's essay begins by noting the absence of a systematic Marxist theory of aesthetics and outlines only a brief lineage, which moves from the scant references in Marx and Engels (and Marx's book on Balzac that was never written) to Plekhanov and Lafargue's work. This is at least one of the reasons why, Macherey argues, Lenin's writings on Tolstoy, occasional pieces as they are, are so precious. These writings, spanning three years between 1908-1911 are pre-revolutionary but gestational in terms of delineating a "Leninist aesthetics" bound up with the question of "scientific socialism."[87] What makes Lenin's interpretation of Tolstoy crucial (in addition to the absence in the Marxist literature it fills) resides in its ability to think together the aesthetic and the political, and more specifically, to articulate their complex relationship.

For Macherey, and we can assume by extension for Althusser, the study of Lenin's writings on Tolstoy reveal in a rough sketch the specific elements necessary for an aesthetic theory that is Marxist. It should be noted that while the writings in question penned by Lenin, and Macherey's analysis of these writings, are devoted only to literature as a specific art-form, it is clear that for Macherey they represent insights that are applicable to other forms of artistic production. These elements comprise of: (1) the complex relation of the author/work to their historical period (and the contradictions of this period), (2) the relationship between the work of art and ideology (and thus, between that of ideology and the historical period in question), and finally (3) an explication and critical reworking of the metaphor of the "mirror," which Lenin deploys to express Tolstoy's relation to his age and its contradictions. In elaborating each of these elements, Macherey produces original concepts, concepts which inform, even if they are not explicitly discussed by, Althusser's reflections.

One of the first tasks of Macherey's intervention is to emphasize the necessity to put the artwork in historical context. In so doing, however, he critically examines the assumption of an immediate, "spontaneous" relation between the work of literature and the lifetime of its author, on the one hand, and the time of its composition, on the other. Instead, Macherey argues that in analyzing

87 Pierre Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", in *A Theory of Literary Production*, pp. 118–19. First published in *La Pensée* 121 (1965).

the historicity of the work of art one must be able to delineate the appropriate time frame by analyzing the broader social and political transformations taking place (and are thus somehow expressed in the artwork). For Tolstoy, this is the period between 1861 and 1905, a time when feudalism is disintegrating and the development of capitalism is continuing apace, with huge social consequences for the peasants. The periodization is introduced by Lenin, earmarked on one end by the legal reforms that ended serfdom, if only *de jure*, and on the other end by the 1905 revolution. Lenin thereby casts this period of decline and dissolution of old Russia and the simultaneous emergence of a bourgeois order as the Tolstoyian age.

Macherey does not dispute this analysis but also notes that the author's relation to their age is still not straightforward. He writes: "Generally, the writer is behind the times, if only because he [sic] invariably speaks after the event. The more he is involved with the materially immediate, the more difficulty he experiences in writing."[88] Macherey thereby introduces a temporal lag in the author's production, complicating an easy periodization. Macherey further notes that "[s]ome writers are involved with the secondary or anachronistic tendencies of their time."[89] Thus, for a proper Marxist theory of literature (or any form of aesthetic production), while it is important to contextualize the artwork in a historical age based on the content of the work, it is also necessary to recognize that the work may appear out of its time, or coming after its own age, insofar as it expresses processes that are not synchronous with one another or which cannot be understood as having begun or ended in precise moments in time. Macherey's analysis, then, builds on Lenin and opens greater space for the multiple histories of different layers of a social formation and nonlinear and nonsynchronous temporal elements that may coexist in the same historical age, all of which go into the making of the artwork's complex historicity.[90]

Macherey points out that this complex historicity (or the relationship between the author/artwork and their age) can best be understood as a result of the mediation that enters into this relationship. The specific ideology, which mediates

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88 *Ibid*., p. 120.

89 *Ibid*.

90 This approach is famously theorized in Althusser and Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, pp. 103–10.

the author and their age and disrupts any semblance of a linear, direct or transparent relationship, is ideology. However, Macherey, following Lenin, is quick to problematize this mediating term. At issue is not a uniform and total ideology; instead, the ideology that mediates the author's relationship to history is one among multiple ideologies that make up the historical period, each authored by a specific class that is part of the social make-up in a particular conjuncture. Macherey writes: "a historical period does not spontaneously produce a single, monolithic ideology, but a series of ideologies determined by the total relation of forces; each ideology is shaped by the pressures upon the class which generates it."[91] If Tolstoy is able to convey "a certain knowledge of his age,"[92] albeit in a manner that is incomplete (incomplete because partial, i.e., mediated by the specific lens of a specific ideology), this is because he drew upon the viewpoint of the peasant. This viewpoint is inevitably incomplete and partial, but also more complicated than simply being a reflection of the author's class position vis-a-vis the social structure. Even though Tolstoy the man comes from an aristocratic family, Tolstoy the author expresses the experience of a different class – that of the *muzhik*. To account for the difference, Macherey puts forth the idea of the "social mobility" of an author; he uses the image of a "traveller" to express the author's ability to migrate away from their own class origins to a different class position, a movement that enables the author not to be bound by their own relationship to the social structure.[93] Tolstoy, then, is "the count with the heart of a *muzhik*" who, like others who produce artistic works of value, is a *traveller* within his own society, which grants him the ability to convey the contradictions of the age.

Althusser builds on this idea of the author as traveller within his own society, unbound by his class origins or even his own political positions, when he refuses to concede to Daspre that the author (in this case Balzac) must have changed his reactionary personal political positions in order to convey a critical sense of his present with his writing. For Daspre, Balzac's critical aesthetic effect can be understood as a function of Balzac's political views, not despite them. For Althusser, by contrast, it is precisely the strength of Balzac's own views, his commitment to his political ideology that allows him to create an "internal distance" from that ideology. Althusser writes of Balzac: "his peculiar, reactionary political

91 Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 128.

92 *Ibid*., p. 126.

93 *Ibid*., p. 127.

positions played a decisive part in the production of the content of his work."[94] This is because the content of an artwork is determined by so much more than simply a reflection of the author's class position or ideological commitments.

The idea that the (great) author/artist is marked by their ability to convey something about ideology that is ultimately irreducible to their subjectivity and ideological investments is taken to its logical conclusions with Althusser's comments on Cremonini's work. In praising Cremonini's radical anti-humanism, Althusser not only extensively comments on the painter's artistic trajectory and the artistic elements in his work that conform to this anti-humanist position, but he also draws attention to how the painter effectively erases himself from his own canvases. Cremonini refuses the temptations of self-recognition in his work, freeing his work from carrying the ideological stamp that marks it as his "creation." If both Macherey and Althusser want to move away from the dominant conception of author/artist as creator, Macherey's proposal of an author as traveller transforms in Althusser's hands to one that travels toward the erasure of the author/artist altogether. This erasure is not simply the author/artist's absence, it is a presence that takes the form of an anonymity, a desubjectivation, an absence, an ability to move from the author/artist as the subject of artistic creation to art as a labor of production of artistic works through which "the structure of the world," the "structural effects of the real relations which govern [subjects]" can be expressed.[95] Cremonini is "present in his painting in the form determined by the relations he paints," Althusser writes, "in the form of their *absence*, i.e. in particular, in the form of *his own absence*."[96] So, too, for Macherey, "the artist produces works, *in determinate conditions*; he does not work on himself but on that thing which escapes him in so many ways, and never belongs to him until after the event."[97] Does this reformulation not bring aesthetic production closer to scientific production?

II. Breaking the Artwork as Mirror

For Macherey, the relation between the work of art and history is mediated by ideology. It is important to account for the artist's "gift" – the particular stamp

94 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", p. 224.

95 Althusser, "Cremonini", p. 239.

96 *Ibid*., p. 240.

97 Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 77. Also see Montag, "Spinoza's Counter-Aesthetics", pp. 80–82.

that artist puts on the work, which prevents it from being reducible to the ideology contained within it.[98] Departing from Lenin, Macherey wants to distinguish the artistic work from being simply a tool of ideological dissemination, on the one hand, and a documentary of existing conditions, on the other. He argues that literary criticism and its specialized conceptual toolbox are necessary to bring out the knowledge inherent in the artwork. This knowledge is neither scientific, nor ideological. At the same time, it is intimately related with how ideology mediates between the work of art and its conjuncture.

An artist's work contains many contradictions: "both the contradictions of his age and the deficiencies involved in his partial or fragmentary view of those contradictions."[99] In Tolstoy's case, this entails both the contradictions of a "*post*-Reform, but *pre*-revolutionary era" in Russian society and the problem of understanding these contradictions through the mediation of a peasant ideology. As a result, while Tolstoy's work embodies the devastating consequences of capitalist development as it affected the landed aristocracy and the peasantry, it does not register either the development of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat.[100] This means that the historical period and its contradictions are not simply reflected in the artwork, as if the artwork held a mirror to its present, but are refracted by the selective or partial point of view afforded by the author's ideological prism. But even then it is problematic to assume that the artwork simply reflects a part in the whole as if it were mechanically reproducing a knowledge of that social reality.

This is where developing a Marxist kind of aesthetic-literary criticism, one that is different from and superior to "bourgeois criticism," runs into problems, problems posed, in fact, by the writings of the foundational figures. In both Engels and Lenin, there is a tendency to appreciate "socialist" or materialist artwork as one that reflects social life in its reality, offers an accurate portrait of social relations, disrupts illusions about reality.[101] This approach is also reflected in Lenin's choice of appellation to characterize Tolstoy. More than once does Lenin call Tolstoy the "mirror" of the Russian revolution. However, this image

98 Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 129.

99 *Ibid*.

100 *Ibid*., p. 127.

101 Harold Osborne, "The Doctrine of Reflection in Soviet Aesthetics", *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (3/1983), pp. 252–58.

creates problems for Macherey because it suggests that what an artwork does is to offer a "reflection" in the sense of a "reproduction or facsimile."[102] Already in Lenin, the metaphor of the "mirror" stands not for an immediate reflection of reality (as in an accurate depiction of the life-world of the peasants) but the reflection of broader truths about the revolution. According to Lenin, Tolstoy not only failed to understand the revolution but he also stood aloof to it. In precisely both counts, he reflects the Russian revolution like a mirror because his attitude was just like the actual participants of the revolution who failed to understand it – despite their participation in the events – and stood aloof from the "real historical tasks" presented to them by the unfolding of the events.[103]

Lenin finds Tolstoy's works to be laden with "glaring" contradictions: on the one hand is his ability to portray Russian life, his protest against its hypocrisies, his critique of the state, property, and the church, his unmasking of capitalist exploitation and its brutal consequences; on the other hand, his preaching of submission to the masses, his doctrine of nonresistance to evil by violence, his articulation of a more refined form of religion, his advocacy of abstention from politics, and his moralization of political conflict. But these contradictions, argues Lenin, are not accidental. Rather, they express the contradictory conditions of Russian life: on the one hand, the coming apart of the patriarchal countryside and the abolition of serfdom; on the other hand, the ambiguity regarding what order is taking shape in its place; on the one hand, the pent-up hatred of the peasantry, on the other hand, their despair in the absence of class consciousness and the politics of alliance and struggle with the proletarians that would follow from that consciousness. In other words, Lenin argues that Tolstoy's contradictions express the contradictions of a peasant-bourgeois revolution, one that is utopian, even reactionary, but with socialistic and critical elements. Overall, Tolstoy holds a mirror, acts as a mirror, to the immaturity of the oppressed classes in terms of their revolutionary preparedness and resilience.
In light of Lenin's analysis, Macherey faces the difficult task of steering the metaphor of the mirror away from any connotations that the artwork presents an exact reproduction of reality or that what is reflected is the same as what the author saw in that reality. Wanting to avoid the temptations of a "*mechanical*

[102] Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 135.
[103] For Lenin's articles on Tolstoy, see "Appendix" in Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, pp. 334–361.

analysis,"[104] and to emphasize the partial, selective quality of the artwork in reflecting its own historical era, Macherey contemplates alternative metaphors of a "distorting mirror," a "broken mirror," multiple mirrors, and a "blind" mirror (in certain areas).[105] None of these does the work. Instead Macherey has to do a lot of acrobatics to salvage the mirror metaphor (though unsuccessfully) and to reconcile the contradictions among Lenin's changing positions across essays. Over and over, he comes back to the basic point: "the mirror is not a simple reflecting surface."[106] Instead, he asserts, the image on the mirror is "deceptive."[107]

Exasperated, and exasperating, the effort to salvage the mirror metaphor keeps falling apart in the essay, leading Macherey to make two important interventions. First, he moves from the conception of "reflection," a connotation of the mirror impossible to expunge, however much he tries, to the conception of "expression." Rather than saying that Tolstoy's work reflects his age, considering the contradictions in its context and within the artwork itself, as well as their complex relationship, Macherey finally opts to assert that it is *expressive* of its age, and the ideology through which it lives its age, meaning "an indirect figuration which arises from the deficiencies of the reproduction."[108] And second, Macherey points out that there is an ineluctable distance between the ideology and the artwork that expresses it, a distance that makes it possible "to escape from the domain of spontaneous ideology, from the false consciousness of self, of history, and of time."[109] Leaving aside the allusion to "false consciousness" as a slip of the pen, we can see how Macherey reformulates the problematic of art away from prior materialist concerns based on its relationship with history, with historically situated social conditions and their contradictions, toward a new basis in its relationship with ideology. What art makes visible in its "mirror," if one can speak of a mirror at all, is ideology, its illusory nature, its "capturing" of subjects, its inevitable contradictions that ideology works so hard not to recognize as contradictions. Thus ideology is "not simply reflected by the mirror of the book; ideology is broken, and turned inside out."[110] Macherey suggests that

[104] Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 136.
[105] *Ibid*., p. 135, pp. 138–9, p. 143.
[106] *Ibid*., p. 137.
[107] *Ibid*., p. 141.
[108] *Ibid*., p. 144.
[109] *Ibid*., p. 148.
[110] *Ibid*.

this can be understood as "an internal displacement of ideology" – "this is not ideology contemplating itself, but the mirror-effect which exposes its insufficiency, revealing differences and discordances, or a significant incongruity."[111]

With these two interventions, we can see how Macherey thus formulates the core of what will constitute Althusser's approach to art: the expression of an internal distance of ideology from within ideology. Let us turn to Althusser. It will be recalled that in his response to Daspre, he defined art in the following terms: "What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing', 'perceiving ' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes." His definition of art as "alluding" to reality can now be better understood as a choice against the highly compromised metaphor of the mirror and its attendant problematic of "reflection," which, thanks to Macherey, Althusser can avoid.[112]

And further, we find the idea of the displacement art enacts within ideology, when Althusser writes, acknowledging Macherey's work and building on it: "Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a 'view' of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a retreat, an internal distanciation from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense from the inside, by an internal distance, the very ideology in which they are held."[113]

When Althusser takes up the mirror, which he does in relation to some of Cremonini's paintings in which he experiments with mirrors, it is no longer deployed as a metaphor of how reality is reflected in the artwork but rather as an

111 *Ibid.*, 149.

112 A decade later, rejecting a simplistic understanding that literature presents a reflection of the material reality of society, Macherey and Balibar situate it as the result of a material practice arising out of determinate social relations and intervene to distinguish the category of "reflection" in materialist analysis from an empiricist conception in which it is equated with "mirroring." They argue: "The reflection, in dialectical materialism, is a 'reflection without a mirror'; in the history of philosophy this is the only effective destruction of the empiricist ideology which calls the relation of thought to the real a speculary (and therefore reversible) reflection." Macherey and Balibar, "Literature as an Ideological Form", p. 5.

113 Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", pp. 222–23.

opacity that separates a human from its own image. It is the mirror that "looks," not the man or woman staring into it; it is the mirror that "sees" in a way that is indifferent to the particular man or woman staring.[114] It is the mirror that refuses a story of genesis; it shows the relations between the objects and the human beings that they are in relation with but not their causes, only an "inexorable circle" of relations.[115] This is why these mirrors need, or at least why Cremonini introduces, verticals that challenge and disrupt the circle of ideological recognition. These remarks echo Macherey's final reworking of the mirror metaphor at the end of his essay on Lenin: "The mirror extends the world: but it also seizes, inflates and tears that world. In the mirror, the object is both completed and broken: *disjecta membra*. If the mirror constructs, it is in an inversion of the movement of genesis: rather than spreading it, it breaks. The images emerge from this laceration. Elucidated by these images, the world and its powers appear and disappear, disfigured at the very moment when they begin to take shape. Hence the childish fear of the mirror which is the fear of seeing *something else*, when it is always the same thing."[116] We name our work after Macherey's powerful evocation of the image of the world in scattered fragments, broken by the peculiar "mirror" of literature, as it best encapsulates our effort of piecing together an Althusserian aesthetics from its remains – the scattered remains in the shadows of Althusser's oeuvre. *Disjecta membra*: always fragmented, ever disseminating, both completing and breaking what Althusser is, complicating his legacy, and yet remaining distinctively Althusserian still.

The Internal Distances Taken

How do Althusser's various marginal and occasional writings enable us to piece together his core insight, namely, that "materialist" art is distinguished by creating an "internal distance" within ideology? Here we mine his commentaries on different works to show how his theorization of that distance from the ideology that they grow from and stage came to life in relation to different ideological formations with which he was engaged theoretically and critically: humanism, Stalinism and official Soviet ideology, and imperialism. Each of his interventions in art focuses on selected artists/authors whose works enact that internal

114 Althusser, "Cremonini", pp. 234–35.

115 *Ibid*., p. 235.

116 Macherey, "Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy", p. 150–51.

distance from one of these ideological formations. His deployment of examples, though differing in the depth of engagement, works to demonstrate how materialist art functions with respect to ideology.

I. Critique of humanism: Cremonini, Bertolazzi

Technically, "The Humanist Controversy" lasted only one year, from March of 1965 when *La Nouvelle Critique* published Althusser's attack on "Real Humanism" to March of the next year when the French Communist Party adopted a "Resolution on Ideological and Cultural Problems." This resolution supposedly settled the intraparty philosophical debate between humanism and anti-humanism in favor of the former.[117] When one looks at Althusser's whole career, it is clear, however, that this was just one skirmish in a long battle between the anti-humanist position in philosophy he sought to articulate and a moralizing tendency in art and philosophy which took many forms: liberal, bourgeois, existentialist, Catholic, Marxist, evolutionary, and personalist.[118]

The generic position of humanism is that there is something intrinsic and special about human beings which must be respected and encouraged. That which humanists identified as special varied: it could be that humans are free, creative, rights-bearing, altruistic, united in their existential situation, marked out by God for some purpose, or that they have a special and universal essence which they are in the process of realizing. In the early 1960s, after Stalinist "diamatics" had been rejected and when something like the last variant of humanism listed above became the French Communist Party's official philosophy, Althusser mustered considerable philosophical resources in order to combat it.

Within the Party, the humanist position was represented by officials and intellectuals such as Roger Garaudy, Henri Lefebvre, and Louis Aragon. For good

117 William S. Lewis, "Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser's "'Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966.'", *Historical Materialism* 15 (2/2007), p. 133; Frédérique Matonti, *Intellectuels Communistes : Essai Sur l'obéissance Politique : "La Nouvelle Critique" (1967–1980)*, Editions la Découverte 2005, p. 71.

118 Louis Althusser, "The International of Decent Feelings", in *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, François Matheron (ed.), G. M Goshgarian (trans.), Verso, London and New York 1997, pp. 21–35; Althusser, "Marx in His Limits", p. 12; Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*, p. 179; Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, "Le mouvement personnaliste français des années 1930 et sa postérité", *Politique et Sociétés* 17 (1-2/1998), pp. 219–37.

reasons, these thinkers rejected the Soviet thought that had guided the Party during the post-war period and they were trying to modernize by appealing to potential members and allies beyond the core to which the Party had been reduced. In place of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, these "thought leaders" adopted an explicitly Hegelian-Marxist philosophy. Seeking pedigree, they traced this philosophy to Marx's writings prior to 1845 when the concept of human alienation and its dialectical development through history to a reunion of human beings with their full power and produce played central roles.[119] Explicitly rejected by these Humanist Marxists was the "economist" thesis associated with Marxism-Leninism which held that the logic of production drives historical transformation. Also rejected was its corollary, which had it that all culture is determined by its relation to economic production. Though still alienated by capitalist exploitation and by its associated ideological superstructure, another common thread that united each of these thinkers was the belief that human beings can realize their full potential through voluntary acts of self-creation.

Who exactly was performing or leading these acts of self-realization and what they consisted of was not consistently identified by Party humanists: Garaudy argued that humanity, in its diversity, is in the process of realizing the human essence in different ways and that we can all learn from each other.[120] His was a kind of "new age" humanism *avant la lettre*. Aragon and Lefebvre endorsed political struggle but they also thought that the "creative activity" of a cultural avant-garde could transform socio-economic and political relations and thereby help to end humanity's self estrangement.[121] What united humanist Marxists most of all was the belief in a knowable essence to human beings. This essence and full freedom were yet unrealized and its expression divided among classes by capitalism.[122] However, the idea of "Total Man" provided a normative measure of human flourishing against which conditions of non-flourishing could

[119] Edmund Demaitre, "In Search of Humanism Marxism-Leninism", *Problems of Communism* 14 (5/1965), p. 19.

[120] Didier Gauvin, "Un intellectuel communiste illégitime: Roger Garaudy", Université Grenoble-Alpes 2016, pp. 297–97.

[121] Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009, p. 50, p. 152, pp. 159–60; Lewis, "Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser's 'Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966'", pp. 142–43.

[122] Richard Eldridge, "Althusser and Ideological Criticism of the Arts", in *Explanation and Value in the Arts*, Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.), 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, Cabridge 1993, p. 198.

be measured and towards the realization of which politics could be oriented. Further, cultural production, including the arts, could be mustered in its realization.[123]

In contradistinction to Marxist humanists, Althusser criticizes the notions of human essence, alienation, and the telic theory of history associated with its eventual overcoming as pre-Marxist. In place of these ideological concepts, he emphasizes the "mature" Marx and references him as the founder of a science of history rather than as the originator of a dialectical and telic philosophical anthropology.[124] The assertions associated with this reading of the mature Marx are that – somewhere around 1845 – Marx abandoned Hegel's philosophical method and Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology and founded a materialist science of history. This science is based on the discovery that what it is to be a human being is determined by a culture's mode of production and the role that one plays in it. Another of its discoveries is that there is no logic to history save for that it consists of class struggle. It also holds that modes of production and therefore human subjectivities and social relations are amenable to transformation through class struggle.[125] An addendum to this last claim relates to Althusser's insistence that Marx originated a novel and correct science of history. Specifically, and as explicitly counterposed to Marxist humanism, it is that this transformation is only possible with a scientific understanding of the material forces which shape humans and their socio-economic relations.[126]

Given this background, we can better understand the interventions into art criticism Althusser undertook in close proximity to the humanist controversy and which were shaped by the battles within Marxist philosophy and aesthetics which gave rise to that conflict during the first half of the 1960s.[127] The first of these interventions is Althusser's defense of the Piccolo Teatro's 1962 pro-

123 G. M. Goshgarian, "Introduction to The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67", in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings, 1966–67*, Verso, London and New York 2003, pp. xi–lxi; Lewis, "'Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser's "Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March, 1966'", pp. 142–45.

124 Matonti, *Intellectuels Communistes : Essai Sur l'obéissance Politique : "La Nouvelle Critique" (1967-1980)*, p. 81.

125 Althusser and Balibar, *Reading "Capital"*, pp. 122–3.

126 Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 168, p. 229.

127 Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 58–60.

duction in Paris of Bertolazzi's 1893 melodrama *El nost Milan*. The second is his take on the retrospective exhibition of Leonardo Cremonini's paintings at the 1964 Venice Biennale. Though markedly different in terms of subject matter, both focus on artists whose works consciously and intentionally enact an internal distance from humanist ideology and, thereby, reveal the real condition of human beings.[128] With *El nost Milan*, Althusser argues that spatial and temporal dislocations inherent to the play's structure accomplish this work. By way of contrast, Althusser traces the diachronic development of Cremonini's painterly depictions of human figures in order to make the case that Cremonini progressively decenters the human subject. The result, he claims, is that the viewer's ideological identification with the figures depicted becomes complicated.[129]

To take *El nost Milan* first and to situate it in context, Althusser wished to defend its importance and aesthetic worth from the disregard of Parisian audiences and from the contumely of the capital's critics.[130] Apparently, when they were not bored, these critics could only see in Piccolo Teatro's production the tired revival of a dead form: the melodrama, which makes use of stock characters, dramatic, well-trodden plots, and outsized emotion to engage its audience.[131] Rather than viewing the work as passé, Althusser emphasizes the tension within the piece between this passé form and its staging. In order to capture this strain, Althusser analyzes the play in terms of four dislocations. The first two dislocations, spatial and temporal, are "latent" within the play and brought to the fore by Giorgio Strehler's directorial choices. The latter two are the result of the dislocations made visible by the play and take place both on stage–in the form of a character's transformation–and beyond the footlights in the audience's consciousness.[132]

The temporal dislocation in the play is affected by the décalage between the two historical senses of time that the piece juxtaposes. The first temporality Althusser labels "tragic time." It is the procession typical of the melodrama, that duration within which history takes place and dramatic events unfold. Interestingly, and in a move that may render the first-reading of this essay diffi-

128 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", pp. 157–66.
129 Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 142.
130 *Ibid*., p. 141.
131 *Ibid*., p. 131.
132 *Ibid*., p. 151; Pippa, "A Heap of Splinters On the Floor", p. 14.

cult for a Marxist reader who thinks dialectics are generally positive, Althusser labels this time "dialectical" before adding that the dialectical transformation characteristic of this duration is that of a "false dialectic." By the end of the piece, this false dialectic will be compared to the genuine dialectical transformation of the heroine's and audience's consciousness.[133]

In the case of *El nost Milan*, the actual events of the melodrama and, therefore, of tragic time and of the "false dialectic" take up very little of the running time. As one of the Parisian critics put it, the plot revolves around three characters: "the vengeful father, the punished crook, and the young woman who sticks to her guns."[134] Ostensibly, the play is about a young woman, Nina, torn between the designs of two men. The first, her father Peppon–a "fire-eater" in the circus, wishes to spare his daughter from the harshness of lumpen-proletariat life. He wants to raise her right and to keep her from falling in with a criminal element. This possibility and this class is represented by Nina's love interest, the clown and crook Carloue, nick-named "the Togasso." Like any melodramatic villain worthy of a nick-name, the Togasso's intention is to seduce the virtuous young woman and to use her for his own nefarious ends. This conflict is introduced at the end of the first act in "lightning" fashion and, indeed, Carloue does abuse Nina in the second. With Togasso's murder by Peppon, the dispute over Nina's path is resolved at the end of the second act with the same alacrity. The drama of the third act is consumed with Nina's reaction to her father's confession that he has killed for the sake of her honor and her rejection of the bourgeois respectability so tragically gifted for a sub-proletarian life of her own choosing.[135] Like the *déroulement* of the events of the first and second act, this climax and denouement takes up only a few minutes of the third acts' running time.

So where in this story is the tragic dialectic and why is it false? Althusser is subtle in his analysis and points out that the dialectic exists in multiple places: onstage, in the audience, and in the history of the melodramatic form. Onstage, it is represented in the figure of the father, Peppon, who has invented for Nina "the fiction of an imaginary condition, and encouraged her in her romantic illu-

133 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 151.

134 Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, "'El nost Milan', de Bertolazzi par le Piccolo Teatro de Milan", *Le Monde.fr* (June 15, 1962).

135 Roger Pic, "[El Nost Milan, Texte de Carlo Bertolazzi : Photographies / Roger Pic]", image, Gallica, 1962, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84200619.

sions."[136] Likewise entranced by this fiction, the play's spectators identify with the imaginary possibility of escape into bourgeois respectability and the father's desire to bestow it.[137] After all, don't we all want the same thing for our children? The dialectic is then set in motion by the conflict between Peppon, who wants nothing more than the conventional "best" for his daughter: marriage, security, and respectability, by Carloue, who wants to use her, and a heroine, Nina, tossed between the two. Nina transcends this conflict, and thus provides an antithesis as well as a satisfying ending, but only in a tragic manner. This resolution is in keeping both with the conventions of the melodrama and the expectations of the audience. "Yes," they say as they exit the theater, "life is just sometimes like that, especially if one is a member of the underclasses." Later, in the essay "On Brecht and Marx," Althusser will label this type of reaction a "fictive" risk. The audience takes pleasure in the possibility that their ideas about the world will be upset by the events of a play but, in the end, the drama only ever toys with this interruption.[138] In the end, the members of the audience recognize the world they believe that they occupy in the logic of the play.

Althusser, however, suggests that there is another reading to the play than the merely tragic and that, in Nina's escape from her father, we see both tragedy and liberation from bourgeois convention. Stefano Pippa labels this choice an act of "disinterpellation."[139] It is the conduct of a subject refusing to recognize herself in the dominant ideology as it is represented by her father's and indeed the audience's own wishes. What allows this choice, which is not quite free but nonetheless genuine, is precisely Nina's eventual contact with "the real," which, in turn, allows her to reject her father's dialectical myths.

How is this contact with the real made? How do Nina and the audience which identifies with her both see it? Althusser attributes this perception to the genuine dialectic facilitated by Strehler's spatial and temporal choices. In this regard, Althusser repeatedly calls attention to the choice of the director to present the melodramatic elements as swiftly as possible and to have these events appear

136 Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 133.

137 Per Brandt, "Fiction et Philosophie. Les Notes d'Althusser Sur Un Théâtre Matérialiste 1", *Revue Romane* 1 (January 1, 1977), p. 37.

138 Montag and Althusser, "On Brecht and Marx (1968)", p. 147.

139 Pippa, "A Heap of Splinters On the Floor", pp. 131–32.

"in the wings, somewhere in the corner of the stage."[140] What otherwise fills the time and space of each act are the trivial doings of minor underclass characters, the "flotsam" of the past. In the first act they are interminably "discussing industry, politics, and, almost, the future, but only just and with difficulty." In the second, we see another group of them barely surviving. In the third, yet another configuration of the Milanese underclass almost disappears into the walls.[141]

One critic wondered if this imbalance between plot and depictions of the underclasses stemmed from the director's nostalgia for the realism of Eugène Sue or from a misplaced love for its Soviet variety.[142] Althusser, though, tried to understand what this juxtaposition accomplished. His verdict was that the diminution of dialectical time and space: the time of the story, and the augmentation and foregrounding of the chronicle of the Milanese sub-proletariat in their "wretched existence" expresses the dissociation or "absence of relations" between the two temporalities displayed within the proscenium.[143] The ostensive subject, the tragic melodrama is acted against the background of the realistic "chronicle" and, due to this proximity, the viewer naturally assumes that they must be related.

If the spatial and temporal relations between the two were reversed and the events of the play given center stage, Nina's story could function as synecdoche. However, the sheer imbalance between the compressed unfurling "plot" of the play, acted in the wings, and the time and space devoted to a chronicle of "discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility,"[144] suggest that Nina's relationship to both worlds is more complex. While her father exists in lightning-tragic time and wholly identifies with the values which support the stories permitted to exist within it, Nina's rejection of these values and affiliation with the wretched of Millan forces a different type of reckoning. Yes, as with all dialectic, there is a synthesis of the two times but this does not mean that they become identical; in the spectator's head as, eventually in Nina's, the two are held apart. On the one hand, there are the values and rules of the ideological world the melodrama represents and with which the spectator identifies. On the other, there is the real

140 Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", p. 138.
141 *Ibid*., pp. 132–33.
142 Poirot-Delpech, "'El nost Milan', de Bertolazzi par le Piccolo Teatro de Milan".
143 Kowsar, "Althusser on Theatre", p. 465.
144 Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (1962)", pp. 135–7.

world of a sub-proletariat stuck in a post-Risorgimento existence. In these dislocated worlds, the agency Nina exhibits appears as a "free" choice made possible by the perception of the real conditions of her existence. The effect of the spatial and temporal dislocations is, therefore, to reveal the melodramatic consciousness of Nina's father and of the spectator "as a veneer on a real condition."[145]

In the essay on the Piccolo Teatro, the terms "humanism" and anti-humanism are not mentioned. Despite avoiding the terms, it is clear that the false dialectic of the melodrama, the story which matches up with the spectator's worldview, has all of the characteristics of a humanist ideology, albeit in bourgeois rather than Marxist guise. Represented by the father and occupying tragic time, this mystified consciousness recognizes that we live in a world of difficult circumstances and that we may be forced to make choices. Not unsophisticated, the tragic consciousness "knows" that it may even be the case that one's status as a woman or as a member of the underclass makes these circumstances all the more difficult. However, by its own agency and actions, it also holds that it is possible to overcome these circumstances and to arrive at a less alienated state or, at the very least, to be true to oneself. Nina's choice to reject these norms is not, however, presented as self-realization. Rather, it is presented by Althusser as a moment when Nina glimpses the true reality of the Milanese underclass and rejects the dream of bourgeois respectability. After this choice, Nina is in some ways more free than she was before. This is not because she has realized her essence; it is because she has stopped living in the world of ideology. With her choice to forsake her father's gift, she thereby places herself back into the system of real relations which constrain her and which were previously invisible. By showing the "absence of relations" between the bourgeois humanist ideology and the objective situation that stands as its contrast, Nina, Strehler, and the Piccolo Teatro, Althusser claim, exhibit to the viewer their true relation … united by a lived relationship.[146]

Compared to *El nost Milan* in 1962, the relation of Althusser's criticism to theoretical anti-humanism is much clearer in the case of Leonardo Cremonini. As with the Piccolo Teatro, Althusser is motivated to defend an Italian friend's art

[145] *Ibid*., pp. 138–39.

[146] Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 135.

against French critics who see it as a poor example of a tired form.[147] However, if not by 1964, then certainly by the time the final French-language version of the piece was published in 1966, the conflict with humanism had become acute and Althusser's response to it well-rehearsed.[148] As in "Piccolo Teatro," we see Althusser moving fluidly (and confusingly) between the artist's intention, the formal qualities of the work(s), and the effect of the work on the audience. In this critique, however, the relevant temporality is not parallel and plural but linear and singular. In the progression of Cremonini's tableaux and development as an artist, Althusser claims, we see him move from an ideological, humanist project, concerned with connecting humans to nature, to a genuinely anti-humanist practice of painting where both the artist and the "human" are effaced.[149]

One of the things that Althusser clearly admires about Cremonini's paintings is that they are materialist. By this, he means that they are neither landscapes, nor portraits, nor narrative but, rather, that they consist of assemblages of material things: stones, water, rocks, beach balls, human bodies, mirrors, all placed in relation within the canvas. Though Cremonini's early tableaux exhibit a kind of spontaneous materialism, Althusser contends that they are also recognizably humanist. This is a strange thing to say as these daubs began with the geological–rocks and sea, moved to the vegetable–stems and sky, and progressed to animals–bones and skins. Humans were not the focus. Eventually, though, humans were added into these assemblages and connected by line to the scapular angles and slim stems. According to Althusser, what makes these works in their succession humanist is that they speak to an evolutionary origin: the human has evolved from nature and has a special place within it.[150]

In the painter's next stage, Althusser views Cremonini's paintings as suggesting that the human figure stands in relation to the natural, just not as its end. A logic of natural progression of things to man gives way to a logic of differences among things and man.[151] This difference is not just expressed in the human figures' relation to the natural, which shifts from nest to cage, but in their relation to one another and to themselves. These intra-human relations are depicted as a

147 *Ibid*., p. 157.
148 Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 57–58.
149 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 153, p. 165.
150 *Ibid*., pp. 159–60.
151 *Ibid*., p. 160.

kind of incomplete circuit. In shabby rooms, Cremonini's figures look at mirrors but see no self-image reflected. When they sleep, the mirrors look at them. As Sarah Wilson points out, this is all a visual representation of the "mirror stage". However, the stage is not complete and, as any reader of Lacan knows, if one cannot recognize oneself, then one cannot misrecognize oneself as a coherent and whole subject.[152] Therefore, the human-formed "non- subjects" depicted by Cremonini can only be what they are: objects in abstract relation to the other objects which circumscribe their space and their possibilities for action. Mirrors – men – water – rocks – wardrobes "'depict' the fact that the objects and their forms, though related among themselves, are only so related because they turn in the same circle, because they are subject to the same law, a law which now 'visibly' dominates the relations between the objects and their men."[153]

After casting humans from any story of natural origin and then visually depicting them as neither being identical to their own notions of themselves nor responsible for their own relations, Althusser argues that Cremonini and his paintings progress to one final visual critique of humanist ideology. Spying paintings from this phase, anonymous French critics at the Biennale labeled them hackneyed expressionism. However, Althusser views them as confirmation of his (and Cremonini's) materialist antihumanism.[154] Guessing what the critics were thinking, Althusser acknowledges that the "monstrous" "deformed" faces Cremonini paints in this phase could be read as indictments of modernity, of the pressures that deform the genuine human subject and which trouble its soul. In order for the spectator to identify with such expressionist portraiture, they need to see themselves in it. In this sense, Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon's paintings of "deformed" subjects reflect back to us our anxious interior states. Inasmuch as we recognize ourselves in their figures, we reaffirm the universal human experience as the true subject of the painting.

In contrast to what expressionist figures signify, Althusser argues that Cremonini's monstrous representations of the human face accomplish something altogether different. Unlike the well-known visages of *The Scream* (1893) or *Untitled*

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152 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Norton, New York 2006, pp. 78–79; Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, p. 58.

153 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 160.

154 Gen Doy, "Materializing Art History", *Art History* (1998), p. 178.

(Pope) (1954), Cremonini's faces are characterized not by deformity but by de-formation.[155] In them, the "humanist-religious ideology of the function of the human face" is short-circuited. The viewer no more recognizes herself in these faces than does Nina's father – still living through and in bourgeois humanist ideology – recognize himself in the historyless "flotsam" that surrounds him.

Part of what makes portraiture appealing, even of the expressionist "ugly" kind, is that we recognize ourselves in it. Even dressed in purple, ermine, and crowns, painted subjects appear "like us." What Althusser says about Cremonini's final stage of painting is that he makes this identification impossible. Yes, we see figures that are recognizably human but these figures are not a representation of ourselves as we are used to thinking about ourselves: that is, as whole individuals endowed with agency and capable of free choices. Because of the way Cremonini paints them, we can only perceive these figures as human-shaped material objects de-formed by and fixed in relations to other material objects. The result of this dislocation of the human subject and the fixing of humans according to the relations which govern them evidences, Althusser argues, "a profoundly anti-humanist and materialist understanding."[156]

II. Critique of Stalinism and official Soviet ideology: Solzhenitsyn, Fanti

If one of Althusser's ongoing preoccupations was the critique for humanism, another was to delineate a rigorous Marxist philosophy (first the quest of a philosophy *of* Marxism, later turned into the quest for a philosophy *for* Marxism) purified from the distortions, deformations, and reductions that arose from its Stalinist inflection, and its further ossification at the hands of the official Soviet state apparatus even after the ostensible announcement of de-Stalinization. Thus, Althusser was particularly interested in challenges, theoretical, literary or artistic, to Stalinism, especially those that had the potential of bypassing humanism, which he considered as a liberalizing influence on communist politics. Already in his letter to Daspre, Althusser cites Solzhenitsyn as an author who makes visible the "lived experience" of Stalinism, or what he refers to as "the 'cult of personality' and its effects."[157] The choice of Solzhenitsyn is guided by Daspre's original letter, so Althusser does not delve into an analysis of

155 Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract", p. 163.
156 *Ibid*., pp. 163–64.
157 Althusser, "A Letter on Art", p. 224.

Solzhenitsyn's novel. Instead, while he asserts that Solzhenitsyn's work offers a view of Stalinism from within, by effecting an internal distance from it, he really mobilizes the example to underscore the distinction between "reality" and "lived experience" of that reality. Arguing against an empiricist approach to art, and the reflection theory, Althusser writes: "This 'lived' experience is not a given, given by a pure 'reality', but the spontaneous 'lived experience' of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real."[158] This move allows Althusser to put forth the argument that whereas art and science may share this "lived experience" as their object, the kind of knowledge produced by each on the basis of the same object remains distinct from one another. While Solzhenitsyn's novel captures the effects of Stalinism as they have been lived by subjects experiencing it, it does not offer an understanding that science would: namely, "the conceptual knowledge of the complex mechanisms which eventually produce the 'lived experience' that Solzhenitsyn's novel discusses."[159] Nor can it offer ways to overcome the effects of "cult of personality" – which is the domain of politics.

Nonetheless, the assertion of Solzhenitsyn's novel in making visible the effects of Stalinism is just that, an assertion that is unsubstantiated in the absence of analysis. However, a similar point is made by Althusser, this time in greater depth, in relation to the work of Lucio Fanti about a decade later. In 1977, Althusser pens a catalog entry for Fanti's exhibition in Paris at the Krief-Raymond Gallery. In this short text, Althusser characterizes Fanti's painting as "painting an ideology," the official ideology of the Soviet Union, but he also emphasizes that this painting is not simply the reproduction of that ideology. Instead, he finds in Fanti's arresting work the production of a "miniscule interior distance, which destabilizes [that ideology], identifies it and denounces it."[160] Fanti paints Soviet sculptures, paintings, and museum objects – personas and artifacts of official ideology – but in painting them he practices an "implacable décalage." The ideology in the photographic images that Fanti paints is not immediately available as ideology; instead, it has permeated not only the objects of the photographs – the statues and and paintings – but also the "symbolism of the figures, the framing, the type of landscape" in which these objects are

158 *Ibid*., p. 223.
159 *Ibid*., p. 224.
160 Althusser, "Sur Lucio Fanti", *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, p. 593.

found.[161] "The photographers pictures [clichés] framing/composing the ideological clichés at one-thousandth of a second," writes Althusser. By painting the photographs of official ideology, is Fanti reproducing their clichés? Is he simply playing with them, while repeating them? Althusser answers these questions in the negative. Instead, Fanti enacts a décalage, exposing these images for what they mean. Through this décalage, he turns the usual into the unfamiliar, highlights the absence in the midst of presence, and unveils the ossification of an ideology which has permeated all facets of everyday life with its iconography. Offering a commentary that moves through Fanti's various pieces, including the ones subtitled with Maiakovsky's suicide note, Althusser notes how Lenin and Maiakovsky maintain ghostlike existences that haunt their own statues, insisting on a truth that cannot be wished away: "Words of a dead man, very dead, [yet] still alive in what he denounced."[162] Fanti makes us see the truth of Soviet ideology, beneath the constructed identity of the "new human," the depoliticization and emptying out of a vision – "these gigantic electrifying pylons of a Communism lacking only Soviets!"[163] If the specters of marching workers above the young pioneers in his painting "Grandchildren of the Revolution [*I nipoti della rivoluzione*]" (1969) were not sufficient to capture the hope of a different future, there stood in his "Electrification plus the Sentiment of Nature *[L'électrification plus le sentiment de la nature]*" (1977) the ghostly presence of a huge pylon over a landscape, with an inexplicable light shining through the darkness surrounding the tall pine trees, encapsulating its lost promise.[164]

Althusser's reading of Fanti's artwork could not have given a stronger endorsement of how materialist art – even in its most ironic, poetic, and dreamy forms – has the capacity to convey a "reality," which one may dare call the "truth," of an ideology. Althusser's piece, commending Fanti for "reveal[ing] the naked truth," ended with the dramatic declaration: "only naked kings reign."[165] Reflecting Althusser's disillusionment with the official ideology of the Soviet Union, his comments on Fanti appear as a necessary detour, a tragic coming to terms. In Sarah Wilson's words, "Althusser's self-investment in the Fanti preface may

161 *Ibid*., p. 592.

162 *Ibid*., p. 593.

163 *Ibid*., p. 591, p. 593.

164 For Lucio Fanti's paintings, see http://www.documentsdartistes.org/artistes/fanti/repro1.html

165 Althusser, "Sur Lucio Fanti", p. 594.

be read as an oblique *detournement* of the Communist genre of confessional 'self-criticism' (originating in the first Moscow show trials). At an acute moment of political crisis and personal dismay, apprehending the possible disintegration of the global Communist system, Althusser was, indeed, using the USSR as a 'necessary detour' to speak of himself."[166] Of his disillusionment.[167]

III. Critique of imperialism and peaceful co-existence: Álvarez Ríos, Lam

Finally, Althusser's commentary on two other painters – Álvarez Ríos and Lam – are interesting in how it mobilizes their work as exemplars of a distanciation, this time through vocabularies of surrealism, from imperialism. Althusser's essay on Álvarez Ríos, his first writing on art, is composed prior to the development of his distinctive formulations as well as the influence of Macherey's interventions. That being said, a retrospective analysis of his text in light of his later formulations, reveals similar insights, though lacking in the conceptual vocabulary that came later. Althusser attributes to certain painters an ability to transform a largely institutionalized (and thereby tamed) genre and pinpoints how Álvarez Ríos enacts this transformation. More importantly, the genre, in this case surrealism, has come to represent a geopolitical divide informed by the world's political conjuncture. Writing on the heels of the Cuban missile crisis, the ideological atmosphere is saturated by American imperialism and its defiance. This crisis should be understood against the recent and violent background of France's war in Algeria, which had already raised significant questions about imperialism. In line with the PCF, to which Althusser had become a member in the late 1940s, Althusser interpreted American imperialism as the main threat in the Cold War, a perspective largely shaped by the hegemony of the USSR within the international communist movement. As a result, the PCF's ambivalent and delayed response to the Algerian War manifested in its adoption of a general call for peace. As Bécquer Seguín has also argued, the Algerian

166 Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 120–21.

167 This disillusionment and his growing criticism of the PCF are reflected in Althusser's more well-known writings from the same period. See, for example, Louis Althusser, "On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party", NLR I/104, (July–August 1977"), pp. 3–22; Louis Althusser, "The Crisis of Marxism", *Marxism Today* (July 1978), p. 215; Louis Althusser, "Marxism Today", in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, Gregory Elliott (ed.), Verso, London and New York 1990, pp. 267–80; Althusser, "Marx in His Limits"; Louis Althusser, "Some Questions Concerning the Crisis of Marxist Theory and of the International Communist Movement", *Historical Materialism* 23 (1/2015), pp. 152–78.

war had led French surrealism into a crisis, compounded with the leftwing ambivalence about decolonization.[168] In this conjuncture of the height of the Cold War, Álvarez Ríos's cultural biography as a young Cuban painter coming to Paris prompted Althusser's sympathies, according to Sarah Wilson, as well as a catalogue preface by "the Surrealist doyen Jose Pierre, who evoked magic, eroticism, spirituality," against which Althusser's politically charged take becomes even more pronounced.[169]

In his essay, Althusser posits surrealism as a current that has largely become institutionalized and therefore lost its critical edge, even as he acknowledges how it lives on in the works of such painters as Ernst, Matta, and Lam. Against this background, he casts Álvarez Ríos as one of the "youths" in whose painting surrealism is "being born again."[170] The renaissance of surrealism against its death, ossified "like a church with its masses and its Latin, its syntax and its vocabulary, its lamentation of an old literary organ at the end of the nave, its passwords," renews our faith – its prayers, which had become familiar mumbles, come alive again and teem with meaning. This is because in the hands of Álvarez Ríos, as with other non-European painters (Cuban and Latin American) such as Lam, Cardenas, Matta, surrealism is transformed. These painters could transform the language of surrealism because of "the effect produced by the profound affinities with the living past of a world, with the matter of a working class life that is close by: that language does not have there the same meaning it had here."[171]

If one determinant of the ability of these painters to transform surrealism is their proximity to a working class reality, one that is also much more alive for them than it is for the "church" of surrealists, another is that history "there" is a "living past," an "open unconscious," in direct contrast to the way is occluded and buried "here." Althusser's class-based antagonism sits over a geographic breach between a "there" – Cuba and Latin America – and a "here" – France, Europe – reflecting the difference between the new world, with its rising prominence, and the old world, ossified and dying. His comments reflect an acknowledgement

168 Seguín, "Mute Cries", p. 100.
169 Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory*, pp. 53–54.
170 Althusser, "A Young Cuban Painter Before Surrealism: Álvarez Ríos (1962)", p. 110.
171 *Ibid*., p. 111.

that imperialism and anti-imperialism constitute the main ideological contradiction of the global political conjuncture, pitting the Western, imperialist camp against the socialist world. On one side of the breach within surrealism rests a proximate revolutionary history, a discourse of freedom based on the history of slavery and the revolutionary struggle to overcome it and transform society; on the other side only a conjuring of the specter of a fading and domesticated history – "the incantation of a lost, perverse history whose meaning one wanted to tame at all costs."[172] The new and the old, the south and the north, surrealism alive and reinvigorated and surrealism ritualized and emptied out: "Hence, the singular difference, so astonishing, between *two forms of speaking the same language*: here, the tense speech of a freedom less delivered than called upon to be born; there, an almost naive voice that speaks of men and beings."[173]

Further, addressing Álvarez Ríos more specifically, Althusser likens the transformation he enacts in surrealism to his speaking French – a language "born before him" and a language that he was not born into. Álvarez Ríos's voice does not simply reproduce the language he is speaking but transforms it "in his speech, his accent, his syntactic and semantic invention, in the transformation of these turns and figures."[174] This is how the language of surrealism avoids death – by being taken up by a speaker who can speak it in his own, foreign, way, bringing it to bear on the present. The result: "Everything is thus *displaced*."[175] In one of the few paintings he comments upon, Althusser writes of *David's Sling*: "a crowd of brothers that merges with the shoreline of an island all the way to the sea, with their outstretched arms as their only weapons against the monster of a thousand cannon blocking the sky."[176] The references to "peace" and "freedom" echo the discourse of the PCF at the time, while also reflecting a "routine exoticism of the Third World,"[177] characterized by references to a certain "naivete," a "natural language," a "great harmony" between human beings and nature, a "happiness" that juxtapose it to the learned "abyss hidden in the night" that is Europe.

172 *Ibid*.
173 *Ibid*.
174 *Ibid*., p. 112.
175 *Ibid*.
176 *Ibid*., p. 111.
177 Seguín, "Mute Cries", p. 101.

Similar themes resurface when Althusser writes for Wilfredo Lam's exhibition to be held in Nanterre in 1977 upon the painter's request. Lam, Althusser writes, strikes a cord in him even at the first encounter: "Unbeknownst, it was already part of me."[178] And with each foray into Lam's work, Althusser confesses that he discovers that Lam "had always preceded me."[179] Not only does Althusser register Lam's pioneering role in surrealist painting, but he also shows his respect for his legacy, joining Lam in the quality that he attributes his work: humility. A humility marked by nativity to a foreign land and its riches, perhaps even a "primitivism."[180] Lam has already articulated in his painting the sense of a different world Althusser is only coming to discover and perceive by the encounter with his work. Lam's world is teeming with creatures, plants, animals, and humans; in it nature is alive, bodies naked, faces mute. The immediate presence of nature, raw, loved, vivacious, is implicitly counterposed to their absence for Althusser and his world. Lam reminds Althusser of something he knew but forgot, something always-already and not-yet, a nature that already preceded him but also encountered for the first time, something entirely foreign yet, like a "miracle," audible and recognizable, something to which he has already corporeally surrendered. How otherwise can we understand the novelty and difference of the world to which Lam belongs and which he conveys: "this man, who comes to us from the end of the world, the other one, from the edge of an endless ocean, this painter who traces in such long or dense lines birds beasts flowers creepers jungles and humans never before seen, this foreign man who speaks in silence our unknown language, and we hear him."[181] It is because Lam speaks the language of the unconscious. But unlike Freud's "uncanny," that strange familiarity, Lam gives a "familiar strangeness." This is because Lam's art makes "his" world ours, without assimilating it into our own. He retains the strangeness, the otherness for us to encounter. That nature, foreign and alive, unassimilable, and uncolonizable, in Lam, we soon find out, is part of us, even if that part is buried deep in our unconscious. For Althusser, Lam's distinctive quality as a painter resides in his ability to transcend the distance and difference between his world and that of the viewer.

178 Althusser, "Lam (1977)", p. 113
179 *Ibid*., p. 114.
180 Seguín, "Mute Cries", p. 108.
181 Althusser, "Lam (1977)", p. 114.

Written in a much more personal register than his earlier texts on art, Althusser's take on Lam is that his work nonetheless shares the basic quality of art – that of enacting a critical distance from ideology. What is this ideology? The answer to this question reveals how Althusser has moved in his political diagnosis in the supervening years. Now at stake is the ideology of a global peace, of "peaceful co-existence" and cooperation between the two camps.[182] We can see this ideology thanks to Lam, "because he lays it bare."[183] Althusser commends Lam's ability to disclose the deep tensions that permeate this global peace, as a result of accumulated histories of violence and relations of inequity. Having characterized Lam as hailing from a different world, from the limits of that world, he conveys how Lam thus paints "the mute cry of a people crushed by centuries of history," a world whose suffering and dignity he thus opens to us. Here we encounter the divide Althusser had formerly characterized surrealism as being marked with – the south and the north, the anti-imperialist shores of the Atlantic and the old Europe. Lam paints at the limits of his own world; he thus also paints the limits of Althusser's world and the ideology that sustains their imagined unity. Lam unveils the violence that has attempted to oppress and humiliate his people, what has led to their suffering and then muted their cries. Althusser takes note of Lam's defiance of that humiliation and violence as well as the ideology of peace that covers it. Lam is timeless – a true "master" – who stretches from the past into the depths of the present and yet he signifies a new world being born in defiance of the old. Althusser ends his note: "I discover him: I have known Lam forever. He was born before us, the oldest painter in the world: the youngest."[184]

Conclusion

So, too, we can write: We discover Althusser: we have known Althusser forever. At once familiar and strange, Althusser's scattered reflections on literature, painting, and theater allow us to piece together these fragments – at once intuitive and sophisticated, overdetermined and undertheorized, brilliant and banal, novel and predictable, reflective of the sharpness characteristic of Althusser's pen while also dynamic, impure, and contradictory. Even after this charitable

[182] A slightly more detailed version of the political diagnosis can also be found in Louis Althusser, "Book on Imperialism", in *History and Imperialism*, pp. 100–101.

[183] Althusser, "Lam (1977)", p. 114.

[184] *Ibid*.

reconstruction, there remain multiple issues with Althusser's aesthetics which threaten its coherence with the rest of his philosophy and that limit its novelty. For us, an important limitation is Althusser's reliance on notions of "great" or "authentic" art and on the related supposition that such art is created by great artists. Reading Althusser symptomatically, we can see this insistence as an ideological holdover from a bourgeois theory of art, one that Althusser explicitly sets his aesthetic and political philosophy against. Not only that, we can see that these holdover notions compromise the ability of his aesthetic theory to recognize and make sense of the diversity of artistic phenomena and their effects. As such experiences are necessary to overcome existing ideologies and to put an issue on the political agenda,[185] limiting the site of their production to great artists, working in traditional media, with the support of traditional institutions, blinds the critic to artistic experiences which may be initiated neither by a single subject, nor occur in a traditional medium. In fact, these works may not even look like "art" endowed with the rituals of cultural recognition at all. It is our belief that such "everyday" and extra-institutional displacements, dislocations that enlarge and democratize the field of aesthetic production may also have that subversive and transformative effect on subjects viewing and participating in them as the plays of the Piccolo Teatro, the novels of Balzac, and the paintings of Álvarez Ríos, Cremonini, Fanti and Lam had on Althusser. Inasmuch as these "everyday" and extra-institutional displacements achieve such effects, they may, thereby, help initiate radical political change.

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