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# “A HEAP OF SPLINTERS ON THE FLOOR”. IDEOLOGY AND DIS INTERPELLATION IN ALTHUSSER<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

One of the most persistent allegations levelled against Althusser’s theory of ideology is that it does not permit to think the moment of resistance to the grip of “interpellation”, not allowing any space for the possibility of the subject to disentangle herself/himself from its power. Challenging this widespread view, this article aims to bring to the fore the widely unrecognized presence, within Althusser’s own theorization, of an implicit theory of “disinterpellation” *ante litteram*, which Althusser develops in his 1962 essay “The “Piccolo Teatro”: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre”. The article will argue that Althusser’s text, if read “symptomatically”, permits to define the general conditions of possibility of a “break” with and within one’s own subjectivity, i.e., with the endless circle of ideological recognition. This break, which I interpret as a “metapolitical moment” of de-subjectivation, constitutes the necessary premise for the transformation of a spectator into an “actor”. As such, it represents the still incomplete but necessary starting point for the constitution of a new political subjectivity.

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## Keywords

Althusser, ideology, disinterpellation, Brecht, subjectivity.

## Resumen

Una de las acusaciones más persistentes en contra de la teoría de la ideología de Althusser es que no permite pensar el momento de resistencia a la «interpelación», ni ningún espacio para la posibilidad de que el sujeto se desenrede de su poder. Desafiando esta visión, este artículo tiene como objetivo destacar la presencia, ampliamente desconocida dentro de la propia teorización de Althusser, de una teoría implícita de «desinterpelación» *ante litteram*, que Althusser desarrolla en su ensayo de 1962 «El «Piccolo Teatro»: Bertolazzi y Brecht. Apuntes sobre un teatro materialista». Este artículo argumentará que el texto de Althusser, si se lee «sintomáticamente», permite definir las condiciones generales de posibilidad de una «ruptura» con y dentro de la propia subjetividad, es decir, con el círculo infinito de reconocimiento ideológico. Esta ruptura, que interpreto como un «momento metapolítico» de des-subjetivación, constituye la premisa necesaria para la transformación de un espectador en un «actor». Como tal, representa el punto de partida, aún incompleto pero necesario, para la constitución de una nueva subjetividad política.

## Palabras clave

Althusser, ideología, desinterpelación, Brecht, subjetividad.

The question of subject and subjectivity runs through all of Althusser's work. Surely, it runs through it *in a polemical form*, since Althusser is almost universally recognized as the champion of theoretical anti-humanism, of structures, as the proponent of a "non-ideological concept of history as a process *without* subject", to use Descombe's words (1979, p. 95). So, what would Althusser have to tell us about the theme that came to the fore, as a theoretical-political need, *after* the season of althusserianism, which can be described, borrowing Badiou's (2007) words, as the need to elaborate a post-cartesian doctrine of the subject, of whose unfolding we would be contemporaries? (p. 1). No doubt, this unfolding runs through a large part of contemporary critical theory or philosophy, in the predominant forms of the hysterical subject, the post-evental subject, the subject of resistance, the populist subject, the hegemonic subject, the subject of disagreement, the multitudinous subject... The question is even more paradoxical since the rethinking of the issue of subject, in its various forms (certainly not assimilable to each other, but which are part of the same broad line of research), has usually taken shape *against* the explicit project of althusserianism. Is not the majority of the attempts to reconceptualize subjectivity after structuralism in the field of critical theory, almost invariably, premised either on a criticism of Althusser, or on a choice alternative to him? (Lacan instead of Althusser; Foucault instead of Althusser; Gramsci instead of Althusser...) Starting from this scenario, what exactly is the relevance of a return to Althusser on the question of subjectivity?

Before turning to the reasons why going back to Althusser with this question in mind is not textually unwarranted, one can note that it was Badiou himself —previously a fierce critic of "althusserianism"— who returned to this problem in a recent essay. In *Metapolitics*, Badiou (2006) argues that Althusser's complex trajectory of thought constitutes an attempt to register, in the element of philosophy, the "thinkability of politics after Stalin" (p. 61). Noting the tension in Althusser's work between his critique of the "subject" as an ideological and "statist" notion and his insistence, evident in the post-theoreticist phase, on politics as "*prise de parti*", "choice" and "militancy", he argues that these expressions serve as an indicator that for Althusser "what is at stake in politics is precisely of the order of the subjective". Thus, for him, Althusser's critique of the subject leads us to the following question: "can one think that there is subjectivity without subject?" (Badiou, 2006, p. 64). Although Badiou's assumption that the "subject" is in Althusser completely reducible to being a figure of the State is rather problematic, as I argued elsewhere (Pippa, 2019b), the expression "subjectivity without subject" brings to the fore a real problem: if Althusser tries to think the "without" of the "subject" as a



condition of politics, in what way does he think it? For Badiou (2006), Althusser's philosophy is "evidently incomplete" here, since it does not make this "without" an explicit theme of reflection (p. 64), only alluding to it through expressions such as "choice" and "*prise de parti*". The problem identified by Badiou in Althusser would therefore take the following form: in his theory of ideology, Althusser does not think the mechanism of the break with the ideological subjection that makes us "subjects", and so does not fully think politics beyond the State-induced subject-form (that which, of course, Badiou claims for himself).

What I will discuss over the following pages is that, instead, Althusser *does* tackle this problem, whose formulation is even prior to the explicit elaboration of the theory of ideology as "interpellation of individuals as subjects" (2008, p. 44). He does so in a direct manner—and not simply in the defective forms that Badiou attributes to him—by thinking the break with the ideological forms of consciousness in which individuals "live" their world as a result of an encounter with a radical exteriority, thus sketching a theory of de-subjectification which I will call, for consistency with Althusser's vocabulary, "disinterpellation". The core of this theory is to be found in the 1962 essay "The "Piccolo Teatro": Bertolazzi and Brecht" collected in *For Marx* (Althusser, 2005, pp. 129-150) (to which Badiou, curiously enough, never refers). This long-neglected essay<sup>2</sup> bears unequivocal witness, I think, to Althusser's interest for the moment of the subjective transformation of the individuals caught in the grip of ideology and attempts to elucidate a general (that is, not purely epistemological) mechanism of the break with ideology. However, the concept of "disinterpellation" is not formulated by Althusser, being present in his text only in a "practical" state, much like for him the concept of "structural causality" was present in Marx's *Capital* without it being produced as an explicit notion. This is because, I shall argue, Althusser both identifies it and its internal features, and at the same time covers it over in the very moment he attempts to generalize it as a more comprehensive theory of rupture with ideology through Brecht's notion of "estrangement". By doing so, Althusser renders the concept of "disinterpellation" almost invisible, and—what is worse—somewhat reduces its "metapolitical"<sup>3</sup> content to an immediate re-politicization thought as the acquisition of a new "consciousness".

To flesh out my thesis, I will first look at Althusser's reading of the play staged by Strehler, in order to show how Althusser first outlines what I will call "disinterpellation"

2. Which has received serious attention only over the last years, in the new studies on Althusser of the past two decades. See Montag (2003), Morfino (2014), Bargu (2012; 2015), Balibar (2015), Pippa (2019a).

3. Whilst I borrow the term from Critchley (2013, p. 92), I give it a different content, as will be apparent in the following of the paper, linking it to a materialist framework, not to an ethical one as it is in Critchley.

through an anti-Hegelian analysis of Bertolazzi's play, and of the character of Nina in particular. I will then focus on Althusser's engagement with Brecht's concept of "estrangement", arguing that his reading of Brecht leads him to accept certain assumptions that are not warranted by his own analysis of the play, a circumstance that I interpret as the reason for Althusser's failure to "produce" the concept of "disinterpellation". Finally, distinguishing my reading from other interpretations, I will argue that "disinterpellation", if properly understood, brings to the fore the "metapolitical" moment of the "break without content", and suggest that them constitutes the proper *locus* in which Althusser thinks, albeit only in the "symptoms" of his own text, the possibility of politics beyond the "subject-form" as the moment of "choice" and "*pris de parti*"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Nina: "Rupture" and "Beginning". A Counter-Phenomenology of Consciousness**

Althusser's essay finds its origin in a lived "experience"<sup>5</sup> as a spectator of Bertolazzi's play *El nost Milan* staged in Paris by Strehler in 1962. Against the Parisian critics who described it as a pathetic "*melodrame miserabiliste*" (Althusser, 2005, p. 133), Althusser is fascinated by the structure of Strehler's *mise-en-scène*. The latter organized the play as an alternation of two temporalities, one "empty" —that of the masses— and one "full" (p. 134), the drama in its narrow sense, revolving around Nina, her father, and the To-gasso. As Althusser himself describes it, the three acts of the play have an almost identical structure. The most of them is taken up by the "empty" time of the sub-proletariat, that is, by the simple portrayal of the life of the poor, in which "nothing occurs" (p. 132). This is the time of repetition of misery without possible way out, the time of the absence of "History" (p. 136). However, against this background, another "time" appears, with a totally different rhythm, which is the properly "dialectical" time (p. 137) of the drama in its Aristotelian sense: the time of the enchained events. Towards the end of each act, and each time against the motionless backdrop of the Milanese masses, Nina —the young

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4. I first introduced the concept of "disinterpellation" in Pippa 2019a, p. 127. Whilst I remain faithful to this concept, in this article I correct my previous account of "disinterpellation" in some important respects, as I previously tended to see it in an immediately political (not "metapolitical") way. This was arguably due to my subterranean polemic with the Anglophone reception of Althusser's thought (which constituted the *milieu* of my study), focused on the problem of agency, against which I was eager to stress that Althusser's theory did allow space for individual agency. This remains true, but the notion of "disinterpellation" needs some more careful investigation, which is the aim of the present text.

5. As Balibar (2015) rightly points out, Althusser's construction of a theory of ideology seems to proceed always based on singular experiences, this being particularly evident in his writings on art and theatre (p. 3).

daughter of a man partaking in the miserable destiny of the Milanese sub-proletariat—appears. At the end of the first act, she is admiring a clown, with whom she is in love; at the end of second one, the clown is dead, the Togasso, a scoundrel belonging to the same sub-proletariat, who killed Nina’s love and her dreams with him, enters the stage, abuses and robs her; but her father intervenes and kills the Togasso. At the end of the third act, Nina’s father, before being taken away to jail, tells her that he did it for her, to preserve her integrity and dignity. But she turns away from him, rejects him, thus refusing all the lies in which her father raised her, finally acknowledging the misery of the real world of the poor and the uselessness of the myths of purity and integrity that were imposed upon her by her father.

Even on the basis of this certainly too succinct summary of the plot (which is described more at length by Althusser himself), it is not difficult to understand why Althusser is interested in such a *mise-en-scène*: by juxtaposing two “stories” and pushing the “dialectical time” in the wings (that is, at the very end of each act), the play breaks with a conception of history as continuity and as development of consciousness, rather staging the *distance* between the “melodramatic” consciousness of Nina and her father and the real conditions of their existence. What is, indeed, the relationship between the two layers of the play, the “empty time” of the existence of the masses and the “dialectical time” of Nina’s story proper? For Althusser (2005):

[...] the true relationship is constituted [...] precisely by the absence of relations [...] We are dealing with a melodramatic consciousness criticized by an existence: the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat in 1890. Without this existence it would be impossible to tell what the melodramatic consciousness was; without this critique of the melodramatic consciousness it would be impossible to grasp the tragedy latent in the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat: its powerlessness. (p. 135)

What the play exposes through its structure is, for Althusser, the real relation of a consciousness dominated by values imposed upon it by the dominant class, and what exists outside it, i.e., the reality of a miserable condition that is also their own—and such a relation is precisely absent. But this absence is also, and at the same time, the *critique* of such consciousness: the very ruin of Nina’s father (who kills the Togasso in the name of bourgeois values) renders manifest, according to Althusser (2005), the proper “falsity” of the “melodramatic” consciousness and its dialectic (p. 140), which does not supersede any conflict, but only runs towards its own ruin. Clearly, here Althusser is

adopting the Marxist point of view for which the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class (Marx & Engels, 1998), which was also used by Marx in his analyses of Sue's *Les mystères de Paris* (Marx & Engels, 1956): Nina and her father "live" their own life following ideological schemes and values imposed upon them by the bourgeois world, and these do not have, properly speaking, anything to do with their real world<sup>6</sup>, whose presence on the stage functions as a silent critique of the melodramatic consciousness itself.

But insofar as a possible theory of "disinterpellation" is concerned, the key point is the way in which Althusser (2005) describes the *bifurcation* between Nina and her father. Whilst her father acted as he did in order to defend the "imaginary" world of his values, acting on the basis of his identification with his melodramatic myths and the "dialectic" they trigger (p. 138)<sup>7</sup>, the final moment when Nina repudiates the gesture of her father represents, for Althusser, the realization of the falsity of the dialectic of this consciousness. This is the moment in which a break with ideology occurs for Nina:

When Nina turns on her father, when she sends him back into the night with his dreams, she is breaking both with her father's melodramatic consciousness and with his "dialectic". She has finished with these myths and the conflicts they unleash. Father, consciousness, dialectic; she throws them all overboard and crosses the threshold of the other world [...]. This dialectic, which only comes into its own at the extremities of the stage, in the aisles of a story it never succeeds in invading or dominating, is a *very exact image for the quasi-null relation of a false consciousness to a real situation. The sanction of the necessary rupture imposed by real experience, foreign to the content of consciousness, is to chase this dialectic from the stage.* When Nina goes through the door separating her from the daylight, she does not yet know what her life will be; she might even lose it. At least we know that she goes out into the real world [...]. (pp. 140-141) [emphasis added]

It is important to note the way in which Althusser describes Nina's actions: he emphasizes the sudden reversal in her behaviour towards her father, but such a "reversal" is not dialectical in any Hegelian sense. Rather, Althusser (2005) understands the moment of rupture in Nina's consciousness as an experience of the "real", conceived as that which

6. "It was the bourgeoisie itself that invented for the people the popular myth of melodrama, that proposed or imposed it (serials in the popular press, cheap "novels")" (Althusser, 2005, p. 139, fn 4).

7. Here Althusser (2005) clearly follows Marx's analyses in the *Holy Family* of Sue's characters, for whom "the motor of their conduct is their identification with the myths of bourgeois morality" (2005, pp. 138-139).

is *external* to the dialectics of consciousness. Here the two levels of the play meet – or, better, the “real” world literally *irrupts* in Nina’s life: it is the experience of the death of her beloved clown, the encounter with the miserable logic of her world under the guise of the Togasso, and, above all, her father’s useless ruin. What such an experience provokes is, properly speaking, a “rupture” because the real is not “retrievable” within consciousness itself—there is no possible *Aufhebung*, simply because there is no contradiction between consciousness and its outside: “The melodramatic consciousness is not contradictory to these conditions: it is a quite different consciousness, imposed from without” (p. 140)<sup>8</sup>. Importantly (and we will come back to this), Althusser describes such moment as the moment in which something new can begin, associating the concept of “rupture” to that of “beginning”:

Nina, who is for us the *rupture* [rupture] and the *beginning* [commencement], and the promise of another world and another consciousness, does not know what she is doing. Here we can truly say that consciousness is delayed—for even if it is still blind, it is a consciousness aiming at last at a real world. (p. 142) [emphasis added]

Thus, it is quite evident that the model that Althusser proposes to think the “supersession” of ideology is the very negation of any phenomenology of consciousness of Hegelian type. There is no progression towards superior knowledge or form of consciousness, nor is there any superior reconciliation. Rather, the transformation of the subject “Nina” is triggered by an encounter with reality (“real situation” in the passage above), which *disrupts* the enclosed circle of the “melodramatic” (but, by extension: of any ideological) consciousness; and it is this “rupture” that poses, for Althusser, the possibility of a (new) beginning that Nina’s character embodies. It is therefore apparent that what is at stake in Nina’s destiny is a spectacular inversion *ante litteram* of the famous “interpellation of an individual as subject” (Althusser, 2008, p. 44), of which Nina represents the very opposite. What Althusser describes here is therefore what can

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8. Crucially, this is the *exact same model* which Althusser (2005) adopted in his early account of Marx’s break with ideology in “On the young Marx” (p. 82): “if we are truly to be able to think this dramatic genesis of Marx’s thought, it is essential to reject the term “supersede” and turn to that of discoveries, to renounce the spirit of Hegelian logic implied in the innocent but sly concept of “supersession” (*Aufhebung*) which is merely the empty anticipation of its end in the illusion of an immanence of truth, and to adopt instead a logic of actual experience and real emergence, one that would put an end to the illusions of ideological immanence; in short, *to adopt a logic of the irruption of real history in ideology itself*, and thereby - as is absolutely indispensable to the Marxist perspective, and, moreover, demanded by it - give at last some real meaning to the personal style of Marx’s experience, to the extraordinary sensitivity to the concrete which gave such force of conviction and revelation to each of *his encounters with reality*”.



well be called “disinterpellation”: the collapse of ideological schemes governing Nina’s life. This moment, Althusser suggests, is also the “promise of another consciousness”, but in itself is just the loss of it – its very shattering.

## Distanciation or disinterpellation?

It should at least be clear at this point that Althusser —the so-called champion of structures and the “implacable logic” of structural causality and so on...!— is far from denying agency to human beings: Nina is, after all, acting. And he is also very far from denying the possibility, for individuals, to break free from the grip of ideology: Nina is, after all, breaking free from her myths and lies.

However, one could raise an objection here: is not Althusser only applying such a model to “characters”? This is a fair point, except that this is not the case. On the contrary, for Althusser it is a matter of *generalizing* the considerations made so far towards a more comprehensive theory, one that would involve the spectatorial consciousness and confront the question of the spontaneously lived ideology of individuals. It is in this sense that the “theatrical mechanism” becomes a true general model of a break with ideology (Balibar, 2015, pp. 2-3), which is all the more valuable because it is not based at all on the science/ideology dichotomy, but rather on a truly lived experience. Althusser says this clearly when he identifies the cause of the effect of the play on the audience not in the content of the story, or at least not essentially in that, but in the “deepening” of the work of the latent dissociated structure to which they are exposed<sup>9</sup>. For Althusser (2005), during the course of the play, “the spectator actually lives [the] ‘deepening’ of the tension inscribed in the structure of the play” (pp. 134-135), confronted with a consciousness criticized by what is completely external to it and the exposure of the non-relationship of this relationship.

The problem is to see how Althusser finally conceptualizes this “deepening”, i.e., the effect of the theatrical mechanism. Because it is here that Althusser, *instead of producing his own concept*, makes the choice to use the Brechtian concept of “estrangement”, thus adopting the model of “distancing”, which in French translates the Brechtian term *Verfremdung*<sup>10</sup>.

9. “The spectators’ emotion cannot be explained merely by the “presence” of this teeming popular life [...] but basically by their unconscious perception of this structure and its profound meaning” (Althusser, 2005, p. 141, trans. mod.).

10. In Althusser’s text, “distance”, “distanciation”, “taking distance” and similar expressions are always used as synonyms of *Verfremdung*. In English the term generally used is “alienation”, to which I prefer “estrangement”. I will use estrange-

If Brecht provides Althusser with a way of thinking through the problems of the rupture with ideology that are posed by Strehler's staging, it is first and foremost because of a profound similarity between *El nost Milan* and at least some of his works. In such plays as *Mother Courage* and *Galileo*, argues Althusser (2005), consciousness is radically decentered. In fact, for Brecht:

[...] no character consciously contains in himself the totality of the tragedy's conditions. For him, the total, transparent consciousness of self, the mirror of the whole drama is never anything but an image of the ideological consciousness [...]. In this sense these plays are decentered precisely because they can have no centre, because, although the illusion-wrapped, naïve consciousness is his starting-point, Brecht refuses to make it that centre of the world it would like to be. (p. 145)

So, just like Strehler in *El nost Milan*, by de-centering consciousness<sup>11</sup> Brecht makes the "real" that lies outside the circle of ideological consciousness appear as something that cannot be recuperated by ideology itself, as something that is irretrievably outside — a remainder which cannot be integrated in the "totality" of the character's consciousness.

It is this aspect that, for Althusser, lies at the hearth of Brecht's notion of *estrangement*. What Althusser appreciates is the fact that Brecht's theatre aims to create a new type of spectator, one that is "active and critical" (Althusser, 2005, p. 146) —as is well-known, the point of "estrangement", as Brecht argues in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, is precisely to "de-familiarize" what is seen, to "relativize" it, and in so doing to prompt the audience to engage actively with the play, and ultimately of course to move them to (revolutionary) action (Brecht, 1967, pp. 190-193). However, Althusser does not simply borrow Brecht's notion, but subjects it to two key modifications/transformations. The first one can be defined as its de-technification (Bargu, 2012, p. 98). For him, the "estrangement-effect" should not be conceived as the effect on the spectators of certain theatrical techniques —as for instance a certain way of writing the scripts, or of acting, which is the way in which Brecht himself tended to conceive it (Brecht, 1967, pp. 191-193), and that was also emphasized by Barthes, whose reflections on Brecht could hardly have been unknown to Althusser (Barthes, 2002, p. 164)—, but precisely of the "invisible work" of the latent structure of the play on the spectator's consciousness:

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ment-distanciation to mark the fact that in Althusser "distanciation" means "estrangement" and *vice versa*.

11. For Althusser (2005) the absence of any centre is, of course, the materialist clause *par excellence* (p. 102).

By means of this effect, Brecht hoped to create a new relation between the audience and the play performed: a critical and active relation. He wanted to break with the classical forms of identification [...] He wanted to set the spectator at a distance from the performance [...] In short, he wanted to make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play, but in real life. This profound thesis of Brecht's has perhaps been too often interpreted solely as a function of the technical elements of estrangement [...] but it is essential to go beyond the technical and psychological conditions [...] if a distance can be established between the spectator and the play, it is essential that in some way this distance should be produced within the play itself. (Althusser, 2005, p. 146)

The distance *within* the play between a consciousness (i.e., of a character) and the real conditions outside it, then, becomes for Althusser the very condition of the effect of "distancing" (= estrangement), which in turn is the condition for the creation of a new kind of spectator, who would no longer be simply passive. Why is it so? Because the spectators cannot simply "identify" with the hero, "hang on" them. This is the classical form of identification, which Brecht intends to dismantle, and against which his "epic theatre" was chiefly directed.

But Althusser (2005) takes a step further, proceeding also to a de-psychologization of Brecht's concept, finally displacing it onto the terrain of ideology. This is possible (and even necessary for him), because what is at stake are not purely psychological forms of identification, but rather forms of *ideological* recognition: ideology is primary, and it is it that binds the spectators to the play and to its centre, the hero, in whom they see themselves:

Before (psychologically) identifying itself with the hero, the spectatorial consciousness recognizes itself in the ideological content of the play, and in the forms characteristic of this content. Before becoming the occasion for an identification (an identification with self in the species of another), the performance is, fundamentally, the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition. This self-recognition presupposes as its principle an essential identity (which makes the processes of psychological identification themselves possible, in so far as they are psychological): the identity uniting the spectators and actors assembled in the same place on the same evening. Yes, we are first united by an institution – the



performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our consent, by the same spontaneously lived ideology. (pp. 149-150)

Remarkably, in this passage we find the basic elements that will form his subsequent theory of ideology: the act of recognition as the ideological act *par excellence*, as well as the idea, that will be developed in another essay collected in *For Marx*, that ideology is the “air we breathe”, our “world” as we immediately and spontaneously “live” it (Althusser, 2005, p. 233). But what is crucial is that, ultimately, Althusser’s seems to accept that Brecht’s “estrangement-distanciation effect”, however reworked, *does account* for the effect of a “materialist”<sup>12</sup> play such as *El nost Milan*. This is what appears in the final passage of the essay when Althusser concludes, with Brecht, that this “materialist” theatrical mechanism “produces” a new consciousness in the spectator. Let’s consider the following:

the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself: the new result which the play produces from the self-recognition whose image and presence it is. Brecht was right: if the theatre’s sole object were to be even a “dialectical” commentary on this eternal self-recognition and nonrecognition - then the spectator would already know the tune, it is his own. If, on the contrary, the theatre’s object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness’s mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator - incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life. (p. 151)

It is on the basis of passages such as this, and more in general of the relationship that Althusser establishes with Brecht, that it is possible to read in this essay a theory of “distanciation” of ideology and give to this idea an immediately political content (Bargu, 2012, p. 98)<sup>13</sup>. Here, the distancing of one’s ideological consciousness through

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12. Materialist, because “de-centered”.

13. B. Bargu (2015) proposes the concept of “over-distanciation” as the core of Althusser’s interpretation of materialist theatre (p. 101). Not only is a reading of this kind entirely legitimate, but it constitutes Althusser’s explicit discourse, since it is he who proposes this juxtaposition. Moreover, this is precisely the path that Althusser would later develop, for example

theatrical experience produces a new critical consciousness —just as Brecht hopes it will—, and Althusser conceptualizes this distancing, again following Brecht, as a *reversal from passivity to activity* (Balibar, 2015, p. 7): the spectator is transformed into an actor endowed with an “active” consciousness.

It would be too long here to investigate all the presuppositions and assumptions behind Brecht’s model of theatre, which Rancière (2009) brilliantly reconstructed in his *The Emancipated Spectator* as the very self-abolition of theatre itself (pp. 6-23). For the more limited purpose of this article, however, the question is whether the idea of “distanciation” really matches the content of Althusser’s (2005) study of *El nost Milan*. We must ask a very basic question here: is this really what “happens” in Bertolazzi’s work, from which Althusser set off? Or better: is this really what Althusser described in his analysis of the play? This is a crucial point, because what “happens” inside the play, its structure and dynamics, is what sustains the effects on the spectatorial consciousness, *according to Althusser himself*, for whom “they are the same problem” (p. 148).

The main issue is that the model borrowed from Brecht does not seem to account at all for the idea, fundamental in Althusser’s (2005) reading, that Nina represents a “beginning” and a “rupture”, and more precisely a “beginning” that is given to us *in the form* of a rupture, i.e., as something which resembles an “explosion of consciousness”, which is not *already* a new determinate consciousness but only, as Althusser himself points out, a “*promise* of a new consciousness” (p. 142, my emphasis). Yet this is precisely the key merit of Strehler’s *mise-en-scène*: having subjected the false consciousness of melodrama to criticism until it exploded, staging the irruption, in Nina’s circle of consciousness, of the “real” of the conditions of existence. Although Althusser’s (2005) explicit discourse largely espouses the model of “distancing” when moving from the level of the play to conceptualizing the effects on spectators, the other model (i.e., the one embodied by Nina) resurfaces, almost like a “symptom”, towards the end of his article, in a passage in which Althusser talks of the destiny of the ideological recognition that binds the spectator to the play “in advance”. Let’s consider, indeed, this passage:

The only question, then, is what is the fate of this tacit identity, this immediate self-recognition, what has the author already done with it? What will the actors set to work by the Dramaturg, by Brecht or Strehler, do with it? What will become of this ideological self-recognition? Will it exhaust itself in the dialectic of the

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in his “Letter on Art” (Althusser, 1995, p. 582) and which would be further elaborated by Macherey (1978).

consciousness of self, deepening its myths without ever escaping from. them? Will it put this infinite mirror at the centre of the action? *Or will it rather displace it, put it to one side, find it and lose it, leave it, return to it, expose it from afar to forces which are external – and so drawn out – that like those wine-glasses broken at a distance by a physical resonance, it comes to a sudden end as a heap of splinters on the floor.* (p. 150) [emphasis added]

This is a really crucial passage, because here the “distance” gives way to the much more radical idea of the “mirror breakdown”, even if the former model is immediately reaffirmed a few lines later in the conclusion of the essay. Now, it is *this* idea that closely recalls Nina’s experience, the moment of “rupture” which I have called “disinterpellation”. The reversal of the model of interpellation is even more blunt here, if we recall that for Althusser the production of the interpellated subject occurs through a *specular* recognition, in which of course the Lacanian mirror stage resonates (Althusser, 2003, p. 50). However, this “disinterpellation” is not really a “distancing” of one’s own ideological consciousness, but a *shattering* of the mirror caused by the de-centring of the specular ideological consciousness of the spectator, whose act of ideological recognition no longer finds any points of anchorage. In the above-quoted passage the model is not at all the Brechtian “estrangement-distanciation”, but precisely *El nost Milan* and Nina: there the dialectic is pushed to the margins, confronted to a real existence, subjected to extraneous forces; there the melodramatic consciousness is criticized until it explodes: and it is now this explosion that is transferred to the spectator’s interpellated consciousness. It seems to me that the difference could not be bigger: if Brechtian estrangement can ultimately still be thought of on the model of the “ego”, who “judges and make decisions” (Bargu, 2015, p. 99), rediscovers itself and its (rational) capacity for action<sup>14</sup> acquiring a new consciousness, “disinterpellation” is instead the moment in which the ideological mirror of the ego shatters, and therefore consciousness itself breaks down “like a heap of splinters on the floor”. One could even ask whether, indeed, the very moment of “disinterpellation” is not really the condition for a distance from the ideology by which one was held captive; whether it is not, in short, the premise that founds its possibility.

But finally, what Althusser leaves unthought is precisely the *difference* between the effect of distancing and the explosion of ideological consciousness. He tends to overwrite the latter through the former, paying the price for his own attempt to re-establish

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14. Althusser (1995) will later say that there still is, in Brecht, an “*Aufklärung*” side in his idea of a scientific theatre (p. 574).

on structural bases (i.e., on the structure of the play) Brecht's estrangement-effect. Yet, as the above-mentioned passage shows, this difference emerges almost as a "symptom" within the text, constituting —from my point of view— its most original dimension.

## Disinterpellation as a Metapolitical Moment

If what is ultimately at stake in this essay is not the Brechtian question of critical distancing that produces a new consciousness, then it seems to me that one cannot fully grasp what's going on in Althusser's essay as the attempt to elaborate a model to think the "interpellation outside ideology by the real", as Balibar proposed (2015, p. 9). I definitely agree with Balibar that here it is not simply a matter of thinking an aesthetic mechanism, but that what is at stake is Althusser's effort to elucidate a possible *general* mechanism for breaking with ideology. And Balibar is certainly right to argue that this "outside ideology", experienced by the spectator in her/his relationship with the play, has to do with the character Nina (2015, p. 8). However, what I find problematic is the idea of an interpellation that comes from the "real" itself. Not only because interpellation is a discursive *dispositif*, and therefore an interpellation coming directly from the real remains an unintelligible operation. Rather, because neither does Balibar's deliberately paradoxical formula fully capture the destructive side of the "action" of the real upon the interpellated subject (that which I tried to account for with the term "disinterpellation")<sup>15</sup>, nor does it account for the fact that it cannot be thought of as productive, per se, of another interpellation. That is: that it is not productive of another "subject" (since this would be the operation of an interpellation). The question is all the more important because it is on this point that the possibility is played out of interpreting the "breakdown of the mirror" as a *metapolitical* moment, by which I mean a specifically "anarchic" moment of loss of the subject-form. If it were an *interpellation* outside ideology, this would mean that the play would indicate a specific path, already prescribing, through the critique of a *certain* form of consciousness, *another* form of consciousness, one that would be more "true", as opposed to the "false" consciousness criticized.

Now, it is undeniable that, as I tried to show in the previous section, Althusser is caught in an ambiguity on this point that derives from the lack of distinction between the theory of estrangement-distancing and the idea of "disinterpellation". We can even

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15. It must be pointed out, however, that Balibar does say, throughout his essay, that the critical effect that Althusser (2015) thinks in his article should be thought of in terms of "disruption of consciousness" (p. 6); on this of course I totally agree.

locate the specific locus of this ambiguity, which presents itself in form of a “forced” logical suturing of the two models. This appears in a passage I have already quoted above. There, Althusser (2005) linked together in a causal-logical sequence (in the form of *modus ponens*) the following propositions:

- (a) “IF [...] the theatre’s object is to destroy this intangible image [...], the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness’s mythical world”;
- (b) “THEN the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator [...] the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life”. (p. 150)

Notwithstanding the apparently smooth “if...then”, (a) and (b) contain, as we saw in the previous section, two *different* ideas: the idea of the “destruction” of consciousness, that is, the idea of “disinterpellation” (a), and the Brechtian-inspired idea of estrangement and of the production of a new consciousness that would prompt the spectator to action (b). But why would the “destruction” of the “intangible image” of consciousness already be, in itself, the production of a new consciousness, or produce it as its apparently logical consequence? It is not at all evident that the “disinterpellation” *produces* a new consciousness, transforming the passivity of the spectator into the activity of the actor; and it is even less evident that “critique”, as Althusser understands it in his analysis of Bertolazzi, produces a new consciousness that is driven to complete the play in real life. This is certainly what Brecht (1967) hopes and intends to achieve through estrangement, which must, according to his theatrical aesthetic indications, remove the layer of “obviousness” from things, “defamiliarize” them so that we can distance ourselves from them and thus, seeing them in their historical relativity, conceive them as transformable, returning us to practice (p. 190) —but this is not what happens to Nina through the exposure and encounter with the real conditions of her life. It is the assumption of this model, of which Althusser accepts the presuppositions, that effectively produces the specific aporia of the althusserian text highlighted by Balibar (2015, p. 10; formulated also with greater rigor by Bargu, 2015, p. 86): in fact, doesn’t Althusser end up assuming the Hegelian model that he wanted to refuse, when he expects the *critique* of ideology to produce a *new* specific consciousness, a transformation of the passive spectator into an actor, which derives, moreover, its course of action from the content of what is shown? The answer is yes, because it is only on the basis of this tacit Hegelian



assumption, bequeathed to Althusser by Brecht, that the “if...then” can appear as self-evident. Ultimately, Althusser *does* end up being caught in this aporia – but only to the extent that he conflates the model of “disinterpellation” with the system of concepts and assumptions borrowed from Brecht, not thinking the gap between (a) and (b), that is, their non-identity.

However, the point is that he also produces their difference, albeit only in a practical way, thus opening up the space to think it through. The problem is that if we remain at the level of this conflation, we miss (but, it should be clear, Althusser himself misses it) the very concept of “disinterpellation” and its metapolitical specificity: we miss its consistency as an autonomous model for thinking the rupture with ideology, as well as its significance for a possible materialist theory of subjectivity. This is because we would miss its being a *purely negative* moment of rupture with a determinate form of consciousness (with a specific, historically determined interpellation), which is an essential moment for a possible new political interpellation, but per se nothing else<sup>16</sup>. The effect of “disinterpellation” is not to move to action either in one direction or another; it is a ruptural moment whose “future” is by no means predetermined — as Althusser himself saw in the destiny of Nina’s, whose “disinterpellation” is described as a “*promise of another consciousness*”, whose rupture is grasped by expressions such as “here we can say that consciousness is *delayed*”. If these expressions are meaningful, this must mean that Althusser was trying to isolate the moment in which a consciousness breaks down and the next one has yet to be born, this very moment in which the mirror is broken, and we do not recognize ourselves anywhere<sup>17</sup>.

But if, as Althusser (2005) argued, the effects of the play on the audience depend on the way it is internally structured, then the proposition (b) in the “if...then” should be substituted with the following:

(c) “THEN the play is the destruction of the ideological consciousness through the display of the “real conditions” external to it, the (possible) production in the spectators of a break with their ideological interpellation, in the form of a “disinterpellation”. (p. 150)

16. “Purely negative” here means: non-dialectical negativity, from which no determinate positivity follows in a linear (however dialectical and complex) manner.

17. That Nina’s “disinterpellation” does not contain any predetermined future is evident in the fact the it does not result in any Brechtian-like “critical consciousness”, which, having seen the real misery of the world, decides to become politically engaged and transform the world, but rather results (in the following plays by Bertolazzi) in the acceptance of its bare truth and cynical rules (Nina will become a prostitute in the good society).

Certainly, Bertolazzi's spectators experience the "deepening of a critique" when (and if, we should add) they recognize themselves in the mirror of the play, and when they pass through the dissociation that separates the "melodramatic" consciousness and its real conditions of existence and witness the "rupture" and "beginning" represented by Nina —but strictly speaking, nothing more, because Nina is just *this* rupture and beginning. Yet, this "nothing more" is precisely what is essential, and that which Althusser doesn't think fully in all its consequences and implications, covering it with Brechtian "estrangement-distance" theory.

If this "nothing more" is essential, it is because it is the moment of the *destitution of the subject-form*, of the dominant interpellation, which is the very precondition for a true liberation from the ideological schemes within which we have always-already accepted our place in the world, the values that guide us, etc. Although Althusser did not fully think it through, it is this moment that is really essential for a materialist theory of subjectivity that wants to be able to think not only the production and reproduction of subjection, but also the negative moment of destruction of a determined subject-form, the possibility of liberation from a specific, and historically given, interpellation – an aspect that will unfortunately remain absent in the following development of Althusser's theory, but that is left to us to develop further.

Now, to conclude where we started: does not the moment of "disinterpellation" trace the contours of the space in which the "*prise de parti*", the "choice" referred to by Badiou (can) occur? In which, in the instant of the "crisis" of consciousness and its world where we "spontaneously" live and find our place, the conditions for a different "consciousness" are formed — the promise of a new beginning? I would not call it the moment of "subjectivity without subject", but rather the "meta-political moment of disinterpellation", which hints at, or, as Balibar (2015) observes, "presupposes a capacity of individuals to disrupt recognition, in other words, one's identity" (p. 9). The key point, however, is that this capacity is not sufficient, but requires a contact with the "real" as that which lies outside the circle of ideology, or rather, of the current determinate form of ideological consciousness that constitutes our interpellation<sup>18</sup>. In this sense, we are not faced

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18. Developing this aspect on the lines traced by Althusser would mean to attempt to develop a consistently materialist theory of disinterpellation, understood as the destitution of the "subject", in a sense that is different both from any thinking of "hetero-affectivity", which is premised upon an intersubjective thinking of Otherness (a line developed by Critchley (2013) as a necessary premise for political action), and also from the line developed by Žižek on the basis of the Lacanian concept of "separation" [2000; 2017]. I believe that both can usefully be drawn upon for developing a refined theory of disinterpellation, but neither of them takes into due account the materiality of the apparatuses and the phenomenon of overinterpellation, which should be integrated in a fully developed theory of disinterpellation (Pippa, 2019a, p. 140).

with an idealist theory of subjectivity that would have sneaked in Althusser's philosophy from the back door (i.e. its marginal reflections on aesthetics). Rather, what we have is the outline of a materialist theory of subjective destitution, which presupposes conditions external to consciousness itself that can reduce it, as a necessary prelude to any possible true liberation, to a "heap of splinters on the floor".

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