

Donner à voir l'idéologie: Althusser and Aesthetic Ideology

Thomas Albrecht

The past several years have seen a reinvigorated interest in the work of Louis Althusser. Even though Althusser has never been fully absent from the intellectual debates on the left, he has often been relegated into a Marxist problematic deemed obsolescent. But of all the 1960s Marxist theorists he is undoubtedly the one who has best withstood the fall of communism. New generations of students are in the process of learning about Althusser's writings, and the publication of a great number of unpublished texts from his posthumous papers makes it possible for those who have long engaged with him to discover new aspects of his thought. There is surely still much we can learn from Althusser.

—Chantal Mouffe¹

Even a cursory look at recent publications will substantiate Chantal Mouffe's claim about a renewed interest in the work and legacy of Louis Althusser. Last year alone saw the appearance of

two new monographs on Althusser, alongside the release of *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, a translated collection of posthumous essays originally from 1966-67, first published in France in the mid-1990s.² The return to Althusser and “Althusserianism” in such diverse fields as cultural studies, literary criticism, critical theory, social science, and philosophy testifies, among other things, to a sustained interest in Althusser’s theory of ideology as a tool for a critical engagement that would be able to account for the ideological and political dimension of cultural and literary works. In his new book on Althusser, for instance, Warren Montag identifies the current task for literary and cultural studies as rejecting the notion of the author as origin, and as analyzing “the historically specific ways in which individuals are ‘recruited’ and interpellated as authors by different ideological and repressive apparatuses.”³ Complementing Montag’s emphasis on ideological interpellation, Isolde Charim has argued in a recent book-length study of Althusser’s famous essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses that the essay must be appreciated as one of the foundational works for the discipline of cultural studies.

In some instances, the applications of Althusser’s writings on ideology as a means to examine literary works and other cultural artifacts operate on the assumption that those writings are not themselves texts that would first need to be read (in Althusser’s own strong sense of reading), but that their meaning is transparent. I would like to put this assumption into question by returning to one of Althusser’s foundational texts on the relation between art and ideology, his “Lettre sur la connaissance de l’art,” and submitting it to the same rigorous reading that it itself exemplifies. I will argue that the success of applying Althusser’s model of ideology critique to literary and cultural artifacts cannot be assumed a priori, since that model itself demonstrates at each point the difficulty for the critique to remain outside the very ideological phenomenon it criticizes.

The “Lettre sur la connaissance de l’art” [“Letter on the Knowledge of Art”], published in 1966 as a companion piece to Pierre Macherey’s *A Theory of Literary Production*, is Althusser’s

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

most categorical statement on the relation between works of art and ideology.⁴ In the essay, Althusser outlines the distinctions as well as the parallels between what he calls art, science, and ideology. He argues that works of art are both produced from, and contained within, ideology, but that they are not simply reducible to ideology. He also draws a parallel between art and science by proposing that both give the critic access to ideology, though in different forms. In the essay's most well-known formulation, Althusser maintains that while science (i.e., Marxist theory) gives knowledge of ideology by concepts, the "specificity of [authentic] art" (222) is that it enables the critic somehow to "see," "perceive," and "feel" the ideology that produced, and is reproduced by, the work of art. Althusser's reference to the *specificity* of an *authentic* art was routinely criticized by the Marxist literary critics who followed Althusser, in particular by British Marxists writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as unreflected formalism. According to its critics, Althusser's essay privileges what it calls authentic art as having a critical, and even a potentially transformative, relation to ideology.⁵ Mostly as a result of this critique of Althusser's supposed formalist understanding of the "specificity of art," the essay has fallen into critical disrepute and even neglect.

In the following pages, I propose that while a formalist understanding of what Althusser means by the "specificity of art" is certainly justified, it is by no means certain that the form in question is that of the artwork. Any critical commentary on the specificity of art has thus far focused almost exclusively on *art* (as a supposedly privileged formal category). For Althusser, however, the *specificity* of art seems to have less to do with the formal properties of the art object itself, and more to do with the formal effect art has on its reader, viewer, or critic: the effect Althusser calls a "perception" of ideology. This important distinction has been noted, for example, by Michael Sprinker: "The apparent privilege granted to art [in Althusser's essay] can readily be misconstrued. The basic conceptual opposition governing the logic of [the essay] is not art/ideology, but perception/knowledge [i.e., art/science]. . . . The specificity of art or aesthetic practice lies in its perceptual features, its presentation

of ideology in phenomenal forms.”⁶ In the following essay, I will concentrate on the perceptual features of art, “its presentation of ideology in phenomenal forms.” This critical shift of focus will help to underline the ongoing relevance of Althusser’s work to any theorization today of the relations between cultural artifacts and ideology. At the same time, it will make explicit how according to Althusser, any critical practice is potentially susceptible to the ideological phenomena it theorizes.

1. Ideology and/as Ideological Effects

In the “Letter on Art,” Althusser draws a distinction between art and science on the basis of their respective relation to ideology: “The real difference between art and science lies in the *specific form* in which they give us the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of ‘seeing’ and ‘perceiving’ or ‘feeling’, science in the form of *knowledge* (in the strict sense, by concepts)” (223). The object given to us by art and by science is ideology. Althusser goes on to specify that what art gives us in the form of “seeing,” “perceiving,” and “feeling,” and what science gives us in the form of knowledge and concepts, is never an ideology as such, but always “the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of ideology” (223). As is well known to readers of the essay on ideology and the state, Althusser argues against distinguishing between an ideology as such and ideology in its lived, material practices. This is because for Althusser, ideology necessarily takes the form of lived experience, and does not exist except as such: “When we speak of ideology we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with the ‘lived’ experience of human existence itself” (223).⁷

At the same time that Althusser *equates* ideology with the ideological lived experience of individuals, however, he also *distinguishes* between the two, as in the following passage about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, which ostensibly elaborates the formal distinction between art and science:

If Solzhenitsyn does ‘make us see’ the ‘lived

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

experience'...of the [Stalinist] 'cult of personality' and its effects, in no way does he give us a *knowledge* of them: this knowledge is the conceptual knowledge of the complex mechanisms which eventually produce the 'lived experience' that Solzhenitsyn's novel discusses. If I wanted to use Spinoza's language again here, I could say that art makes us 'see' 'conclusions without premisses', whereas knowledge makes us penetrate into the mechanism which produces the 'conclusion' out of the 'premisses'. This is an important distinction, for it enables us to understand that a novel on the 'cult', however profound, may draw attention to its 'lived' effects, but *cannot give an understanding of it.* (224)

According to Althusser's definition of ideology, an ideology's "lived effects" (which art makes us see and which science allows us to know) *are* that ideology. However, the word "effects" not only designates the ideological lived human experiences to which Solzhenitsyn's novel draws our attention. Understood as the kind of effect that follows an antecedent cause, it also sets up a *causal relationship* between itself and a *prior, distinct* ideology (the cult of personality). The causality in turn implies a separation of cause and effect. Althusser makes such a separation between a causal ideology and its "lived effects" in the first sentence, for instance, when he explicitly distinguishes the "cult" of personality from "its effects." The subsequent reference to Spinoza similarly sets up a causal relation ("the mechanism which produces the 'conclusions' out of the 'premisses'"), which again separates ideology and ideological effects (in the analogy between premises and ideologies, conclusions and lived effects). The claim that art only shows us conclusions divorced from their premises, while scientific knowledge encompasses both conclusions *and* premises, reiterates this separation. At several moments, therefore, the passage on Solzhenitsyn seems to contradict Althusser's own argument that ideology and its lived effects are conceptually inseparable and practically identical. It posits a linear or expressive

causality in which the lived effects to which art draws our attention are only a secondary effect of a prior ideology.⁸

Confronted with this apparent contradiction, Althusser might respond that his separating ideology from its effects is merely an expository necessity. This is the argument he makes, for example, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” about having to present ideology and the interpellation of individual subjects (which to him are the same thing) in the form of a temporal succession:

Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession ... But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.⁹

The word “naturally” is one clue that what Althusser calls an expository necessity is also a symptom of an ideological necessity, specifically of an ideological necessity proper to Althusser’s scientific project. In the last instance, Althusserian science, *qua science*, wants to theorize ideology as such or an ideology as such, and not merely “see” or “know” ideological effects. This is because science is for Althusser by definition a knowledge of ideology. Any knowledge of ideological effects attained by science therefore implicitly and necessarily looks beyond those effects towards an ideological premise that originally produced them and is reproduced by them. As a scientific exposition, it cannot do otherwise, and so cannot help reproducing the expository separation of ideology from its effects, even while it also denies the tenability of any such separation.

While the splitting of ideology and ideological effects testifies to an underlying scientific imperative, Althusser’s statements about science in the passage on Solzhenitsyn also deny to science any conceptual knowledge of ideological

premises as such, distinct from their effects. According to those statements, what science allows us to know is precisely the production of ideological effects: “[scientific] knowledge is the conceptual knowledge of the complex mechanisms which eventually produce the ‘lived experience’ that Solzhenitsyn’s novel discusses ... [It] makes us penetrate into the mechanism which produces the ‘conclusions’ out of the ‘premisses’” (224). Althusser makes explicit that scientific knowledge is not a knowledge of ideology as such or of premises as such, but of the mechanisms which produce “lived” effects (i.e., “conclusions”). To the extent, therefore, that scientific knowledge is a knowledge about the production of ideological effects, it is a knowledge of those productions and those effects *as ideology*. In other words, these formulations imply that ideology is not a distinct and prior premise in itself, but *is* always already the production of lived effects in material practices such as writing and reading, aesthetics and criticism. Consistent with statements Althusser makes elsewhere, ideology here does not exist distinct from the production of its effects.

It seems then that Althusser’s text is divided into statements that disavow any separation of ideology and effects, and statements that make precisely such a separation (sometimes these are the very same statements). I will be arguing in what follows that this internal contradiction touches on the ideological double bind in which Althusserian science finds itself. On the one hand, as a science of ideology, it wants to arrive at a knowledge of ideology as such. On the other hand, the separation of ideology and its effects is not only a philosophical error, but is a move into ideology, specifically into an ideology proper to Marxist science. This ideology is the scientific ideology that presupposes an ideology that could somehow be conceptually separated from its lived effects. So the juxtaposition of the two contradictory strands in Althusser’s statements is in fact closely linked to the question of ideology that is also posed thematically by those statements. I will suggest that in the splitting of ideology and effects that is prompted by a scientific imperative to knowledge about ideology, Althusser’s essay touches on the question of its own ideology.

Ideology is conceived by science as a distinct entity because the concept of such an entity is an ideological knowledge-effect of scientific texts like Althusser's essay. We can find a useful example of one such knowledge-effect in the essay's English translation. Privileging science over art and following science's imperatives, Althusser's translator Ben Brewster makes the error of separating an ideology from its effects in the following sentence, already quoted earlier, from the passage on Solzhenitsyn: "a novel on the 'cult', however profound, may draw attention to its 'lived' effects, but *cannot give an understanding of it* [*ne peut en donner l'intelligence*]" (224). Brewster translates the French pronoun "en" in the phrase "*ne peut en donner l'intelligence*" as "it," indicating he takes it to refer exclusively to the cult of personality. His translation draws a definitive distinction between the cult and its lived effects. The distinction in turn produces a knowledge-effect. It makes possible in the English translation a knowledge of an "it" (the ideology of the cult) that would be separate from the cult's lived effects. In the French text, however, the pronoun's referent remains ambiguous since the word "en" refers to either or both "le culte" ("the cult") and "les effets 'vécus' du culte" ("the cult's 'lived' effects").¹⁰

Brewster's error, framed here as a problem of translation, is symptomatic of an ideology that Althusser's essay itself both denounces and also perpetuates. To posit an understanding of an ideology as such, as Brewster's translation does, is to produce an *ideology of criticism*, an ideology Althusser implicitly criticizes in the very text Brewster is translating and trying to help out. Brewster attributes to Althusser an understanding of an ideology as such, an understanding Althusser knows to be itself ideological. In doing so, Brewster turns Althusser's text over into ideology. His error is a move into ideology not because the splitting of ideology and ideology's lived effects is contradicted by some of Althusser's statements about ideology. Rather, it is an ideological interpellation insofar as it reproduces an ideology Althusser specifically identifies with the science of art. It reproduces what Althusser calls the *aesthetic effect*.

2. The “Aesthetic Effect”: *Donner à voir l'idéologie*

In the essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses, Althusser famously reminds us of the “material existence” of ideology in “material practices”: “the ‘ideas’ or ‘representations’, etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal (*idéale* or *idéelle*) or spiritual existence, but a material existence ... An ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material.”¹¹ In the realm of art and aesthetics, ideology’s material practices are the production by art of an “aesthetic effect”: “in order to answer most of the questions posed for us by the existence and specific nature of art, we are forced to produce an adequate (scientific) *knowledge* of the processes which produce the ‘aesthetic effect’ of a work of art” (225). This statement does not mean that, for Althusser, art is the same thing as the production of its aesthetic effect. Rather, it suggests that a scientific knowledge of art (which for Althusser is always, in the last instance, a knowledge of the relation between art and ideology) would have to be a knowledge of the aesthetic effect art produces. Therefore, if ideology only exists in its material practices, and if the object of a scientific knowledge of art is the production of art’s aesthetic effect, then the material practices of aesthetic ideology would have to be the production of that effect.

The word *aesthetic* derives from the Greek *aisthanesthai* (to perceive), so it would seem that the phrase “aesthetic effect” designates the work’s perceptual effect, the effect on the reader of “perceiving” in works of literature the ideological lived experiences of human individuals. According to Althusser, such a “perception” may provide readers with a *critical* point of view on a particular ideology that is reproduced through those lived experiences: “Balzac, despite his personal political options, ‘makes us see’ [*donne à voir*] the ‘lived experience’ of capitalist society in a critical form” (224). Our critical insight into lived capitalist ideology is the aesthetic effect of Balzac’s art on us, the effect

Althusser calls “donner à voir.” By insisting it is precisely this effect of which Marxist criticism is constrained to produce a scientific knowledge, Althusser suggests our critical “perception” of ideological effects is itself a form of ideological interpellation.

If art is the occasion for a critical insight that is also an ideological interpellation, this may be because it positions the critic in a vantage point that would be in some sense *outside* of ideology. Althusser defines the aesthetic effect not only as the reader’s perception of ideology, but also as a spatial distance between the work and ideology, a distance that alternately places the reader or the work somehow at a visible remove from ideology:

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 distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us ‘perceive’ (but not know) in some sense [en quelque sorte] *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held. (222-23)

The fact that the content of the work of Balzac and Tolstoy is ‘detached’ from their political ideology and in some way [en quelque sorte] makes us ‘see’ it from the *outside*, makes us ‘perceive’ it by a distantiation inside that ideology, *presupposes that ideology itself*. (225)

In these sentences, a distance or detachment becomes visible between the work and the political ideology from which the work was born; this distancing enables the critic to “perceive” the given ideology as discernibly separated from the work, from its content, or from him or herself.¹²

Both of the above citations present us with a critical double bind similar to the one in the earlier passages about the separability and inseparability of ideology and ideological effects. At the same time that Althusser posits the possibility of a *detaching* of the umbilical relation between ideology and the work of art, he also emphasizes that the work is always still *inside* ideology, continually

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

being held by it and being fed by it. On the one hand, the work affords a “retreat” or “distantiation” from the ideology out of which it emerged. This distancing enables the critic to “see” that ideology in a critical form. On the other hand, the distantiation is *internal*, taking place “from the inside” of ideology. In the second passage, for instance, the critical perspective on ideology “in some way . . . from the *outside*” is due to a distantiation that takes place “inside that ideology.” It seems these entangled statements are at best ambivalent about the possibility of attaining through art a critical vantage point on ideology that would wholly or even partially be from outside of ideology.¹³

Like the manifest tension in Althusser’s text between the possibility and impossibility of separating ideology from ideological effects, the tension in these passages between the possibility and impossibility of seeing ideology from the outside suggests that the ideology with which Althusser is concerned here is not only the *political ideology* feeding the work of writers like Tolstoy and Balzac. He is concerned with the *presupposition* of a political ideology that could somehow be seen from the outside. As the text states explicitly, any detachment by art from a political ideology “presupposes that ideology.” This presupposition of a detachable and visible ideology is itself an ideology, as Althusser suggests when he tells us that it is the work’s aesthetic effect (rather than the work as such) of which we must produce a scientific knowledge. It is the ideology which *presupposes* a potential retreat or distance from a political ideology, and which *presupposes* a political ideology that would become visible through the reading of novels. It is, in short, the ideology of the Marxist critic.

Althusser seems at once to reproduce this ideology and to question it. He reproduces it at the level of his explicit statements about the critical potential of art and the science of art. The questioning, on the other hand, is more muted. Althusser indicates in the above citations that any “seeing” of political ideology by the critic is only a seeing in quotation marks, a seeing “in some sense.” The telling use of quotation marks and the qualification “en quelque sorte” in both citations suggest that the critical insight into ideology is not to be taken literally, but designates the rhetoric

of art criticism. Terry Eagleton, for one, has noted the emphasis on rhetoric in Althusser's text: "[Althusser] can [redeem art from ideology] only by resorting to a *nebulously figurative language* ('allude,' 'see,' 'retreat') which lends a *merely rhetorical quality* to the distinction between 'internal distantiation' and received notions of art's 'transcendence' of ideology."¹⁴ Eagleton is correct that Althusser evokes the figurative language and rhetoric of criticism. For Eagleton, the rhetoric in question is Althusser's own rhetoric, which aims (apparently unsuccessfully) to redeem art from ideology, distantiation from transcendence. But in the statements cited above, Althusser does *not* separate art from ideology; to the extent that he posits a "distancing" between the two, he locates it not in the artwork itself, but in the critical rhetoric that would have art "allude to" and "retreat from" ideology. This is an important distinction, one that Eagleton's indictment of Althusser's alleged formalism overlooks.¹⁵ As the quotation marks suggest, the phrases "seeing," "retreating from," and "alluding to" are the rhetoric of a kind of criticism that presupposes the possibility of such seeing, retreating, and alluding in the first place. For Althusser, this "seeing" of ideology from the outside is hardly a transcendence of ideology, but is rather an ideological effect, an ideological knowledge-effect of a critical ideology that reads works of literature in order to see ideology outside of itself. It is this ideological effect, Althusser insists, of which we must produce a scientific knowledge. Even as he maintains that works of literature can give us "perceptions" into political ideologies, he consistently takes care to identify such perceptions as a rhetoric and an ideology of Marxist criticism.

Althusser repeatedly points to this critical ideology in his discussion of the aesthetic effect: both the distancing and the critical perception he associates with the phrase "aesthetic effect" are effects the novelist's art has *on the critic*. The distance from ideology and the perception of ideology are effects produced not within the work itself, but within the critic's analysis of the work. This distinction is specified in another important text by Althusser on art and ideology, "Cremonini: Painter of the Abstract," a 1966 review essay about the Italian painter Leonardo

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

Cremonini: "Every work of art is born of a project both aesthetic and ideological. When it 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 [*donne à voir*]) an *ideological effect*."¹⁶ Althusser makes explicit here that a work of art inaugurates a type of critique which *sees* a particular ideology. He also makes explicit that the inauguration of such a critique is an *ideological effect*, a kind of interpellation. On the one hand, the work "makes us see" an ideology: this aesthetic effect is the specificity of art, art's critical potential. But the aesthetic effect simultaneously produces an ideological effect, namely the type of critique that could or would somehow "see" ideology outside of itself.¹⁷

Both aspects of this double bind on the critic are inevitably implicated in what Althusser calls the "specificity of art": "As the specific function of the work of art is to make *visible* (*donner à voir*), by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology (of any of its forms), the work of art *cannot fail to exercise* a directly ideological effect."¹⁸ Althusser links the inevitable ideological effect of art to the aesthetic form in which art "gives us" ideology: the form of "making visible." He makes explicit that art's perceptual effect is an ideological effect, and that this ideology is *inevitably* implicated in the project of Marxist science, in "the type of critique and knowledge [art] inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see." Marxist science strives to make the reality of existing ideology visible by establishing a distance from it. According to Althusser, it thereby exercises a direct and inevitable ideological effect. It reproduces the aesthetic ideology that there exists an accessible point outside of ideology that would provide a critical distance from, and a view of, ideology.

Althusser insists the proper object for any scientific criticism of art must therefore be not only the artwork itself, but the production of the work's aesthetic effect, which is to say the ideological aesthetic effect in art criticism: "in order to answer most of the questions posed for us by the existence and specific nature of art, we are forced to produce an adequate (scientific) *knowledge* of the processes which produce the 'aesthetic effect'

of a work of art” (225). If “perceiving” ideology *is* the aesthetic effect of which we are forced to produce a scientific knowledge, that knowledge would have to be a knowledge of the type of critique art inaugurates with respect to the ideology it makes us see. For Marxist science, it would have to be a reflexive knowledge. Althusser predicates such self-reflection on close and rigorous reading. This is because he associates the aesthetic effect with a failure by critics to read, and, conversely, because he associates reading with an attentiveness to the material practices and material existence of ideology, in particular of aesthetic ideology.

3. The Necessity of Reading

My contention that Althusser’s essay on art is concerned with the aesthetic ideology of Marxist criticism, no less than with the insights into political ideology given to Marxist criticism by art, derives not only from the specific statements discussed above, but more fundamentally from Althusser’s axiomatic emphasis on the material practices and material existence of ideology. In the “Letter on Art,” the examples of art are notably all works of literature: the novels of Balzac, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn. What strikes any reader of Althusser’s essay is that despite Althusser’s repeated injunction to attend to the “specificity of art,” these novels are at no point discussed in terms of their material specificity, which is to say in literary, verbal, or linguistic terms. Instead, the specificity of what is fundamentally *literary* art is discussed exclusively in terms of the perceptual effect the novels in question have on the critic: the effect of “seeing” and “perceiving” ideology. The specificity of literature, these metaphors suggest, is above all else that it is *not read* by its critics.

No less than the separation of ideology and ideological effects, of ideology and art, and of ideology and science, Marxist criticism’s failure to read is a fall into ideology. This is because the critics fail to attend to the material specificity of their object, the novels of Balzac, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn. At the most fundamental level, the material specificity of those novels would

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

seem to be simply black marks on white paper. The critics, it appears, do not read those marks or even acknowledge them as such; rather, they see them as windows or mirrors through which ideology could be “perceived” or “felt.” What Althusser calls the aesthetic effect designates the critics’ sensory access, via a phenomenalization of linguistic marks, to a phenomenalized ideology.¹⁹ The phenomenalization of ideology into something tangible or visible implies that linguistic marks and language more generally are somehow transparent to the critic. Yet Althusser makes explicit in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that to see language as transparent is itself an ideological effect: “the obviousness of the ‘transparency’ of language ... is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect.”²⁰ In the essay on art, what Althusser calls “seeing” and “perceiving” designates precisely this elementary ideological effect. These metaphors suggest an assumed transparency of language, rather than attention to the material existence and material practices of ideology. They are indicative of the critic’s fall into ideology insofar as they reveal his or her confusion of linguistic with material reality, and of reference with phenomenalism.²¹

If the critic’s confusion of linguistic with phenomenal reality is indicative of his or her failure to attend to the material existence of ideology, Althusser himself is by contrast attentive to the material existence of the aesthetic ideology with which he is concerned. Unlike the critics, he does not confuse writing with phenomenal reality. What he calls “seeing,” “perceiving,” and “feeling” are not literal sensory experiences, but are metaphors designating the critic’s rhetoric about a given novel. For Althusser, this rhetoric is the material existence of the aesthetic ideology of criticism, the very ideology of which he tells us we must produce a knowledge: “we are forced to produce an adequate (scientific) *knowledge* of the processes which produce the ‘aesthetic effect’ of a work of art” (225).

Given the above, it is hardly surprising that Althusser defines such a scientific knowledge of art’s aesthetic effect as a close and rigorous *reading*.

I believe that the only way we can hope to reach

a real knowledge of art, to go deeper into the specificity of the work of art, to know the mechanisms which produce the 'aesthetic effect', is precisely to spend a long time and pay the greatest attention to the '*basic principles of Marxism*' and not to be in a hurry to 'move on to something else', for if we move on too quickly to 'something else' we shall arrive not at a *knowledge* of art, but at an *ideology* of art. (227)

Althusser insists that we must read the fundamental principles of Marxism carefully and attentively. In the context of his critique of aesthetic ideology, he also implies simply that we must read as such, at least if our object is literature or literary criticism. Marxist critics must read the novels of Balzac, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn, rather than hastening to move on to something else, namely the "perception" of ideology through those novels. And we in turn must read the texts and the rhetoric of Marxist art criticism, as Althusser does when he qualifies the alleged "perception" of ideology with quotation marks and with the phrase "en quelque sorte." Through such reading, we can come to apprehend the material existence of a given ideology, for example of aesthetic ideology in Marxist art criticism. Conversely, if we fail to read, we fall into ideology. This is what happens to the critics in Althusser's essay, who bypass the labor of reading in order to move quickly on to "something else" (a critical view of ideology), thereby falling into the ideology Althusser calls the aesthetic effect. This is the ideology that presumes there exists "something else" beyond the work for the critic to move on to. It is the ideology that presumes a distinct and prior ideology that *could* be arrived at by way of the transparent language of literary works. In order for us to recognize this ideological effect in others and to avoid perpetuating it ourselves, Althusser insists, we must read, and we must not wish to move too quickly on to "something else" beyond the text we are reading.

Ben Brewster's translation error, discussed earlier, is one example of this kind of non-reading, of a moving on to "something else" that culminates in ideology rather than outside

of ideology. Brewster translates the word “en” in the phrase “un roman . . . ne peut en donner l’intelligence” as “it,” thereby creating a conceptual distinction between an ideology (the Stalinist cult of personality) and its lived effects. This distinction is an aesthetic effect, since it allows Brewster to “see” an ideology as such, distinct from the lived ideological experiences portrayed in Solzhenitsyn’s novel. It is also an aesthetic (i.e., a perceptual) effect because it occurs as a result of *not reading* a text, the original French version of Althusser’s essay. It is by not reading that Brewster is able to see. To put it in the words of the passage discussed just above: Brewster is in too great a hurry to move on to “something else,” namely to the ideology of the Stalinist cult, and to a scientific knowledge of it. He does not take the time to read Althusser’s text, and thus falls not into a knowledge of art, but into an ideology of art.²²

4. Inside/Outside Ideology

For the critic to want to move on too quickly from the text to “something else,” Althusser writes, is for him or her to fall into ideology. This statement implies that it is precisely by wishing to move to a critical vantage point that would be somehow outside of ideology that we are ideologically interpellated. In one of the more equivocal sentences discussed above, for instance, Althusser writes, “The fact that the content of the work of Balzac and Tolstoy is ‘detached’ from their political ideology and in some way makes us ‘see’ it from the *outside*, makes us ‘perceive’ it by a distantiating inside that ideology, *presupposes that ideology itself*” (225). Here Althusser not only locates the *outside* perspective on a political ideology *inside* that same ideology. He also implies that any seeing of a political ideology *from the outside* takes place *within* a critical ideology that presupposes such a political ideology (and an outside to it). In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser similarly takes up the question of a potential outside to ideology. He concludes that to suppose oneself to be outside of ideology is itself a moment of ideological interpellation:

What ... seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology.²³

Althusser not only tells us that we are in fact in ideology when we think of ourselves as being outside of ideology. He goes on to insist that any point in ideology *by definition* believes itself to be outside ideology, implying that any outside to ideology theorized from such a point is always already within ideology. Ideology takes place in the very act of negating ideology, i.e., in supposing oneself to be detached or distant from ideology: "one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology." Any such negation of ideology is a point *in* ideology that by definition believes itself to be *outside* of ideology. The negation reproduces the ideology maintaining that ideology exists outside of itself.

In Althusser's essay on art, this ideological effect takes the form of intermittent distinctions or movements between an "inside" and an "outside" to ideology. Althusser reflects on the critical ideology that presupposes an attainable vantage point outside of a given political ideology, a point from which the critic could "see" and "perceive" that ideology. He recognizes that to make such a separation between an inside and an outside not only provides potential insight into political ideologies, but is also the aesthetic effect that turns the critic over into aesthetic ideology.

For Althusser, knowledge of the aesthetic effect must be a form of *self-knowledge*. This is because the "Letter on Art" does not situate aesthetic ideology outside of itself. It continually poses the question whether, as a form of science, it escapes perpetuating the error it calls "seeing" and "perceiving." For one, it ostensibly endorses a form of art criticism that would position the critic outside of ideology. In order to be a science, it cannot do otherwise. Yet it also knows that at the moment it posits an

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

ideology that could be “seen” or “felt” from the outside, it turns itself over into ideology. This is the double bind of Althusser’s essay: on the one hand, it produces a “perception” and a critical knowledge of ideology from the outside, and, on the other hand, it knows that in doing so it reproduces the aesthetic ideology of Marxist science.²⁴ The double bind raises the broader question of whether Marxist science must be *by definition* ideological because its most fundamental imperative is to arrive outside of ideology. If scientific knowledge of an ideology is by definition a point outside of that ideology, and if any such point is an ideological knowledge-effect produced by the ideological discourse of scientific knowledge, can Althusserian science ever truly be science? Can it ever be truly “outside” of an ideology, and know that ideology from the outside? Or does Althusser leave us trapped in an endless ideological aporia, insofar as any outside to which we lay claim invariably inscribes us within ideology?

The passage from “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” cited above goes on to suggest that only through a recognition of its own inscription *in* ideology can Althusserian science paradoxically arrive at an *outside* to ideology:

Those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself.²⁵

The passage constructs the familiar opposition between ideology and science (“It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge ...”), but then abruptly collapses it (“... to be able to say: I am in ideology”). It is in science’s paradoxical reversal from outside to inside that Althusser locates the real difference between science and ideology. For its part, ideology “never says, ‘I am

ideological.” By Althusser’s own definition, it would say: I am outside of ideology. And one thing it does say is just that: “As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself.” Like ideology, science must say that ideology is outside of itself. And in saying this, it invariably falls into ideology: “one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology.” However, the difference between science and ideology is that science takes this fall *knowingly*, for it *also* says, “I am in ideology.” By saying the latter, it falls “outside” of ideology, because ideology, by definition, always believes itself to be outside of ideology. Thus science occupies a paradoxical position: it is “outside of ideology” insofar as it is knowingly “in ideology.” Its place outside of ideology is a self-conscious position *in* ideology that arrives at an outside precisely through this consciousness. Knowing itself to be in ideology is a knowledge precluded by the inside, and to this extent, science can be said to be outside of ideology. It says more and knows more than those who only say, “I *was* in ideology,” and who only apply the accusation of being in ideology to others, never to themselves.

This paradoxical outside to ideology, which science reaches by means of recognizing its placement within ideology, is qualitatively different from the outside to ideology discussed in the essay on art, the critical vantage point that would be visibly detached from ideology. The difference, briefly put, is between what Althusser calls knowledge, on the one hand, and what he calls “seeing” and “perceiving,” on the other. Both knowledge and “perceiving” are forms in which ideology is given to us, and more importantly, both are forms in which we are given over into ideology. Althusser endorses and identifies with both modes, and he recognizes that neither is outside of ideology. Yet he does insist on a difference between them: “the form of ‘seeing,’ ‘perceiving’ and ‘feeling’ ... is not the form of *knowing*” (222). The difference is due to a self-critical blind-spot in the eye of the criticism that would “see” or “perceive” ideology through works of literature. Such a criticism can only see ideology outside of itself. Whereas what Althusser calls knowledge is foremost a form

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

of self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is for Althusser foremost the ability to say, "I am in ideology." According to the cited passage from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," such a self-knowledge is the paradoxical condition of any outside to ideology. Its reflexive quality is what distinguishes it from the ideological blindness Althusser associates with "perceiving" and "seeing."

Besides the presence or absence of a self-critical element, what distinguishes knowledge from "seeing" and "perceiving" is the presence or absence of *reading*. As I have demonstrated, the words "seeing" and "perceiving" in Althusser's text designate acts of non-reading through which the critic, for instance Ben Brewster, attempts to attain a vantage point outside of ideology, only to fall thereby into aesthetic ideology. Knowledge, by contrast, takes the form of reading. Reading is for Althusser an attending to the material existence and material practices of ideology, and specifically of aesthetic ideology. Althusser's use of quotation marks and of the qualification "en quelque sorte" around the words "perceiving" and "seeing" is one example of this kind of reading, since it points to the ideological assumption that language is a transparent medium, an assumption that underlies Marxist critical rhetoric about literature.

Althusser locates the ideological error he calls "perceiving" and "seeing" not only outside of himself, but within his own text. His critique of the aesthetic effect in the "Letter on Art" is his way of saying, "I am in ideology." It is his way of applying the accusation of being in ideology not only to others, but to himself. In making this self-accusation, he supplements his "perceptions" of political ideologies with a knowledge (i.e., a reading) of his own scientific and aesthetic ideology. Althusser's self-knowledge places him "in some sense" outside of ideology, precisely insofar as it is a recognition of his own inscription in ideology. It distinguishes his text from more spontaneous "perceptions" or "feelings" of ideology, which is to say from "perceptions" that are unaccompanied by knowledge. The distinction is not between being inside or outside of ideology, but between being knowingly or blindly in ideology. It is the distinction between reading one's own ideology, and merely seeing ideology outside of oneself.

This distinction sets Althusser's critique off from the type of criticism that *only* "sees" and "feels" ideology, even as Althusser necessarily identifies with the latter (he can only lay claim to a difference from it insofar as he also identifies with it). Its self-knowledge places Althusser's text into an irreducible undecidability vis-à-vis its own ideology, an ideology from which it knows it is unable to escape, and from which it escapes precisely through its recognition of this impossibility. This undecidability is not the dead-end of an infinite ideological aporia in which any ideological inside invariably turns into an outside (and vice versa). Althusser teaches us that the first step towards any outside to ideology is to come to know (by way of reading) one's own ideology. He arrives at this self-knowledge by continually rereading his own text against the reflexive implications of its insights into ideology, a rereading that is necessitated by nothing less than the text's most rigorous epistemological and ideological imperatives.

Tulane University

Notes

¹ This citation is taken from Mouffe's preface to Isolde Charim, *Der Althusser-Effekt: Entwurf einer Ideologietheorie* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2002), 11.

² See Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2003). The monographs are Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Andrew Levine, *A Future for Marxism? Althusser, the Analytical Turn and the Revival of Socialist Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2003). For another revision of contemporary Marxist theory in light of Althusser's work specifically and poststructuralism generally, see Jason Read, *The Micropolitics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

³ Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 135.

⁴ Louis Althusser, "Lettre sur la connaissance de l'art,"

La Nouvelle Critique 175 (1966), 136-146. The essay has been translated as "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 221-227. All references to the translated version will be given parenthetically by page number. For intellectual-historical background on Althusser's essay and its place in Marxist literary theory, see Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 38-42; Francis Mulhern, "Message in a Bottle: Althusser in Literary Studies," in *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gregory Elliott (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 161-163; James Kavanagh, "Marxism's Althusser: Towards a Politics of Literary Theory," in *Diacritics* 12 (1982), 33-34; and Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 18-19.

⁵ This critique is made, among other places, in Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1982), 82-86; Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, "On Literature as an Ideological Form," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 79-80; Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (New York: Methuen, 1979), 120-149; Thomas Lewis, "Aesthetic Effect/Ideological Effect," in *Enclitic* 7.2 (1983), 5-6; Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), 176; and Steve Giles, "From Althusser to Brecht—Formalism, Materialism, and *The Threepenny Opera*," in *New Ways in Germanistik*, ed. Richard Sheppard (New York: Berg Publishers, 1990), 274-275. For helpful commentary on this line of critique, see Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 1987), 101-102; Kavanagh, "Marxism's Althusser," 34; and Mulhern, "Message in a Bottle," 164.

⁶ Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations*, 102.

⁷ Althusser first equates ideology with the "lived" relation between men and the world" in the 1964 essay "Marxism and Humanism," later republished in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1996), 219-247. He elaborates this argument in the essay on ideology and the

state, where he famously identifies the subject as the constitutive category of all ideology. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 127-186. On the relation between Althusser's theory of ideology and his theory of art, see Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, 112-118; Kavanagh, "Marxism's Althusser," 26-30; and Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations*, 270-271.

⁸ This causality not only separates ideology and ideological effects, but also joins them, insofar as Althusser's definition of causality synthetically suspends any strict distinction between cause and effect. In his essay "Freud and Lacan," for example, Althusser writes, "If one understands the term *effect* in the context of a classical theory of causality, one will think it in terms of the actual presence of the cause in its effects (cf. Spinoza)." See Althusser, "Freud and Lacan," in *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, ed. Olivier Corpet and François Matheron, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 178n.8. The references to Spinoza and causality echo the formulations in the passage on Solzhenitsyn, suggesting that the passage does *not* clearly separate premises and conclusions, causes and effects. The locating of the cause *in* the effects recalls Althusser's model of structural causality in *Reading "Capital,"* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 1979).

⁹ Althusser, "Ideology," 174-175.

¹⁰ Althusser, "Lettre sur la connaissance de l'art," 143.

¹¹ Althusser, "Ideology," 165-166.

¹² Tony Bennett finds in this argument the influences of Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists, on the one hand, and of Brecht, on the other (*Formalism and Marxism*, 122-123). As regards Brecht's influence on Althusser's essay, Steven Giles points out that the word *distantation* is the standard French translation of the Brechtian term *Verfremdung* ("From Althusser to Brecht," 262). On Brecht and Althusser, see also Montag, *Louis Althusser*, 22-37; and Althusser's own essay, "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (Notes on a Materialist Theater)," in *For Marx*.

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

¹³ See Michael Sprinker's reading of these passages in *Imaginary Relations*: "The presentation of ideology in art places the reader or spectator, for the moment and *within* the context of the work's ideological materials, *outside* the particular ideology or ideologies being presented" (282, my emphases). Sprinker goes on to identify the distance produced between art and ideology as simultaneously an alienation effect *and* an ideological effect: "The mode of presentation in art is perceptual or phenomenal: in it we see and feel the lived experience of ideology. Ideology thus appears in aesthetic presentation, but at a distance ... But the alienation-effect can also serve as a means for ideological interpellation, so that the work of art can therefore be said to function in two different ways: as the distantiating of ideological materials and as the production of a new ideology" (282). This somewhat equivocal claim about art's double effect is in fact based on a very close reading of Althusser's text, as my essay will demonstrate.

¹⁴ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 84, my emphases.

¹⁵ In his commentary on the "Letter on Art," Tony Bennett specifies that the aesthetic effect takes place not within the actual artwork, as critics like Eagleton have maintained, but within Marxist criticism of the work: "It is ... *Marxist criticism* which, through an active and critical intervention, so 'works' upon the texts concerned as to *make them* 'reveal' or 'distance' the dominant ideological forms to which they are *made* to 'allude.' The signification of ideology that [the texts concerned] are thus said to have is not somehow 'natural' to them; it is not a pre-given signification which criticism passively mirrors but is a signification they are *made to have* by the operations of Marxist criticism upon them" (*Formalism and Marxism*, 141). Bennett understands this point as a corrective to Althusser's alleged formalism. Yet what he says is quite consistent with what Althusser himself says. A slight difference is that whereas Bennett is unqualifiedly optimistic about such critical operations, Althusser is more cautious about the advantages such operations are presumed to afford. This is

why he speaks of an ideological effect, not only of a distancing effect.

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, "Cremonini: Painter of the Abstract," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 241.

¹⁷ The quoted sentence from the Cremonini essay is very explicit about equating the aesthetic effect with an ideological effect. Nevertheless commentators on the essay have focused exclusively on distinguishing between them. Thomas Lewis, for instance, attributes to Althusser a distinction between the two effects, and goes on to critique Althusser for making the distinction ("Aesthetic Effect/Ideological Effect," 6). According to Lewis, the distinction upholds the problematic privileging by Althusser of art over ideology. Michael Sprinker similarly finds a distinction between aesthetics and ideology in Althusser's text, but unlike Lewis, he endorses the distinction. For Sprinker's Brechtian reading of the Cremonini essay, the aesthetic effect is not an ideological, but an anti-ideological, effect. It is the production by works of art of an "internal distance" from the ideologies they present. Through the creation of such a distance, Sprinker argues, ideologies are estranged from themselves. This in turn creates the possibility for an audience to attain knowledge, the kind of knowledge it can use to transform the social conditions that produced a given ideology in the first place. See Michael Sprinker, "Art and Ideology: Althusser and de Man," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, and Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 42-44.

¹⁸ Althusser, "Cremonini," 241-242.

¹⁹ The aesthetic effect is a phenomenalization of ideology insofar as the critic gains a spatial distance from ideology, and can see ideology. See Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations*, 271; Kavanagh, "Marxism's Althusser," 33; and Balibar and Macherey, "On Literature as an Ideological Form," 79.

²⁰ Althusser, "Ideology," 172. For the critic to see language as transparent is to see ideology as similarly

ALTHUSSER AND AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

transparent. This mutual transparency is what Althusser calls a fundamental ideological effect. According to Ellen Rooney, it is also indicative of a defense by critics against doing the very work that would bring them closer to a true understanding of ideology, namely the difficult and tenuous labor of reading: "The theory of ideology that could render transparent to the critical intelligence any (and every) ideological operation might also protect us from the uncertain work of reading." See Ellen Rooney, "Better Read Than Dead: Althusser and the Fetish of Ideology," in *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995), 184.

²¹ My reference here is to Paul de Man's definition of ideology from "The Resistance to Theory": "What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism." See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11. De Man's formulation complements Althusser's critique of the aesthetic effect, insofar as what Althusser indicts as an ideological effect is the critics' phenomenalization of linguistic reality (i.e., their failure to read), and their confusion of language with the phenomenal world. Althusser indicates the critics' phenomenalization of language in the metaphors of "seeing" and "perceiving," and indicates their confusion of linguistic with material reality in the telling use of quotation marks. On parallels between aesthetic ideology in de Man and Althusser, see Sprinker, "Art and Ideology," 32-42; J. Hillis Miller, "Ideology and Topography: Faulkner," in *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 192-196; and Andrzej Warminski, "Allegories of Reference," in Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 9-12.

²² In her essay on ideology and "symptomatic reading" in Althusser's work, Ellen Rooney establishes a connection between the predominant critical emphasis on Althusser's theory of ideology, on the one hand, and a simultaneous resistance by critics to reading Althusser's text as such, on the other. For Rooney, the critical "fetishization" of Althusser's

theory of ideology and the accompanying refusal to read Althusser are themselves “profoundly ideological.” See Rooney, “Better Read Than Dead,” 185.

²³ Althusser, “Ideology,” 175.

²⁴ This self-critical dimension, though explicit in later texts such as *Elements of Self-Criticism*, is not always recognized in Althusser’s writings on ideology. Perhaps this is because those writings are so often approached in view of their potential application to literary and cultural artifacts. From such a perspective, they have to be assumed to be impervious to the ideologies they theorize. There are of course exceptions to this tendency. According to Judith Butler, for instance, “Althusser’s own writing, he concedes, invariably enacts what it thematizes, and thus promises no enlightened escape from ideology through this articulation.” See Judith Butler, ““Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All,”” in *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995), 9.

²⁵ Althusser, “Ideology,” 175.