© EUSP, 2014 ISSN 2310-3817 Vol. 2 stasis No.1 80–91

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What Althusser can teach us about street theater—and vice versa

Abstract
The defining trait of street performances is that they catch their audience members unawares, while they are walking on the streets minding their own business. They recruit unsuspecting pedestrians and transform them into active participants in a street performance. This is what enables us to compare the transformative operation of street theater to what philosopher Louis Althusser described as the operation of ideological interpellation. In the first part of the paper the author discusses several ways of separating these two interpellations, drawing from examples by Robert Pfaller, Mladen Dolar, Slavoj Žižek and Blaise Pascal. In the second part of the paper, the author discusses examples of the Slovenian group *Laibach*, interventions by the Rebel Clown Army and the "Standing Man" protests in Turkey, arguing that artistic practices can be subversive with respect to the dominant ideology, when they are able to occupy the position of ideology's blind spot.

Keywords:
Althusser, ideology, interpellation, political art, street theater

The basic and key difference between street theater and regular theater lies in the fact that the audience of regular theater knows in advance that they are going to see a show. They dress for the occasion, they organize transportation, and they arrange some socializing afterwards. The street theater audience, on the contrary, is usually caught unawares. Of course there are exceptions; sometimes we spontaneously go to an experimental theater and do not really know what to expect, and sometimes we come to the streets specifically to see an announced street performance. However, the general rule is valid: while we go to see regular theater, street theater comes to us. An entire field of street performances is designed to surprise us, to suspend our initial intentions and plans—going to the market, to pick up kids from the kindergarten etc.—and include us in their show. We were innocent passersby; and it was the events in the street that transformed us into active participants. The point of departure of this paper is the simple idea that this operation of the transformation of passive pedestrians into active participants is in many ways homologous to political engagement.

But first, allow me to relate this operation to one described by a French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, namely to the operation he calls the ideological interpellation. To be sure, Althusser's thesis is developed in a completely different context; however, it is not without a theatricality of its own. Our initial claim is that the operation through which an innocent bystander is transformed into an active participant in a street performance is the exact opposite of the operation of the Althusserian interpellation.

Althusser defines interpellation as a transformation of what he calls a material individual into an ideological subject. To be sure, a material individual is a hypothetical state of an individual, considered outside of his or her practices and rituals, outside of his or her necessary social and political context. And as for the ideological subject, it is that same individual considered as an instance of this or that ideology, as ideology at work in a concrete, material practice or ritual. It is clear that material individuals don't actually exist, since our actions are always part of such and such ritual or practice. Let us consider Althusser's example. He stages the interpellation in the street; he describes something that is not entirely unlike a street performance.

> I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree

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> physical conversion, he becomes a *subject.* Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). (Althusser 1970: 174)

The point is, of course, that the man turns around even though he has no way of knowing that the police officer was calling precisely him and not someone else. The interpellation therefore works much like self-awareness, self-consciousness; in order for the interpellation to work, one must recognize oneself as the person being called. Other examples given by Althusser of interpellation all hint at the same direction: one is interpellated as soon as one recognizes oneself, even if this is in a simple and minimal scene, such as the following, taking place at the front door. Knock-knock. "Who's there?" "It's me" (1970: 172). I recognize myself as a subject, and this recognition is already an ideological recognition.

How do we formulate the difference between the pedestrian from Althusser's example and the unsuspecting witness of a street performance? Both the pedestrian and the spectator are innocent in the sense that they are not in control of the event but are rather called into participating in it. But while Althusser's pedestrian is made to turn by his or her own self-consciousness, to his or her specific ego, as if answering the call of conscience, the spectator of a street performance is precisely *relieved* from his or her own consciousness, from his or her ego. The reason why the operation of a street performer hailing an innocent pedestrian is inverse to the operation of a police interpellation is because in the latter case, the pedestrian is forced to recognize himself, he stakes his subjectivity and fully becomes a subject, while in the former case the pedestrian *does not recognize* himself as a subject and therefore also *does not become* a subject.

Even though the material result may seem the same in both cases—since in both cases we witness the pedestrian making a half-circle and turning either to the police officer or to the performer—the value of pedestrian's actions is quite different. In the street performance, the pedestrian's actions are empty of ideological content to the extent that they may even be considered as subversive. The pedestrian not only does not recognize himself or herself as the proper subject-being-hailed, but is also allowed to participate in the performance with an alternative identity, with a pseudo-identity, *basically as someone else*. The pedestrian is, figuratively or perhaps even literally, offered the chance to wear a mask and to perform in the spectacle as someone else. This means that even in those situations where the audience member performs their own subjective position, when they are, for instance, asked to act as themselves, this performance is a mediated one, it is, strictly speaking, acting.

The underlying concept that guides Althusser in his thesis of ideological interpellation is the concept of the imaginary recognition, borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, to put it very simply, imaginary identity is a question of a failed recognition. When we recog-

nize ourselves as completely identical to ourselves this is a failed recognition insofar as such an identity necessarily introduces a foreign object. The example of recognition in a mirror makes this point quite clear: one requires a detached image, displayed on the surface of a mirror, in order to claim identity. The point is that this imaginary identity is therefore not simply *observed* as a matter of fact; rather it is *produced* by the operation of recognition. What Althusser calls the ideological subject is precisely the imaginary self-identity produced in such recognition.

We can further elucidate the difference between the ideological interpellation and the interpellation by a street performer with a distinction introduced by Robert Pfaller, a prominent Viennese philosopher of art. Pfaller distinguishes between a belief and a disavowed belief, or more tendentiously, between an illusion and a disavowed illusion (Pfaller 2009). The example of the former is a proper religious belief, faith, like for instance Christianity: if we are Christian, we fully acknowledge this belief, it is our own belief, our faith. The example of the latter is superstition, like for instance the belief that our fate is written on the pages of a newspaper Horoscope. When we read the Horoscope, we never fully accept it as our faith; in fact, we know very well that the Horoscope is complete nonsense. However, the curious thing is that this knowledge does not render Horoscope trivial, but quite to the contrary, this knowledge is precisely what enables us to enjoy reading it. And since we don't really hold on to the belief in such superstition, we don't acknowledge it, it is called a disavowed belief. *Others* may believe in Horoscope, but we ourselves know full well that it is nonsense. It is an illusion, but not our own illusion; it is an illusion of some unnamed others.

Pfaller relies here on the idea of disavowed belief as was developed by psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni to explain fetishism, and goes as follows: "I know very well, but still…" (Mannoni 2003: 69). Somehow these words function as a magical formula that enables us enjoyment, even though, on some level, we are negating it. Pfaller's specific contribution to this debate is that he uses this formula to explain a very wide range of contemporary practices of cultural enjoyment. He coupled it with Slavoj Žižek's idea of "objective enjoyment," that is, the enjoyment of other(s) in my place, like for instance in the phenomenon of canned laughter in the American sit-coms of the 1990's (even though the viewer personally does not have to laugh, there is laughter, objectively) or in the phenomenon of Tibetan prayer mills (the believer puts his or her prayer, written on a piece of paper, in the mill, and even though he or she does not pray subjectively, each turn of the mill is a prayer, objectively) (Žižek 2008: 32–33). For Pfaller, the practice of disavowed belief is quite wide-spread in contemporary culture, and he endorses it as a productive practice: "All cultural enjoyment is 'fetishistic'—that is to say, it is produced by a suspended illusion. Superstition, the illusion of others, is the pleasure-principle of culture" (Pfaller 2002: 222). This practice is to be strictly separated from the

dominant practice of one's own belief, the practice of acknowledged faith, which Pfaller considers as ascetic obstacle to happiness: "The belief as one's own, i.e. faith, is what stands in the way of happiness" (2002: 243).

We can use Pfaller's distinction between faith (*Bekenntnis*) and superstition (*Aberglaube*)—with which he replaced Mannoni's distinction between faith (*foi*) and belief (*croyance*)—to tackle our examples of interpellation. The proper Althusserian interpellation is analogous to a case of "faith," a case of an illusion with an owner, not because we acknowledge that ideology—as arule, ideologies negate the fact that they are ideologies—but because it is our own illusion, the illusion of our identity, where we are exactly who we claim we are, without any remainder. The interpellation of an unsuspecting pedestrian by a street performer, on the other hand, is a case of an illusion of others: the pedestrian knows very well that it is all just a silly game, that the odd-looking fellow is merely an actor. However, this knowledge does not make the game impossible for the pedestrian—quite to the contrary! It is precisely because the pedestrian knows that it is all just a game that he or she can enjoy it all the more.

As an aside, let me point to another example that Pfaller gives us, namely his experience of carnival time in Vienna and in a small Austrian town called Linz. In Vienna, Pfaller reports, during carnival time no-one dresses up in silly costumes, except maybe children; the whole business is seen as childish and provincial. At the same time, in a much smaller town of Linz, people happily put on carnival costumes. Pfaller's point is that the people in Linz aren't naive. They know full well that it is all just a silly tradition. However, this is precisely why they can enjoy doing it, they don't feel that they need to remind anyone that it is all just a game—they believe this is perfectly clear to everyone. Now let us think about those street performances where the audience members participate by playing one of the roles, often a very simple one, like Wind or Tree, etc. Isn't taking part in these performances structurally the same as taking part in a carnival festivities in Pfaller's Linz? They know very well that all that nonsense is quite stupid, and they know that this is perfectly clear to everyone in the street, and yet this knowledge allows them to enjoy this participation all the more. This structural connection between carnival and street theater points to the historical link that binds them; we need only remember Mikhail Bakhtin's account of medieval carnival and market practices to see how most of those are still employed—transformed, of course—in contemporary urban performances (see Bakhtin 2009).

All these examples show that street performances can present a kind of interpellation that is irreducible to the ideological interpellation described by Luis Althusser. It is an interpellation that doesn't make us subjects of an ideology but rather releases us from our everyday banalities or complacencies, such as, for instance, from the obvious fact that we are who we are.

But we must delve deeper into this problem. When Althusser presented his theory of practical ideology, he provided another famous example of its functioning which is known as Pascal's formula of belief (Althusser 1971: 168). Blaise Pascal, the mathematician perhaps familiar to most for his wager on God's existence, claimed that it was prideful to refuse to join external practices of faith, such as kneeling and praying with the lips, to internal practices (Pascal 1958: 73, § 250). In fact, Pascal went as far as to claim that humans are "as much automatic as intellectual" and that it is the customs that make people Christians or Turks, atheists or soldiers—not demonstrations of reason (1958: 73–74, § 252). The formula that Pascal is suggesting here is quite stunning, because it lays the foundation, in principle, for Althusser's thesis that inner thoughts and beliefs of the subject who is faithful are not important, and are perhaps nothing but a byproduct of repetition of certain ritual gestures. This is what Althusser called the thesis of the material existence of ideology (Althusser 1971: 165). Strictly speaking, it is the material action that counts, while the corresponding symbolic order is merely its epiphenomenon. We come to a surprising result: religious gestures and words that only make sense if one is already a believer are in fact the ones that retroactively *produce* the belief.

How is all this relevant to our example of the interpellation in street performance? Well, if it is material actions that count, than our participation in a ritual already makes us subject of the ideology that prescribes those rituals. Mladen Dolar recently analyzed the phenomenon of comic mimesis by recalling the story of Genesius, the Christian patron-saint of actors and clowns. Genesius was performing in a series of plays that mocked Christianity, but the legend says that while he was performing in one such show mocking the ritual of baptism, he received Divine grace on stage and converted to Christianity on the spot. Dolar points out that the case of Saint Genesius is precisely the case of someone performing senseless routines and uttering meaningless words and then suddenly finding himself believing, just as Pascal suggested (Dolar 2012: 98). And in fact Althusser himself argued that as far as ideology is concerned, it is quite irrelevant what the subject thinks in his or her head when he or she is performing the actions and routines that constitute that ideology. Whether someone is only mocking the Christian prayer or actually praying, matters little (Althusser 1971: 168).

How do we then effectively differentiate between an ideological interpellation and an interpellation by a street performer? I don't think there is any easy way out of this, especially because Althusser—unlike Lacan—did not distinguish between the imaginary and the symbolic register. For Althusser, symbolic structures of society and culture are always ideological and therefore imaginary; there is no practice other than the practice included in the ritual of the ideological apparatus. From a Lacanian standpoint, this is very problematic. To rely once more on Žižek's account, the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic can be

explained as the difference between two kinds of fictions, namely between fabrications like unicorns and fictitious entities like contract or duty (see Žižek 1993b: 86). What Lacan, at least in the greater part of his teachings, described as the pinnacle of psychoanalytic treatment, can be summed up precisely as an exit from the imaginary and transition into the symbolic which always comes with the acceptance of primordial "castration," that is to say, with the rejection of the imaginary identity and acceptance of symbolic mediation. Insofar as the Althusserian concept of ideology conflates these two registers and focuses only on the relationship between the imaginary and the real, it may be said that it fails to fully account for the exit out of the imaginary relations.

But on the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation is an interpellation that inevitably produces an ideological subject and cannot misfire. The very concept of recognition as a necessary misrecognition can help us out of this impasse. It allows us to assert that while ideology, strictly speaking, never fails to produce its ideological subjects, those subjects themselves are endowed with a flaw. This flaw is not perceived as a flaw by the ideology in question, because the ideological recognition is produced precisely in order not to see it; it is a flaw that composes the invisible of the ideology. If we remain within the framework of Althusser's concept of interpellation, the difference between the perfect ideological subject and an audience member who is participating in a street performance must be seen precisely from that *blind spot*. In fact, what I want to argue is that the interpellation of an innocent bystander into an active participant in a street performance *is* the blind spot of the ideological interpellation.

This point of view of the blind spot is where street performances can become subversive with respect to the dominant ideology. A mock interpellation is in fact no different from the properly ideological one—but only inasmuch as the dominant ideology is concerned. As long as one does the proper gestures and repeats the proper words, it doesn't matter what one thinks one is doing. And so the difference is only visible from a point of view that emerges within the confines of the dominant ideology as a flash of lightning, as a punctual rupture of the ideological texture.

This may seem very abstract, so let me offer an example. It is typical for such instantaneous moments to emerge and reveal the crack within the ideological sphere through some very simple devices, like repetition or over-acceptance. There is an historical example from the final period of socialist Yugoslavia. In the 1980s, an avant-garde musical group called *Laibach* was formed in the industrial town of Trbovlje and strongly associated itself with totalitarian iconography and discourse. They were, of course, immediately recognized as a bone in the throat of the official establishment. Even the choice of their name was disturbing, since the traditional German name for the city of Ljubljana—Laibach—was then mainly associated with the attempts in World War II by the Nazi occupying

force to Germanize the territory of Slovenia; so much so that today Germans use the name Ljubljana to refer to the capital of Slovenia (while Austrians, on the other hand, simply kept calling it Laibach). In any case, *Laibach*'s strategy when responding to the inevitable and persistent harassment by authorities was always to keep in line with their general stance and over-accept the totalitarian discourse—or to put it in Žižek's words, to "over-identify" with it (Žižek 1993a). Laibach were far more totalitarian than the official authorities ever dreamed of being. This over-acceptance or over-identification is what Althusser's account of interpellation cannot register.

Let us now take a look at a contemporary example from political street art, the practice of an informal group using various names, but mostly referred to as the Rebel Clown Army or Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). They often appear at mass protests, costumed in full clown wear, and engage with the police or other security forces with a series of small, usually quite innocent, usually at least in part improvised provocations. One of them appears to have taken place at 2007 G8 summit in Amsterdam, and is of particular relevance to the topic discussed here. The photograph that was circulated widely in world media shows a formation of police forces in riot gear, standing still. Next to it, another group of people is standing still in the same formation: it is a squad of clowns. What the performers used there is a very simple and well-known tactic: they are just copying the police formation. That is all. The performers do not threaten anyone; they do not attempt any particular movement; they are basically just a bunch of stupid clowns in a stupid formation. That is all there is to it, but at the same time this is precisely what this street intervention is inviting us to see: a bunch of stupid clowns in a stupid formation. This is how the simple redoubling of the formation puts us in the perspective where the blind spot of power relations becomes clearly visible.

Another example: in May and June 2013, Istanbul was the site of mass protests against government plans to destroy a park adjacent to the the historically important Taksim Square. A sit-in to defend the small Gezi Park, one of the last green areas in the center of Istanbul, from being transformed into a shopping mall, was violently broken up by police; this sparked massive protests all over the country, such as Turkey hadn't witnessed for decades. On June 17th, one man, choreographer Erdem Gündüz, decided to stand in the heavily guarded Taksim Square and stare at the flags draped on the Atatürk Cultural Center. He was just standing there, not speaking, not reacting to questions, for six hours in total; his surprising style of protest—named *duran adam*, or standing man—was soon recognized as extremely powerful and he was later joined by many others, at various locations across the country. The principle that was employed in this protest can again be described as over-acceptance: if the government was trying to pacify opposition and disperse protesters, then a single per-

son standing motionless, speechless, apparently showing great respect for national symbols, was precisely the embodiment of their success. However, over-identification with their goals produced a surplus of success, exposing their blind spot.

The idea of the blind spot of ideology is an essential component of Althusser's theory. Without this concept, it can only account for the working relations of power, but cannot determine any affirmative procedure for emancipation. Jacques Rancière, one of Althusser's collaborators on the volume *Reading* Capital, criticized the theory for this very reason:

> Such a theory can think an *enslaving* mechanism, in general, as the instrument of ideological domination by one class. But it does not allow us to think either the struggle pitched around a state apparatus like the school, nor the functioning of the concepts, 'ideas' and slogans that classes deploy in their struggles. (Rancière 2011: 76)

But in truth, Althusser formulated his own way of tackling the problem of transforming the dominant ideological formation. In the context of the work of science, he pointed out that ideology is indeed omnipresent and that scientists can only work within the context of the dominant ideology, using its vocabulary. However, by using a procedure Althusser called the symptomal reading, scientists may be able to produce a revolutionary scientific theory within the confines of the old discourse, using the old vocabulary (Althusser 1970: 28). The point is this: for the old dominant ideology, the new scientific concepts aren't saying anything new and this is why they go unnoticed, this is why they are overlooked in the very moment they are looked at. In other words: scientific concepts appear in the blind spot of ideology.

Althusser himself wrote sparingly on artistic practice, but there are some fundamental similarities between his ways of understanding the work of science and the work of art. While it is true that he listed cultural practices in the framework of what he called the cultural ideological apparatus of the state (Althusser 1971: 143), this does not mean that all art is just an ideological or imaginary reflection of the real conditions of human existence. Of course, we could say that a lot of or even most cultural and artistic production is simply ideological; we could make this claim for entire genres like the (television) melodrama. But the point is that this is not a deterministic statement. While all practices are inevitably practices of an ideology, it is still possible to use these practices, to use this vocabulary, and produce within this framework completely subversive works, that is, works that undermine the dominant ideology with perhaps procedures as simple as over-acceptance or redoubling.

Let us take a closer look at Althusser's engagement with materialist theater in his essay "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht" from 1962 (Althusser 1969: 129–151). If in its outset the article is nothing but

a defense of Giorgio Stehler's staging of *El Nost Milan* by Carlo Bertolazzi, it develops quickly into a discussion of Brecht and presents an idea of materialist theater in general that pertains to our question of the relationship between ideology and theatre practice. First of all, Althusser describes the three acts of Bertolazzi's play as basically following the same principle, which is to establish a place of static, non-dialectical time, where nothing ever changes and where the flow of time is empty repetition, and then to break this with an intervention of dialectical, full time, time of conflict and drama. Althusser reports that the play in Stehler's vision was criticized as a "*mélodrame misérabiliste*" (Althusser 1969: 133); but he saw it precisely as enunciating materialist disillusionment with and critique of melodrama, linking *El Nost Milan* to Brecht's pieces like *Mother Courage* and *Life of Galileo*:

> Here again we also find forms of temporality that do not achieve any mutual integration, which have no relation to one another, which coexist and interconnect, but never meet each other, so to speak; with lived elements which interlace in a dialectic which is localized, separate and apparently ungrounded; works marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity. (Althusser 1969: 142)

It is precisely this separation of two temporalities, their incommensurability, which makes a theatrical piece materialist. This is why Althusser writes: "I wonder whether this asymmetrical, decentred structure should not be regarded as essential to any theatrical effort of a materialist character" (Althusser 1969: 143).

Here we must again ask the question of the break with ideology. Clearly, theater in general belongs to the field of superstructure. Does Althusser's inclusion of cultural and therefore also artistic practices among ideological apparatuses of the bourgeois state not imply that all theater is ideological? Far from it; if theater produces a break where we "spontaneously" expect continuity, if it creates the space for a critical distance where we would normally be supposed to get caught up in the melodrama, then it can be properly called materialist theater. Its existence is not one of affirmative practices and rituals, but rather a fleeting existence of ruptures and distances taken. The most important remark that Althusser makes with regard to the Brechtian practice of breaking the theatrical illusion is that it should not be explained merely as a question of preventing an identification of the spectator with the play's hero or heroine. This explanation remains at the level of psychology. Rather, the point is that such a distance or a break must be produced *within the play itself*.

> Now, I feel that these interpretations are limited to notions which may well be important, but which are not determinant, and that it is essential to go beyond the technical and psychological conditions to an under-

> standing that this very special critique must be constituted in the spectator's consciousness. In other words, 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, and not only in its (technical) treatment, or in the psychological modality of the characters. (Althusser 1969: 146)

This, then, is the ultimate reason for the asymmetrical time of the play, for the decentered staging: it is a break within the play itself, a break that renders visible *another break*, which is the break constituting the ideology within which the play situates itself. This is how the play is able to set in motion a transformation, a change in the real world, simply by pointing to what I called previously the "blind spot" of ideology.[1]

Let us conclude by way of a return to our example of interpellation in a street performance. If we are invited to participate in some melodrama of authentic human emotions which enable our identification and recognition, then street theater works like any other (cultural) ideological apparatus, hailing us into ideological subjects. However, if the street performance is materialist in the Althusserian meaning of the term, if it sets in motion a break or establishes a distance, then it can be called materialist.

But there is more to it than this. Street performances are in themselves decentred; street theater is in itself an institution that works with and demands the material of the accidental and improvised, it is fringe almost by definition. These are, in fact, the merits that Althusser praised in Bertolazzi and Brecht. We would therefore be tempted to suggest that street theater, as a form of theatrical practice, not only offers the possibility of a materialist intervention, but cultivates and induces it. The danger of such speculation lies in the fact that any institutional practice remains, first and foremost, a practice included in rituals of an ideological apparatus. Compared to indoor theater and its rigorous conventions, street theater is not non-conventional, it simply has different conventions, different rules of participation, different rules of staging, no less rigorous than those of the indoor theater. However, the principal and most important specific difference of street theater, namely, the fact that its spectators are caught unawares, that they are but innocent bystanders turned partici-

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[1] Mohammad Kowsar argues similarly: "A theatrical performance, as a species of artistic activity (relegated to the field of ideology in Marxist thought—hence, the superstructure) cannot presume to effect absolute change. But superstructural activity, including theatrical practice and political philosophy, can very well demonstrate the conditions of change and act as vanguard in the instigation of efforts toward transformation. Althusser consistently argues for a greater determinative role of the superstructure in the organizing principle between it and the structure or base (forces and relations of production)" (Kowsar 1983: 469).

pants, that its ontological status is that of a detour on our way to serious business (shopping, taking kids from school), the fact that even in its formal existence it involves a clash of temporalities and spatialities, allows us to treat street theater, as strange as it may sound, similarly to the way we treat science. The workings of the accidental ontology of a street performance can therefore be explained with the words Althusser used to describe the work of science, as "the real itself, known by the action which reveals it by destroying the ideologies that veil it" (Althusser 1971: 38).

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