

"It seems possible that today we are in a position to return to Althusser's work (...) in a new way, and make a new assessment of it."

Jameson 2001, vii

In the threshold of the 1980s I had that "almost sublime experience of irresistible compulsion towards a work of art"<sup>2</sup>. It was at The National Gallery, in London, in front of Van Gogh's oil painting *Field with Poppies*<sup>3</sup>. I remember how I could not set my eyes off the painting – actually the whole of my senses – because my eyes were not enough to render full account of what I was experiencing.

The impression was so overwhelming that I felt that absolute urge to move and find different places for perspective. At every new move, however, new emotions were awakened by the painting, changing as I moved and calling me into the painting, yet challenging my own sense of the figurative experience that I was programmed to expect. *Field with Poppies* was defying my Cartesian perspectivism demanding an insistent "regard" from which I could retreat only in almost physical pain.

At the time I was vaguely aware of the dialogue between figurative and representational art, and the reason for me to recapture this episode dwells in the fact that it embodies the discourse on art and ideology and sets the stage for interrogating the role of art in helping the postmodern subject escape ideology, and the discussion about whether art itself will be able to escape it at all.

In a disengaged appreciation of this particular painting, which is not even particularly captivating by standards of beautiful, I might have taken it for a master work on Cartesian

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<sup>2</sup> I am quoting from my notebook at that time.

<sup>3</sup> The reproduction of the painting, in addenda, was taken from [www.vggallery.com](http://www.vggallery.com).

perspectivism; the lines reflecting an organized space where the viewer is allowed to see things as if they were real; the translation of a dyadic relationship between the human rationality of the viewer and what is represented in the picture, simultaneously representing that point of view from which the painting makes sense and harmonizes with the definition of art work.

The spectator, however, soon becomes disinterested from the focal point – the vanishing point – and, unlike the perspectival painting, this particular work cries out to the viewer with primary color contrasts, fustigated stokes of the spatula in windy-like waves over the poppies that elude the senses and demand the spectator's action to find the multiple focal points by means of which the harmony between what is perceived and the ideology of perception is disrupted. The scopic regime<sup>4</sup> in which we frame our ways of perceiving the world schematized under a rationalistic<sup>5</sup> knowledge is now destabilized and the spectator can no longer keep that comfortable distance that was given by the illusion of his/her own identification with the art work. On the contrary, s/he is required to participate, to criticize the dissonances of color, to wonder about the artist's mastery of the codes of representation, to interrogate the author's technique of execution and the choice of a trivial subject matter as ways of breaking with the foundational standards of academic aesthetics. The senses are agitated and the viewer becomes the acting part in the critique to a hegemonic ocularcentrism (Jay 1988) while the enigma posed by the construction of the work of art inaugurates a hermeneutical space that extends the narrative to a wider audience: not only the narrow circle of the art specialist and merchant but to the general public.

Van Gogh, like his contemporary Cézanne, brought his artistic personality into the painting. The multiple centers or perspectives in this painting produce a force of discontinuity into the apparent realistic landscape that absorbs the spectator's capacities of seeing in an attempt to control the contesting forces, fulfill his/her desire for stability and achieve satisfaction and adjustment. In this process the four fundamental aesthetic categories: author, audience, work and world become mutually dependent while, in this new author-audience relationship, the authority of authorship becomes challenged by the authority of the audience/subject. In quite a modernist orientation the work of art becomes a readable discourse rather than a realistic presentation. In search for adjustment it is not what is being represented that matters for the spectator but the very process of perception into which the viewer is called.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Martin Jay's *Force Fields* where he questions the ways in which we are conducted to organize our modes of seeing.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Van Gogh's painting is actually challenging the "reality" of the dominating system of manipulating the signified by destabilizing the signifier within the unconscious structure of the subject.

The "almost sublime experience" I registered in my notebook back in the early 1980s was that which put in check my complacency to the socially constructed quality of beauty, required that I transcended my limited power as spectator and consumer of 'realistic' art, and reinstated my subjective desire to overcome the slippage between my I/eye(s) looking forward to harmonizing my mental model of the world with this new experience of being dislocated from the center of the painting and knowledge. The failure of my ability as an individual to harmonizing my gaze - in a Lacanian sense the split between the eye and the gaze (Lacan 1998, 73) *i.e.*, the point of view that inhabits in me or the lens through which I interpret phenomena - with the challenging perspectives and multiple focal points is that which questioned me as a postmodern subject.

Actually, Van Gogh's painting was interpellating me (Althusser 2001, 115), the concrete subject, as mirror/reflection and object of the symbolic order. I was forced, in my aesthetic experience, to interrogate my collective sense of identity or rather to interrogate whether I recognized myself in the relationship that I was establishing as a subject with this painting, whether the painting 'talked' to me in harmony or why I was forced to look for other centers. By acknowledging the fallacy that what would be taken for real is but the illusion of understanding our relationship to the real in a symbolic system of power relations, we undergo the consciousness of ideological transmission and acquire the ability to criticize the social and political-economic structure where we navigate. A structure fostered by both the ideological frame of a compulsive progress into the future and the notion of development that sustains capitalism, heirs to the Enlightenment project.

However, what are we talking about when we refer to ideology?

In cognitive philosophy *Weltanschauung* (worldview/world sense/ideology/perspective) is the sum total of the individual common experiences within a particular social order, ranging from geographical/environmental conditions to economic resources available, socio-cultural systems and linguistic families. It emerges as a holistic representation of the way in which individuals perceive and conceive the world, and is organized around ontological and cosmological dimensions, ethical and aesthetical values and moral behaviors. *Weltanschauung* is therefore a framework for the construction of the subject through the various dimensions of

human perception and experience; a framework that is crystallized in the political, economic, religious, cultural, and social institutions of power.

Louis Althusser, however, transcends this concept of ideology based on our individual perceptions of the world when he acknowledges the structure of the mode of production as the ultimate and determining instance in the *abstract* relations created between individuals and the objects, places, and times. What becomes essential then, is to be aware of the fact that categories and concepts through which we think the real are not themselves the same as immediate reality. They are mediated by operations of association, worked out in and framed by the social institutions and the state apparatuses, whose levels of operation and the way in which they induce responses it is crucial to understand.

In fact, this is also Fredric Jameson's reading of Althusser's theory of ideology that he considers as an epistemological break with his predecessors:

[W]hat we normally think of as ideological positions – thoughts, opinions, worldviews, with all their political implications and consequences – never exist only in the mind or in the individual experience and consciousness; they are always supported and reinforced, indeed reproduced, by social institutions and apparatuses, whether those are state based, like the army or the judicial instance, or seemingly as private as the family and the school, the art museum and the institutions of media, the church and the small-claims court. Ideology is institutional first and foremost and only later on to be considered a matter of consciousness. (Jameson 2001, xii)

For the psychoanalytical school of thought human experiences pertain either to the realms of the real, the symbolic, or the imaginary and the problem with recognition, or self-identification results from the slippage of the ego in the mirror-stage (Lacan 1998, 103) while the taken-for-granted functional assumptions are inscribed in a symbolic order operating by associations of symbols at the level of the imaginary mind. For Althusser, however, this symbolic order – or ideology – is a corpus of ideal (idealized and fabricated) relationships organized in a structure whose function and intent is to reproduce the conditions *sine qua non* of the productive system from whose social and economic dynamics they evolve.

This all-pervading superstructure, that Althusser considers trans-historical, and therefore immutable in form, is "ideology [which] represents the imaginary relationship of

individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 2001, 109). It is also the locus where the subject is constantly being interpellated to make options from the possibilities available for him/her in his/her historical moment. However, it is through an imaginary process of transposing their real conditions of existence into their representations of themselves that individuals get the sense of who they are, what their role is in society and the world at large, how they are recognized by others in the community, and how they recognize themselves. This means that the relationship individuals establish with their real conditions of existence is what defines ideology and allows for interpellation (Althusser 2001, 111). This Althusserian concept can be defined, therefore, as the process through which the individual is carried, within this relationship, to the level of subject, *i. e.*, the point where an individual is endowed with a consciousness of the ideological conceptual dispositive that determines his/her condition of existing in the world. Interpellation that ultimately demands the subject’s action and compels him/her into the material practices and rituals that transform him/her into a subject: be it by adopting the point of view provided by the structural framework of ideology or by refusing it and revolt; by creating new forms of relationship or simply seeking to harmonize with the collective. This same amounts to say that subjects who work as reflections of the symbolic order become objects under the subjugation of this same ideology.

A similar position adopts Jean-François Lyotard by considering the emergence of the subject in the transposition from inhuman into the human stage (Lyotard 2007). He also contends that the faith in the future and progress of humanity that was the Enlightenment stance is not the answer to a more human human being. Actually Lyotard does not seem to believe that this which is called development has the potential to draw on the most pure form of inhuman, that stage of the human being prior to the upgrade into becoming a human by force of socio/economic and social structure where the subject recognizes him/herself. On the contrary, this so-called development, and the institutions to that end, is for Lyotard the inhuman that threatens to annihilate any sense of the primordial inhuman, which is “‘proper’ to humankind” (Lyotard 2007, 2) and that may still be left within the individual after s/he has been made fit into society, social consciousness, and reason as we can perceive from the following statement:

The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage. To believe, as happened to me, that the first can take over from the second, give it expression, is a mistake. The

system rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it.  
(Lyotard 2007, 2)

This is also what Althusser observes when he acknowledges a dialectical relationship between subject and ideology. So the question remains the same for both authors: if we are ideology (Althusser, 2001) how much is left of inhuman that may transcend the inhumanity of the ideology *i. e.*, development, as Lyotard calls it?

Is there a way out of ideology?

The post-modernist subjects answer that resisting conformity and becoming agents of interpellation by drawing on and deconstructing the “miserable and admirable indetermination from which [the soul] was born and does not cease to be born (...) with the other inhuman” (Lyotard 2007, 7) will defy the subjugating effects of ideology. For Althusser the possibility for agency dwells in the recognition and understanding of the fallacy under which the superstructure works and organizes the symbolic order. The ideological subject has the ability to unmask the oppressive ways of ideology; we can revolt and change the institutional practices. Notwithstanding, we are the subjects of our own oppression: the ones who operate/create the illusion of ‘real’ representation and identification. Such is the fragility of the subject. Revolution, when it happens, relates to the practices of oppression, not to the organization of the superstructure. This, in Althusser’s view, paradoxically means that every new revolution is, after all, the emergence of a new order of a structure of power that reproduces oppression.

Both Althusser’s theory of ideology and Lyotard’s appeal to the preservation of the inhuman against the terrorizing forces that subject us definitely constitute escapes out of ideology by a process of interrogation of the whole inventory of ideas that frame our perception of the world *vis à vis* our experiences. However, because what is represented in ideology is not a system of real relationships but the imaginary relations of the individuals to the world, our individual perceptions mediated by our own conditions or gaze, subjects will have to be able to deconstruct (Derrida, 1982a) the symbolic interactions and networks of power relations with which ideology ‘terrorizes’ the inhuman (Lyotard 2007, 4), inscribes itself in the Freudian unconscious or leads the subject through the Lacanian mirror stage.

Since the subject only exists in his/her own recognition of the symbolic order, the menace of the impossibility of recognition becomes the driving force created by a sense of agitation that requires the subject’s agency into questioning his/her role as object defined by and identifying with the superstructure.

Both Althusser and Lyotard agree that art, which gives witness of the determinant forces that operate towards the human, and are inscribed in the subject's consciousness, has the power to agitate and escape ideology.

I believe that a peculiarity of art is to 'make us see' (*nous donner à voir*), 'make perceive', make us feel' something which *alludes* reality. (...) What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing', 'perceiving' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and which it *alludes*. (Althusser 2001, 152)

For Lyotard, art can escape ideology in its ability to produce a fracture, disharmony, and displacement of the viewer; the ability to create a feeling of anxiety that generates the interrogation "about now" (Lyotard 2007, 90) that is simultaneously attached to the desire/fear of the possibility of nothingness. It is this *pathos* that Lyotard claims to be his re-take of the sublime: not Kant's sublime, but that indeterminate that transcends all reason and provokes the subject into interrogating the 'terrorizing' mechanisms of the ideological superstructure and his/her own conformity to them.

Unlike the metaphysics of the Enlightenment truth or the illusion of it is now to be found within the subject. According to Lyotard:

'Development' is the ideology of the present time, it realizes the essential of metaphysics, which was a thinking pertaining to forces much more than to the subject. (Lyotard 2007, 6)

A turn in the theory of art has therefore been taken towards the reception in the sense that an identity crisis may issue out of an experience of aesthetics of the sublime when the art work has the potential - a 'trace' of displacement, an occurrence like van Gogh's *Field with Poppies* - to make us perceive ruptures in the imaginary relationships between the subject and the symbolic structures.

However, the globalizing economic, social, cultural, and political apparatuses of global capitalism that are pervasive today in the world reduce the intervention of the individual. From the northern and western geo-strategic powers to the eastern and southern ones

everybody and everything has become a commodity. The increasing role of a digitalized network technology that expands automation and dramatically changes the demands for labor force is generating unprecedented rates and forms of unemployment. Modern day societies experience new patterns of insecurity and inequality that claim for new socio-economic theories of analysis or the revisiting of former ones of which Althusserian Marxism is one example.

It is in this sense that Fredric Jameson (2001) contends that we are now in a historic, theoretical, and philosophical position to re-read Althusser's work and, eventually, better understand his conception of philosophy as the result of social and economic dynamics rather than an autonomous realm of systems that evolve in time.

In today's globalized world with its new face of 'vulture' capitalism even art that escapes ideology is/has been turned into a commodity. In tune with Althusser and Jameson I too am of the opinion that revisiting early Marxist theory of reproduction is crucial to equip the subject with the understanding of the mechanisms under which webs of power relations are build; to develop the subject's ability to deconstruct the symbolic order and the interactions of oppression that seek recognition and compliance; to ultimately refuse the inhumanity of being determined by the fallacy of development: the ideology of the present time.

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**Abstract**

This paper interrogates the role of art in helping the postmodern subject escape ideology from a Marxist perspective. It discusses the idea that the work of art can have the ability to produce a displacement of the viewer's scopic regime and its conformity to the 'real' by creating a feeling of anxiety that generates the subject's interpellation of the subjugating mechanisms of the ideological superstructure. As such the work of art would be a vehicle to the understanding of the mechanisms under which webs of power relations are built and to the deconstruction of the symbolic order. In escaping ideology itself, the work of art can be instrumental in challenging and ultimately refusing the 'inhuman condition' when the subject is determined by the fallacy of development as the ideology of the present time.

**Key words:** Art, ideology, superstructure, post-modern subject, deconstruction.

**Resumo**

O presente trabalho aborda, de uma perspectiva marxista, a função da arte na fuga à sujeição ideológica do sujeito pós-moderno. Discute-se aqui a ideia de que a obra de arte tem a capacidade de produzir um deslocamento do 'regime visual' e da sua conformidade com o 'real' ao criar um sentimento de ansiedade que obriga o sujeito a interpelar os mecanismos de sujeição da super-estrutura ideológica. Nessa medida a obra de arte tornar-se-ia veículo fundamental na compreensão dos mecanismos que constroem as relações de poder e na desconstrução da ordem simbólica. A nossa tese é que, ao recusar render-se à ideologia, a obra de arte pode ser instrumental no questionamento e recusa, por parte do sujeito, da condição de inhumanidade a que a falácia do desenvolvimento ou ideologia do tempo presente o condena.



Van Gogh, *Field with Poppies*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Van Gogh, *Field with Poppies*, Oil on canvas, 71 x 91 cm. Saint Rémy: early June, 1889. Kunsthalle Bremen. (Imagem escolhida pela autora)