

On Althusser's Marxist Dramatic Theory

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Abstract

The founder of “structural Marxism” Louis Althusser through the law of unity of opposites in materialist dialectics reveals the profound meaning of “Materialist Theater”, eliminates accusation of “the materialist theater”, reveals its true and false consciousness. He uses centrifugal structure to analyze materialist theater analysis ideology to demonstrate the essential difference between materialist theater and traditional theater and thus reveal the substantive difference between false ideology and true ideology and reveals the conflict between traditional ideology and the social reality. Althusser wants to abandon the false dialectics in the conscious world to show the real state of the real world. This idea is identical with Marx's idea of revealing the false consciousness of the real world to show the true consciousness.

Key words: Dialectics; Centrifugal structure; “Traditional theater”; “Materialist theater”; False consciousness; Real consciousness

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INDODUCTION

Althusser is a famous French philosopher and the founder of “structural Marxism”. In early 1960s he starts to accept the influence of structural ideological trend,

uses structural approach to interpret Marx's writings, criticizes empiricism, historicism and humanism, and creates “structural Marxism” which is unlike orthodox Marxism. Under the banner of “For Marx”, Althusser uses structuralism logical framework to “arbitrarily” interpret Marx's philosophical texts in different periods and for the first time he breaks the illusion of “identical Marx” created by the former Soviet Union theorists.

Althusser's article *The “Piccolo Teatro”: Bertolazzi and Brecht (Notes on a Materialist Theater)* (hereinafter referred to as *Notes*) is based on the logical framework of structuralism, applies Marxist dialectics to analyze the dialectical structure of theater stage, propose opposition between dialectical time and non-dialectical time, that is the opposition of the real world and the virtual world, thus profoundly reveals and criticizes the reality of real world.

1. TO USE THE LAW OF UNITY OF OPPOSITES OF MATERIALIST DIALECTICS TO REVEAL THE DEEP MEANING OF “THEATER”

The whole theory of the Marxist is completed by relying on materialist dialectics methodology. *Notes* are a masterpiece of Althusser by applying Marx's materialist dialectics to theoretically analyze materialist theater. The importance of *Notes* is that it is not just an ordinary theater appreciation criticism, but also by means of discussing theater issues to raise his own Marxist literary theory advocates. In *Notes*, he uses logic framework of structuralism with centrifugal structural theory to analyze the characteristics of materialist theater and that is to analyze materialist theater from the perspective of the separation of theatrical stage layout while not losing the focus, according to Marx's materialism dialectics from stage structure separation to reveal the real situation of social reality.

To facilitate the discussion and for a better understanding of Althusser's dramatic theory, we might briefly summarize Bertolazzi's screenplay plot. The drama has three acts in total.

The first of its three acts is set in the Milan Tivoli in the 1890s: an evening, a good thirty characters who come and go in this empty space, waiting for who knows what, for something to happen. And the people strolling at day's end from booth to booth, between the fortunetellers, the circus and all the attractions of the fairground: unemployed, artisans, semi-beggars, girls on the look-out, old men and women on the watch for the odd halfpenny, soldiers on a spree, pickpockets chased by the cops ... neither are these people the people of our myths, they are a sub-proletariat passing the time as best they can before supper (not for all of them) and rest. They wait. However, at the end of the act, in a flash a 'story' is sketched out, the image of a destiny. A girl, Nina, stands transfixed by the lights of the circus, staring with all her heart through a rent in the canvas at the clown performing his perilous act. Night has fallen. For one moment, time is in suspense. But she is already being watched by the Togasso, the good-for-nothing who hopes to seduce her. Now an old man appears, the 'fire-eater', her father, and he has seen everything. Something has taken shape. Might it turn into a tragedy?

It comes in the second act. It is broad day in the spacious premises of a cheap eating-house. Here again we find a whole crowd of poor people, the same people but different characters: the same poverty and unemployment, the flotsam of the past, the tragedies and comedies of the present: small craftsmen, beggars, a cabman, a Garibaldian veteran, some women, etc.. Also a few workers who are building a factory, in sharp contrast with their lumpen-proletarian surroundings: they are already discussing industry, politics, and, almost, the future, but only just and with difficulty. King and Pope are on their thrones, the masses are in poverty. Then, just at the end of the act, Nina reappears on the stage, for no apparent reason. The men and women leave the stage little by little. The Togasso appears, he forces the girl to kiss him and give him what little money she has. Hardly more than a few gestures, her father arrives. After a terrible struggle he succeeds in killing the Togasso with a knife and then flees, haggard, overwhelmed by what he has done.

In the third act it is dawn in the women's night shelter. Old women, blending into the walls, sitting down, talk or stay silent. One stout peasant woman, bursting with health, will certainly return to the country. Some women pass; as always, we do not know them. The lady warden leads her whole company to Mass when the bells ring. When the stage has emptied, the tragedy begins again. Nina was sleeping in the shelter. Her father comes to see her for the last time before prison: she must realize at least that he killed for her sake, for her honor ... but suddenly everything is reversed: Nina turns on her father, on the

illusions and lies he has fed her, on the myths which will kill him. The Togasso was right. She will pay the price, she will sell herself, but she will be on the other side, on the side of freedom and truth. She will leave this world of night and poverty and enter the other one, where pleasure and money reign. The hooters sound. Her father has embraced her and departed, a broken man. The hooters still sound. Erect, Nina goes out into the day light.

The above three acts are opposed on the structure and timing. Structurally, "many characters" and "three characters" are opposed; on the timing, "long time" and "short time" are opposed. This opposition to structure and timing seems to appear an absence of relations between them ("many characters" and "long time" and "three characters" and "short time").

However, it is this absence of relations that is the true relations, and the relations in the absence of relations are the materialist dialectic relations. Why do we say so? There is a relation of unity of opposites between the internal things and between things. Contradictory oppositions and unities are always indivisible. Contradictory identity refers to that the two sides of the contradiction are interdependent and mutually conditional and they coexist in a single entity. Contradictory struggle refers to the nature and trends that the two sides are opposed, mutually divorced, mutually exclusive and mutually negative. "Many characters" and "a long time" and "three characters" and "a short time" are arranged in a relation of unity of opposites on the structure and timing. The former will not generate a story from itself, but the latter can produce a story from itself; however, the latter's story internally generated from itself can do so only when it is in the same unity with the former. On the surface, the former seems to be "many characters" lounging on the stage for a long time, whiling away their time, day to day, allowing the mercy of fate. They sometimes laugh for mockery, sometimes help each other, but more often they are just silent. From a deeper level of view, the former represents the underlying workers who have ordinary, boring and general life with the potential tragedy. Their lounging for a long time is not a long walk after a busy day and a satiated appetite, but in a vacuum, wasted and stopped era a wasted and stopped living condition. People living in this state will not survive the story from their own internal world. However, the latter, on the surface, "three characters" only come to the stage when the play goes to the end, and three characters have the story taking place; from a deeper point of view, the "three characters" interpret the tragic story. That is to say, they produce the content from their own internal world. Audience can realize the situation in the real world from the deep meaning of these "three characters". This is a typical dialectical time.

It is this typical dialectical time that builds up the dialectical relation between "many characters" and "a long time" and "three characters" and "a short time". When the

audience's attention is transferred from the former ("many characters" stage layout for "a long time") to the latter ("three characters" stage layout for "a short time"), they see the tragic story taking place. Therefore, the former cannot do without the latter, because without the latter, the former cannot transfer the self-generated content of the latter into a tragedy; the latter cannot do without the former, because without the former, the latter will not be able to replace the former while producing the content (the audience's thinking and awareness are concentrated on the latter).

From the perspective of the structural arrangement of the drama, the dialectical relationship between the structure of "many characters" and "a long time" and the structure of "three characters" and "a short time" is "materialist drama" that Althusser called. In Marx's words, "materialist drama" is the criticism of "traditional drama" and it is to abandon the false dialectics in the world of consciousness and that is to reveal the false consciousness, alien consciousness and show the real world and the reality of the real state of the world.

What is relative to "the materialist theater" is "traditional theater" (or "the melodrama")? Marx in *The Holy Family* uses Eugène Sue as an example to describe the origins of "traditional theater". "Traditional theater" is the myth that the bourgeoisie create for civilians. When the bourgeoisie supply or imposes this myth to civilian, they also provide shelters and relieves to civilians. This is quite a clever set of preventive charitable measures. That is, the "traditional theater" is false consciousness and is a false consciousness that the bourgeoisie prepare in order to maintain their dominant position and make civilians to be complacent.

2. TO USE THE LAW OF UNITY OF OPPOSITES OF MATERIALIST DIALECTICS TO ELIMINATE THE ACCUSATION OF "THEATER"

Althusser points out that people have serious misunderstanding of Piccolo Teatro and Bertolazzi theater. In the past, people have been living in the publicity of "traditional theater" consciousness and accepted the traditional drama ideological indoctrination. In other words, in the past people had been living in the false consciousness made up by the ruling class and unconsciously accepted the rule of the ruling class's consciousness. When people see Bertolazzi theater (materialist theater), they believe this is just a drama about an ordinary, boring group of people wandering the stage which seemingly has the lead but in fact there is not. They cannot accept this kind of drama which is different from "traditional theater" so that they blame and attack it. In order to clarify deep meaning that the "materialist

drama" reveals, Althusser analyzes the dramatic structure from a philosophical perspective and eliminates people's "misunderstanding" and accusation of this drama from two sides.

The first of these misunderstandings is that Althusser believes anyone who has "lived" the performance or studied its economy can demolish this charge.

Althusser's logical thinking is like this: He outlines the conflict between Nina and her father and that is the conflict between pathetic "emotional" fantasy and the naked world so as to further point out the conflict between the virtual world and the real world and that is the conflict between melodrama world and the real world. Nina and her father have each other. He has invented for her the fiction of an imaginary condition, and encouraged her in her romantic illusions; he tries desperately to give flesh and blood to the illusions he has fostered in his daughter: as he wishes to keep her free from all contact with the world he has hidden from her. When the clown dies and Togasso molests her, she contacts the real world. From this we can see that, Althusser dialectical analyzes the contradictions of traditional theatrical melodrama and materialist drama. The father is a representative of traditional melodrama and it is the overcome of "emotional law" to "real law", while Nina is a representative of materialist theater. When Nina has a real experience of the world and when she sees the naked world, she discards the myth of childhood and her father's myth and she learns how to rely on her own unique property to enter into another world, namely relying on her own to go towards the true reality of the world. Thus, Althusser says, "Although the script contains ingredients of melodrama, but the whole tragedy is of criticism of melodrama." (Althusser, 2006, p.124) Althusser's words means that Bertolazzi materialist theater contains components of conventional melodrama, but the essence of materialist drama criticizes traditional melodrama inherent in itself.

The second "misunderstanding": Through further analysis of the screenplay, Althusser reveals the tragedy lurking in the lower proletarian's life and proposes time dialectics. Once we understand the rhythm arrangement of the drama in "time", we will dispel accusations to materialist theater.

First, he points out the "strange rhythm of the time in the script". Althusser analyzes the separation structure of the drama and concludes that the true relationship is the absence of relation from the dissociation of two times or two spaces. He says: "The reader will have noted that its three acts have the same structure, and almost the same content: the coexistence of a long, slowly-passing, empty time and a lightning-short, full time; the coexistence of a space populated by a crowd of characters whose mutual relations are accidental or episodic – and a short space, gripped in mortal combat, inhabited by three characters: the father, the daughter and the Togasso." (Ibid., p.125) From the dissociation of the dramatic structure, namely

the dissociation of the two times (long time and short time) and two spaces (many characters and three characters), Althusser raises questions: How can the audience realize the potential relation and this potential relation acts as the basis and reason of the dissociation? What is the dissociation? (Ibid.)

Althusser believes the answer lies in a paradox: the true relationship is constituted precisely by the absence of relations. He starts from the feature of absence of plot of the drama and believes drama without a plot contains the general, potential tragedy meaning of the ordinary life of the lower labor.

The play's success in illustrating this absence of relations and bringing it to life gives it its originality. In short, I do not think we are dealing with a melodramatic veneer on a chronicle of Milanese popular life in 1890. We are dealing with a melodramatic consciousness criticized by an existence: The existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat in 1890. Without this existence it would be impossible to tell what the melodramatic consciousness was; without this critique of the melodramatic consciousness it would be impossible to grasp the tragedy latent in the existence of the Milanese sub-proletariat: its powerlessness. (Ibid., p.126)

In the 1890s, the life situation of lower proletarians in Milan was the same as the living conditions demonstrated in Bertolazzi theater. Just because people's life situation is such a general and potential tragedy, people can resonate with this seemingly unrelated dramatic structure.

All this is really to say about the real content of this pathetic era: It is a time in which nothing happens, a time without hope or future, a time in which even the past is fixed in repetition (the Garibaldian veteran) and the future is hardly groped for in the political stammerings of the laborers building the factory, a time in which gestures have no continuation or effect, in which everything is summed up in a few exchanges close to life, to "everyday life", in discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility. In a word, a stationary time in which nothing resembling History can yet happen, an empty time, accepted as empty: the time of their situation itself. (Ibid., pp.126-127)

Second, he points out "the dialectical structure of stage design". In the analysis of the stage design, Althusser sees the direct perception of an era, and then emphasizes that a more fundamental problem is that "there is another time structure and that is the time structure of 'tragedy' in the drama which is opposite with this 'slow' time structure" (Ibid., p.128). He puts forward the concept of "dialectics of theater" and points out the opposition between non-dialectical time and dialectical time. We can interpret them as the opposition between "many character" and "a long time" structure (non-dialectical time) and "three character" and "a short time" structure (dialectical time). In other words, it is the opposition between the non-dialectical time when there is no story or no inner necessity to promote the development of the plot and the time when conflicts appear and that is the dialectical time when the

development and results of the drama are driven by the inherent contradictions (Ibid., p.129).

Based on Marxist dialectics, especially the law of the unity of opposites, Althusser interprets the relationship between the two.

First, "the three characters" and "a short time" structure (dialectical time) internally generates content from its own, that is, "the three characters" in "a short time" (dialectical time) produce their own story. The content internally generated from its own is a typical dialectical time. Nina appears on stage and several momentary actions constitute knots and produce a tragic story, that is, "three characters" in "a short time" launched a tragic story. And "many characters" and "a long time" structure (non-dialectical time) refers to "many characters" are wandering on the stage, spending their time day to day with the mercy of fate, sometimes laughing for mockery, sometimes also helping each other, but more is silent. This essentially means the ordinary, universal, potential tragedy of life of the underlying labor. This wandering is not strolling after a busy day, but in a vacuum, stagnated and wasted era people's wasted and stagnant living conditions. This state of life will not internally generate a story from their own, and therefore it is non-dialectical time.

Second, when the "three characters" and "a short time" structure (dialectical time) produces their own content, they also replace "many characters" and "a long time" structure (non-dialectical time). That is when the dialectical time produces its own content from its own internally, it replaces the non-dialectical time, and "many characters" and "a long time" structure (non-dialectical time) converts the content generated by "three characters" and "a short time" structure (dialectical time) into tragedy. As Althusser says:

When the men have left the restaurant, and only Nina, her father and the Togasso are left, something has suddenly disappeared: as if the diners had taken the whole décor with them, the very space of walls and tables, the logic and meaning of these locations; as if conflict alone substituted for this visible and empty space another dense, invisible, irreversible space, with one dimension, the dimension that propels it towards tragedy, ultimately, the dimension that had to propel it into tragedy if there was really to be any tragedy. (Ibid.)

3. TO USE MATERIALIST DIALECTICS TO REVEAL THE TRUE AND FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS OF "THEATER"

Materialist theater interprets people's ordinary life status. From the story, the play did not have speeches or actions, nor people with thinking and changes to communicate the consciousness. This is puzzling. The audience has a glimpse of it, but they cannot say it with a clear conscious language. Where does this theatrical attraction lie? What produces such a huge attraction to the audience? What

makes the audience moved and has a kind of “buzzing” aftertaste?

Althusser uses a dissociated structure of drama to explain this phenomenon. The so-called dissociated structure is two forms of time which are mutually separated from each other, unrelated, coexist, interleaved but never meet; and it is real events concluded by local, individual dialectics that seems to appear out of thin air. Dissociate structure has the characteristics of separation and diversity that cannot be overcome. “Dissociation” is the separation of the dramatic structure, the separation of the structure of “many characters and “a long time” and “three characters” and “a short time”. There is no relationship between these two structures on the surface. “Dissociation” also refers to dialectics. It is the link between the two structural relationships and the bridge grafting the two structures. The dramatic structure between the former (“many characters” and “a long time”) and the latter (“three characters” and “a short time”) seems to have no relationship, but the former is the backdrop of the latter’s own content internally generated from its own. Without the former, the latter will lose the function to produce its own. Without the latter, the former (false consciousness) cannot be eliminated and people will not know the true consciousness. Therefore, dissociation is the separation from the dramatic structure and also the core of the dramatic structure.

Althusser sees this asymmetric and dissociated structure as the basic characteristic of Materialist theater. Materialist theater is critical theater. “Traditional theater” conveys consciousness through people with speeches, actions, thinking and changes and what is conveyed is consciousness made up by the ruling class and false consciousness which makes civilians obey the ruling class and satisfy with the status quo. And the “materialistic theater” from dialectical materialism and historical materialism thinks about life, reflects life and sees the true face of life and its complexities, contradictions, prompting people to think and to stimulate the enthusiasm of people to change society. It makes the ordinary things become unusual, reveals causality of things and exposes the nature of contradictions of things so that people know the possibility of changing the reality. “Materialist theater” is criticism of the “traditional theater”, but the criticism is not performed by words, but by internal relations and non-intrinsic relationship between the various elements of the script structure. Althusser says that, “The real criticism can only be internal criticism, but before becoming conscious criticism, first it should be true and material criticism.” (Ibid., p.134) “Materialist theater” is through its own internal structure to criticize “traditional theater” and then analyzes the difference between “materialist theater” ideology and “traditional theater” ideology.

“Traditional theater” ideology is an ideology without criticism. It is nothing more than a myth fabricated by the ruling class to maintain their ruling and allow civilians to

satisfy with their existing situation. This ideology is a kind of “alien consciousness” and is a “false consciousness”. Under the impetus of the internal structure of the script, “Materialist theater” produces and appears distance, and this distance structure is both criticism of conscious fantasy but also elaboration on the real conditions of consciousness. In other words, the “materialist theater” criticizes false ideology and reveals the true ideology.

Althusser’s theory of ideology and Marxist theory is in the same strain. Marx believes that false ideology is a reflection of reality, but it is always a distorted picture of reality. As a ruling class ideology, it always consciously or unconsciously covers up the reality of people’s real life and the truth of real relationship to maintain a long-term stability of the ruling. Real ideology is a true reflection of reality and it reveals the truth of people’s real life and real relationships. Based on Marx’s theory of ideology, Althusser in *Notes* reveals the basic characteristics of false ideology:

First, the false ideology is illusion.

Specifically, this ideology without criticism is nothing more than a well-known myth in which a society or an era can learn to recognize their own (not know themselves). That is to say that in order to recognize itself it goes in front of the mirror; however, if it wants to know itself, it must shatter this mirror. (Ibid., pp.135-136)

Althusser says the ideology is a myth, by which he means it is like a myth with a reversed, fantastic way to reflect the real world; in order to know the real world, this untrue ideology mirror must be broken. That is to say, things that the public thought they were right such as believes of “purity” and that the poor good man should eventually be happy are unreliable false consciousness. They are only false ideology using which the ruling class deceives the poor. Only by breaking the false ideology can people wake up and join the real world.

Second, the false ideology is mandatory. False ideology is not something for people to freely choose. It is imposed on people that people have to accept. It first as a structure is imposed on the vast majority of people and the ideology imposed on them is not through their ideological consciousness, but as perceived, received and tolerate cultural objects through the action of the process a man does not know work on people, just as the bourgeoisie convinces civilians to accept slavery just as accepting freedom.

Third, false ideology has the character of class. The ruling class always tries to conceal their relationship with the dominant ideology of their own. They speak their own rights and requirements into the rights and requirements of all people thereby to blind most people. “Traditional theater” ideology is a myth fabricated by the ruling class to maintain their dominance and to allow civilians to trust them and be complacent with the existing situation.

Althusser analyzes materialist theater through dissociated structure and the ultimate end is how

materialist theater makes the audience aware of real consciousness and how to realize the true ideology. In other words, the audience has a kind of “buzzing” feeling to the consciousness what the drama wants to express after the curtain call. In Althusser’s view, the arrangement of materialist dramatic structure is to make the audience become actors who play out the drama in real life that did not play out on stage. That is to say in materialist drama, the leading actors are the audience. It makes the audience to become protagonists and they are the group who can realize the true consciousness. This arrangement of materialist dramatic structure is somewhat similar to the feature of Chinese prose which has “scattered shape but the spirit is not scattered”. “Materialist theater” is a reversal of the mode of “traditional theater”, making the protagonist becomes non-hero and making the consciousness, ideology expressed by the drama expel from the stage and fall into the brain of the audience, allowing the audience to realize the consciousness expressed by the drama. This theater makes the audience become the protagonists. The audience realizes the true consciousness the drama would like to express and the real meaning of the drama is after the curtain call or they go back home. This is determined by the materialist dramatic structure.

From this we can see that, Althusser’s dissociation structure theory is linked by dialectic which from the height of philosophy analyzes the characteristics of materialist drama and profoundly illustrates the essential difference between the false ideology and the real ideology.

In short, from the stage dissociation structure, Althusser reveals the inherent dialectical relationship with

the dissociation structure and then criticizes “traditional theater” from the perspective of materialist dialectics. The materialist theater that he advocates is precisely a criticism of traditional drama. Starting from an analysis of stage structure, he uses materialist dialectics as the theoretical basis to reveal that “traditional theater” is false consciousness that the bourgeoisie uses to maintain their dominance and to instill a sense of obedience over the civilians they rule. However, “materialist theater” shows the true state of the real world, reveals the real life drama of civilians, and is an art form with a strong self-reflective and critical spirit. People who watch drama can feel that, Althusser’s analysis of materialist theater has a kind of “buzzing” feeling which is like the kind of “buzzing” consciousness that materialist theater allows the audience to realize after the curtain call. It can be said that Althusser’s materialist dialectics analysis of “materialist theater” has the purpose of revealing that the ideology of liberty, equality, fraternity that the bourgeoisie actively promotes is in fact just an imaginary relationship and that real exploitation and dependency are included in that relationship. While this ideological fraud remains in the glib word games, the majority of the toiling masses can only be deceived. This idea and Marx’s critique of ideology to expose its falsity and result in the overthrow of this false secular structure is exactly the same.

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