

# Toward a Compositional Model of Ideology: Materialism, Aesthetics, and Cultural Revolution

JENNIFER PONCE DE LEÓN AND GABRIEL ROCKHILL

**ABSTRACT:** This article sets forth a compositional model of ideology by drawing on the tradition of historical materialism and further developing its insights into the aesthetic composition of reality. It demonstrates how ideology is not simply a set of false beliefs but is rather the process by which social agents are composed over time in every dimension of their existence, including their thoughts, practices, perceptions, representations, values, affects, desires, and unconscious drives. By working through a number of diverse debates and authors—ranging from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to Louis Althusser, Eduardo Galeano, Rosaura Sánchez, and Paulo Freire—it thereby elucidates how ideology is best understood as an aesthetic process that includes *every* aspect of sense and sense-making, and that therefore requires a collective, cultural revolution as its antidote.

**KEY WORDS:** ideology, aesthetics, commodity fetishism, materialism, Marxism, ideology critique, *conscientização*, cultural revolution

## HISTORICAL MONTAGE: TWO WORLDS IN ONE

*“Did you know that ‘The Communist Manifesto’ was published the same year as ‘Alice in Wonderland’?”—Jean-Luc Godard*

**T**his passing query in *Hélas pour moi* raises the larger question of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Although the texts Godard references are *prima facie* of a different order—one being a revolutionary call to arms and the other a fictional story—the seemingly arbitrary fact of their shared publication date suggests a homology that is not immediately

apparent. By conjoining them, Godard mobilizes the otherworldly mathematics of montage, according to which one plus one does not equal two, as he was fond of saying, but rather *three*: the relation between the two elements that are combined transforms their very nature, and a third phenomenon emerges that surpasses the sum of its parts. In this particular instance, what the political and the poetic share is the idea that there are incompatible worlds of sense-making.

In the case of the “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explained that “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”<sup>1</sup> A central site and stake in class struggle is thus the capacity of human collectivities to make a world that makes sense. The capitalist class strives to impose its definition of reality as the only one possible, while seeking to destroy, discredit, or render inapprehensible all other worlds and possibilities of world-making. Lewis Carroll’s story similarly juxtaposes rival and incompatible spheres of sense: Alice enters a parallel universe whose seemingly fantastic, nonsensical qualities are experienced as the seamless manifestation of reality itself by its regular inhabitants. As we will discuss below, Eduardo Galeano has convincingly interpreted the adventures of Alice, particularly in *Through the Looking-Glass*, as an allegory for her submersion in the “looking-glass world” of ideology, meaning the upside-down reality that the ruling class is viciously intent on imposing as the only possible one.

A materialist understanding of aesthetics is extremely useful for analyzing this battle of the senses and developing an account of ideology as the multi-layered composition, and potential re-composition, of a collective world. Far from reducing aesthetics to a restricted field of privileged cultural production, we draw on its etymological root—*αἰσθητικός* means *of or for sense-perception*—to expand its meaning to the collective composition of a shared sensorium.<sup>2</sup> We mobilize this conceptualization of aesthetics to build on the recognition, central to Marx’s work, that humans’ experienced life-worlds are produced and transformed through sociohistorical practice. As Marx himself claimed, all aspects of our “relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, being aware, sensing, wanting, acting, loving” are eminently social and historical.<sup>3</sup> They have been shaped by collective life processes and can thus be transformed in turn.

In what follows, we will draw on the power of aesthetic re-composition inherent in Godard’s understanding of montage to explore how important aesthetics is to elucidating the political polarization between rival worlds of sense-making.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, we will focus on the category of ideology in order to develop an account of its world-making capacity. We will do this through a layering effect not dissimilar to that of montage, offering a sequential account of different dimensions of ideology that actually function simultaneously and are relationally constituted as an ensemble. Beginning with the materialist conception of ideology in Louis Althusser’s work and tracing it back to the writings of Marx and Engels, we will then develop additional strata of analysis in order to set forth a compositional model of

ideology that includes not only thought and practice, but also perception, habits, norms, feelings, values, desires, drives, discourse, representations, etc. Ideology will thereby be explained as a multidimensional world-making mechanism that collectively forges a shared sensorium in all of its complexity. According to the compositional model, ideology is thus understood as an aesthetic framework of sense-making that quite literally *makes* a world by making it *make sense*.

## FROM THE REPRESENTATIONAL TO THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF IDEOLOGY

*“In all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura.”—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*

This famous description of ideology has often been used to suggest that Marx and Engels maintained a representational or illusionistic conception of ideology, according to which it is a system of false ideas that inverts, and thereby misrepresents, the true nature of reality. Ideology critique would thus consist in destroying the illusion of ideology through rationalist argumentation and Marxist science.

In his well-known essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), in which he sought to develop a materialist conception of ideology over and against this illusionistic account, Althusser made a rather surprising claim that might make some readers wonder whether he was slyly convoking, as an intertext, Marx’s famous assertion: “*je ne suis pas marxiste*.” The author of *For Marx* flatly stated that the theory of ideology set forth in *The German Ideology* “is not Marxist.”<sup>5</sup> Although he quickly added that his own adumbration of such a theory still required further study and elaboration, Althusser argued that the work of Marx and Engels suffered from positivism and historicism because it portrayed ideology as “an imaginary assemblage [*bricolage*], a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the ‘day’s residues’ from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.”<sup>6</sup>

Advocating a break with what he saw as positivist historicism, Althusser proposed that if ideologies have their own histories, ideology in general does not. Instead, it functions in a manner akin to the Freudian unconscious: it is eternal in the sense of being omnipresent and transhistorical. It is on the basis of this analogy between ideology and the unconscious that he then advanced two fundamental theses:

- i) Ideology does not misrepresent the real world but rather constructs an “imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”<sup>7</sup>
- ii) Ideology has a material existence.

Rejecting the reduction of ideology to a simple misrepresentation of the real, he explained that it exists in ISAs—ranging from the school and family to church and the media—that regulate practice, producing subjects that act as they are acted upon by material systems of power whose role is to reproduce the social relations of production.

In principle, the materialist conception of ideology displaces the very ground upon which the representational understanding is based by according a primacy to practice. Althusser was fond of paraphrasing Pascal in this regard: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.”<sup>8</sup> The practices established and perpetuated by ISAs forge material beliefs that are anchored at a much more profound level than conceptual representations: “Where only a single subject . . . is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.*”<sup>9</sup> Participating in the rites and rituals of ISAs produces a sense of the world that is materially inscribed in one’s very existence qua subject. In fact, Althusser went so far as to assert that ideas as such disappear, leaving only the practices of subjects materially governed by ISAs.

Although there are certain limitations to Althusser’s approach, some of which we will foreground below, his materialist conception of ideology elucidates the concrete processes of ideological subjectivation, as well as the institutional forces operative in the social reproduction of the relations of production. By situating material practice and institutionalized social discipline at the core of his analysis, he helped displace the presumption that ideology is first and foremost about ideas that function as illusions masking reality.

### CAMERA OBSCURA REDUX

*“Consciousness [das Bewusstsein] can never be anything else than conscious existence [das bewusste Sein], and the existence of men is their actual life-process.”—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*

Through this subtle play on words in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels dismantled the idealist illusion of “consciousness” and critiqued the presumption that there exists an autonomous sphere of subjective mental activity. Instead, they affirmed that consciousness (*das Bewusstsein*) is materially composed out of the concrete socio-historical reality of a conscious being (*das bewusste Sein*), with the emphasis falling on the action of *being*, or existence, meaning what Marx and Engels immediately qualified as the actual life-process (*wirklicher Lebensprozess*). In other words, far from functioning as a fixed entity or spiritual identity, being

is nothing other than the real activity of this “being,” meaning its practice qua *homo faber* (human as maker).

This re-composition of language reveals a world of sense that is materially hidden within another. That which presents itself as a self-evident reality (*das Bewusstsein*) shows itself to be a composition, whose very sense is based on dissimulating the ongoing life-process of *being* that materially composes it (*das bewusste Sein*). This aesthetic “remontage” of *das Bewusstsein* as *das bewusste Sein* constitutes a break with the assumption that consciousness is self-determining and auto-constituting. Rather than ideas being freely formed conceptions that interpret or frame a given world, they are interwoven with material practice to such an extent that they are organically produced within it, thereby calling into question the very distinction between individual consciousness and collective social practice. In this regard, we see that, pace Althusser, the materialist conception of ideology was already operative in Marx and Engels:<sup>10</sup>

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness [*des Bewusstseins*], is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely in this context that they proceeded to aesthetically recompose *das Bewusstsein* as *das bewusste Sein*, revealing the unseen in the seen, before invoking the oft-quoted aesthetic analogy between ideology and a camera obscura: “If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”<sup>12</sup> The metaphor chosen by Marx and Engels, we should note, is extremely precise. Strictly speaking, a camera obscura does not simply misrepresent the world outside. On the contrary, it perfectly captures key features of it, and *this* is part of its pernicious power of sense-making: it frames them within an over-arching gestalt that inverts their actual relations and sense.<sup>13</sup>

Our perceptual apparatus, as Marx had argued in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, is not simply part of “nature” but is instead the result of historical life-processes that train us to perceive in certain ways.<sup>14</sup> The inversion operative in the camera obscura of ideology is thus not a misrepresentation in yet another sense. Rather than there being a real, given world outside of ideology, that is then simply distorted through inversion, the world materially delivers itself to us upside down, and *this* is the primary datum of our ideological experience.<sup>15</sup> This

is why the comparison to the inversion of objects on the retina is so important: it is *impossible* for us to see it. Just as physical life-processes have forged our retina in such a way that inverted objects immediately and instinctively appear upright to us, so have historical life-processes trained our perception such that we spontaneously see an upside-down world—the world of ideology—as right-side up.

This insight constitutes a crucial contribution to the materialist conception of ideology, as well as to the compositional and aesthetic model that we seek to develop here. It holds that material practice formats our perceptual matrix in such deep and fundamental ways that the world is “naturally” delivered to us through the lens of ideology. Instead of simply being a set of illusions or false ideas, ideology operates as an all-encompassing sensorium that emerges from the actual life-processes of *homo faber*. It composes an entire universe through the collective and historical production of a shared world of sense that is at one and the same time physical *and* mental. It is the collective historical life-process (*der historische Lebensprozess*) that forges this sensorium in such a seamless fashion that it is largely rendered imperceptible. In other words, the ideological sensorium is often not visible *as such* precisely because it is not recognized as one amongst others. Instead, it imposes itself as the sole and unique reality, meaning the *only* one that *makes sense* and has the power of *making sense*.

## THE ART OF INVERSION

*“Upright vision, in the final analysis, is vision in harmony with touch and motor experience.”—George M. Stratton*

Near the time of Engels’s death, but apparently with no direct connection to the Marxist tradition, the American psychologist George M. Stratton began a series of experiments on perceptual inversion. He fabricated upside-down goggles, which he wore from morning to night. They substituted “an up-right retinal image for the normal inverted one,” thereby making the world appear upside down.<sup>16</sup>

At first, although the inverted images he perceived were clear and definite, “they did not . . . seem to be real things, like the things we see in normal vision, but they seemed to be misplaced, false, or illusory *images* between the observer and the objects or things themselves.”<sup>17</sup> The “memory-images” from normal vision continued, as he explained, to function as “the standard and criterion of reality.”<sup>18</sup> One of the remarkable features of this experiment and subsequent ones is that it only took a short amount of time before what originally appeared to be “illusory *images*” were integrated into an cohesive field of sense-making experience. “The seen images thus became,” Stratton wrote, “*real things* just as in normal sight. I could at length *feel* my feet strike against the *seen* floor, although the floor was seen on the opposite side of the field of vision.”<sup>19</sup> “Upright vision,” he explained,

is thus a *purely relational* phenomenon that is not dependent upon being upright “in reality,” but is rather simply the result of integrating vision, touch, and motor experience into a coherent gestalt, meaning a total set of relations—independently of their “actual” orientation in space—that makes sense.

Other researchers have since repeated Stratton’s experiments with comparable results. In one of the most well-known cases, the Innsbruck Goggle Experiments, Theodor Erismann and Ivo Kohler found that habituation to visual inversion took place in phases but occurred with remarkable rapidity: within just six days of wearing inversion goggles, research participants experienced upright vision and were able to perfectly execute complex actions like drawing, walking on a crowded street, riding a bike or motorcycle, or even skiing.<sup>20</sup>

Although the focal point of these experiments was not the power of aesthetic adaptation to the upside-down world of ideology, they demonstrate how perception is a constructive and interactive process that is flexible and can be radically modified through habituation and relational integration. We can quite literally be trained, in a few short days, to see the world upside down, and to have that world make perfect sense. Relating these experiments, then, to the account of ideology we have been developing, we can say that ideology is a social process of habitual sense-making that norms perception, thought, and practice—among other things—by accustoming social agents to a shared sensorium. In short, ideology routinely organizes a world of sense that *makes sense* by providing social agents with an integrative grasp of what appears to be a coherent world.

In a poetic turn of phrase, Stratton concluded his description of his first experiment as if he were alluding to Marx and Engels: “Only after a set of relations and perceptions had become organized into a norm could something enter which was in unusual relation to this organized whole and be (for instance) upside down. *But a person whose vision had from the very beginning been under the conditions we have in the present experiment artificially produced [those of an inverted field of vision], could never possibly feel that such visual perceptions were inverted.*”<sup>21</sup>



## COMMODITY FETISHISM AS AESTHETIC COMPOSITION

*“Through this substitution [of social relations between people by relations between things], the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye.”*

—Karl Marx

Numerous scholars have highlighted the fact that Marx generally stopped using the term *ideology* in his later work. The perceptual metaphor he had invoked to describe ideology as a *camera obscura* reappears, however, in a particularly telling context. In his analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital I*, Marx explained that visual perception is a “physical relation between physical things”: light is transmitted from an external object to the eye.<sup>22</sup> However, we do not *perceive* the physical impression of light on our optic nerve, and we do not therefore recognize it as a “subjective excitation.” Instead, we experience vision as the immediate apprehension of objective forms that lay outside of the eye. A material relation between physical things is thereby transformed into an ethereal relation to external forms.

Marx compared this process, by which the visible emerges out of a *structural* invisibility, to the perception of commodities. Having “absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations [*dinglichen Beziehungen*] arising out of this,” the commodity-form transforms the actual social relation between people into “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”<sup>23</sup> The products of labor, which consign the social relations of labor to oblivion, thereby take on a mysterious and suprasensible quality as they appear to have a magical life of their own. The visibility of commodities arises out of the structural invisibility of the labor that produced them, as well as of the overall set of social relations integral to capitalist exploitation.

Commodity fetishism is not, therefore, purely subjective or a simple illusion, nor does it only exist in the realm of ideas.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, it is a constitutive aspect of the collective sensorium that has been socially constructed under capitalism. And this sensorium is as affective and libidinal as it is value-laden and often unconscious. Indeed, this is one of the most important features of Marx’s elucidation of commodity fetishism, and one of his major contributions to the compositional model of ideology that we are elaborating. For in addition to constituting a shared sensorium that is ideational, practical, and perceptual, ideology functions as a social system of collective values, unconscious feelings, and uncontrollable cravings.<sup>25</sup> The commodified universe of capitalism arouses desires, produces needs, drives obsessions, concocts baseless anxieties, perpetuates fear, and creates mesmerizing spectacles of a world of pleasure in order to mask a world of pain.<sup>26</sup>



### IMAGINARY INTERPELLATIONS

*“There is something both profoundly important and seriously regrettable about the shape of this ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay. . . . What was originally conceived as one critical element in the general theory of ideology—the theory of the subject—came to be substituted, metonymically, for the whole of the theory itself. The enormously sophisticated theories which have subsequently developed have therefore all been theories about the second question: How are subjects constituted in relation to different discourses?”*

—Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall incisively identified a fundamental schism in Althusser’s famous essay and traced its material consequences in subsequent work on the matter.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, Althusser brought together Marxism and psychoanalysis in order to elucidate the problem of how individuals are ideologically interpellated as subjects. On the other hand, however, he unwittingly opened the path to post-Marxist reflections on subjectivity that would abandon the materialist analysis of ISAs, as well as the totalizing critique of capitalism, in favor of a theoretical—and often theoreticist—preoccupation with subjectivation.

Given the remarkable brevity of the allegorical interpellation scene in Althusser’s text, it is highly symptomatic that so much ink has been spilled over it in subsequent writings on his work. In this scene, a police agent, who serves as a metonym for the state, hails an individual on the street: “Hey, you there!” In turning around 180 degrees, presuming that he or she is the one being called, the individual turns into a subject of ideology. The idiosyncratic nature of ideological subjectivation is thus an important aspect of his theory. Instead of ideology being a form of groupthink or collective indoctrination, it is individualizing and appears to be freely chosen. I recognize *myself* as the sole and unique person being hailed in the crowd, and I turn around to accept it: the individual interpellated is *me!*

No one willingly admits that they are part of ideology, Althusser had explained earlier in the text, precisely because we all feel like free and unique individuals. However, *this singularity* is the precise site of ideological inscription: we each do our own ideological pirouettes. Moreover, what is important about the interpellation scene—and *this* might go a long way to explaining its extravagant legacy in post-Marxist reflections on subjectivity—is that it simultaneously suggests, at least for some readers, that individuals could respond in some other manner to ideological hailing (e.g., not turn around), and that this would provide them with a singular exit from ideology.<sup>28</sup>

What has been lost on many readers is the extent to which Althusser composed the interpellation scene itself as an *imaginary* construction. He introduced it by explicitly stating that “we can imagine [*se représenter*] it along the lines of the

most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing.”<sup>29</sup> He then insisted on its purely imaginary aspect: “If we assume [*supposons*] that the imagined theoretical scene [*la scène théorique imaginée*] takes place in the street.”<sup>30</sup> When he went on to correct the illusions produced by the scene by explaining that individuals are in fact *always already* ideological subjects, and that there actually is no succession leading from one to the other, he explained that “for the convenience and clarity of the exposition of my little theoretical theater [*petit théâtre théorique*], I had to present things in the form of a sequence.”<sup>31</sup>

It is worth entertaining the hypothesis, then, that this imaginary scene constitutes an ideological trap. It stages ideology *as if* it came from the outside, was imposed all at once by an external authority, confronted individuals directly and impelled them to react to it, and left them some free choice in the matter. Even though Althusser insisted on the fact that these are all mistaken beliefs, which themselves are instigated by ideology, he nonetheless maintained the illusory scene itself. It is almost as if he was coyly deploying this allegory precisely in order to demonstrate the depth and power of the materialist account of ideology. By situating his reader in a material scene that would subtly foster false beliefs *in spite of* all of the conceptual clarifications regarding their falsity, it is as if—on the most generous possible reading—he wanted to juxtapose the ideological power of practical experience to the weakness of theoretical knowledge within his own essay.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is certainly true that many unsuspecting readers have allowed themselves to be lured in by this materialist staging of an ideological understanding of ideology.

### THE BLACK MIRROR OF IDEOLOGY

*Stripe*: “The whole thing’s a lie. . . . Roaches—they look just like us.”

*Arquette*: “Of course they do. That’s why they’re so dangerous.”

To further analyze this subjectivist misunderstanding of ideology and develop our compositional account, let us consider a contemporary allegory that restages Althusser’s interpellation scene. In “Men Against Fire,” the fifth episode in *Black Mirror*’s third season, a group of U.S. soldiers is hunting down “roaches,” which are horrific, screeching monsters considered to be a menace to society and the gene pool of the rest of the population. The soldiers are equipped with sophisticated MASS implants that control their sensory apparatus and provide them with enhanced forms of visualization.<sup>33</sup> If they succeed in their hunt-and-kill missions, they are rewarded at night by their implants being programmed to play out their sexual fantasies in their dreamscapes, Thanatos (the death drive) thereby seamlessly bleeding into Eros (the erotic drive).

During his first mission, the protagonist Stripe succeeds in killing two roaches. However, his pre-selected enemies shine a light on him that later produces glitches in his MASS implant. At first, his visualization technology starts to give out intermittently, and then he notices that he is able to smell the grass, whereas usually his implants had blocked his sense of smell. He also begins hearing birds. When all of his senses come back and are no longer controlled by MASS, he realizes that what he had perceived as monsters are just normal human beings. He then turns on the other soldier he is with and seeks to save a mother and child that had been targeted as roaches.

When he is eventually hunted down by his fellow soldier and returned to base, one of the implant overseers, Arquette, explains to him that MASS was developed to make the task of killing easier by taking over all of a soldier's senses. Stripe also learns that the implants control his memories, as Arquette lays out his options for him. He can either agree to have MASS reset, and all of his recollections will be erased, including his conversation with Arquette, or he can refuse and he will be incarcerated in solitary confinement with the memory of his kills—in which he sees actual human beings instead of roaches—constantly replayed for him in MASS. The “choice,” however, is his. As Stripe is prostrate, Arquette hails him from behind, placing his hand on his back and gently coaxing him: “just say the word, Stripe, and it all goes away.”

In the final sequence, we see Stripe returning home to his beloved. The scene is portrayed in stereoscopic vision: we see both the actual, dilapidated, and pre-ideological world, on the one hand, and his own dreamlike perception of it via his implant, on the other. The chirping birds on the soundtrack and the tears streaming down his cheeks suggest, however, that there are at least minimal memory traces of the “choice” he had made, and what it means: the one world of sense now appears to have fissures in it, allowing the other to leak in.

Understood metaphorically, the implant technology is an excellent depiction of the ways in which ideology operates as a multifaceted, aesthetic framework that composes an entire world of experience. It combines perceptions, affects, discourse, thoughts, memories, dreams, unconscious drives, and desires into a world of sense. Strictly speaking, however, the externalization of ideology in the implant fosters the mistaken belief—which is itself ideological—that ideology functions like a program that is imposed from the outside and could be started or stopped at will.<sup>34</sup> Just as in Althusser's interpellation scene, one could be led to interpret “Men Against Fire” as suggesting that submission to ideology is a choice (which is no choice), akin to simply pressing a button that spawns a new world.<sup>35</sup>

This magic button conception of ideology obfuscates the intricate ways in which social agents are gradually composed over time through multidimensional and dynamic processes of socialization that produce a layering effect in which various strands of one's existence are laid down and woven together.<sup>36</sup> These layers

do not, of course, only depend on how a social agent identifies itself since they are also intertwined with those of other agents and their perceptions.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in Frantz Fanon's comparable interpellation scene in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he describes how he is identified as a negro (*nègre*) in such a way that his agency is negated via objectification: he does not need to act—by turning around—in order to be racialized, because he is *always already* acted upon by the white gaze. Fanon describes in this regard how it was “the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”<sup>38</sup> This layering effect of the ideological composition of social agents thus goes hand in hand with the layering effects of social composition and the establishment of the socioeconomic stratification integral to capitalist society.<sup>39</sup> The compositional model of ideology thereby proposes a solution to the longstanding debate regarding the relationship between subject and structure because it demonstrates that these are conceptual abstractions that are incapable of capturing the intricate ways in which “social agents” are gradually composed—and potentially recomposed—out of palimpsestic processes of material socialization.

### UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

*“The looking-glass school [la escuela del mundo al revés] is the most democratic of educational institutions. . . . It’s not for nothing that this school is the child of the first system in history to rule the world.”—Eduardo Galeano*

In the opening pages of *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World* (1998), which was published in the wake of the dismantling of the communist block and during an era of intensified globalization of capitalism, Eduardo Galeano imagines what it would be like if Alice, who had stepped through a mirror to discover the reversed world of the looking-glass, were born today. “She’d only have to peek out the window,” he writes.<sup>40</sup> Everything is so systematically and ubiquitously inverted that it appears perfectly natural. The very mechanism of inversion—the mirror—is so seamlessly integrated into our vision of the world that we do not even see it or its effects. Not unlike the participants in the Innsbruck Goggle Experiments, we share an upside-down universe that appears like reality itself.

The looking-glass school has been developed and imposed by global capitalism in order to ideologically train the world’s population by providing daily lessons that format common sense. It teaches via practical knowledge, by demonstrating through repeated experience how things actually work. For instance, the upside-down world, Galeano explains, “rewards in reverse: it scorns honesty, punishes work, prizes lack of scruples, and feeds cannibalism. . . . The worst violators of nature and human rights never go to jail. They hold the keys. In the world as it is,

the looking-glass world [*mundo al revés*], the countries that guard the peace also make and sell the most weapons. The most prestigious banks launder the most drug money and harbor the most stolen cash. The most successful industries are the most poisonous for the planet.<sup>41</sup>

What Galeano demonstrates with remarkable breadth and depth is the extent to which the looking-glass school functions as an unrelenting, ubiquitous, and intricate process that constitutes social agents. In addition to ideas and practical knowledge, it bestows upon us values, norms, affects, representations, discourses, modes of perception, and all of the other features of existence. Through the course of *Upside Down*, he dissects many of these dimensions, but always with an eye to the composition of a world that results from their integration into a relational ensemble of sense-making. To take but a few examples, he explains how language itself is an important material vehicle for indoctrination in the looking-glass school:

- capitalism wears the stage name “market economy”
- imperialism is called “globalization”
- the victims of imperialism are called “developing countries” . . .
- torture is called “illegal compulsion” or “physical and psychological pressure.”<sup>42</sup>

Representations, particularly those imposed through mass culture and the media, are another central aspect. “Poor criminals are the bad guys in this movie,” he writes, “rich criminals write the script and direct the action.”<sup>43</sup> A system of values, replete with all of the requisite prizes and penalties, is equally significant: “What is rewarded above is punished below. Petty robbery is a crime against property; grand larceny is a property owner’s right.”<sup>44</sup> Affects play a particularly crucial role, and he analyzes in detail how fear, along with greed, is socially constructed as “the most active engine of the system that used to be called capitalism.”<sup>45</sup> To mention a final aspect, Galeano examines how time itself is subjected to ideological transformation, imposing a form of obligatory amnesia along with a destruction of the future: “Consumer culture, a culture of disconnectedness, trains us to believe things just happen [*las cosas ocurren porque sí*]. Incapable of recalling its origins, the present paints the future as a repetition of itself; tomorrow is just another name for today. The unequal organization of the world, which beggars the human condition, is part of eternity, and injustice is a fact of life we have no choice but to accept [*estamos obligados a aceptar o aceptar*].”<sup>46</sup>

## THE COMPOSITIONAL MODEL OF IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

*“As social agents, . . . we are not reduced to one social location as we are constantly in the process not only of reproducing but also of transforming these very same social sites.”—Rosaura Sánchez*

Ideology functions as a microscopic process of composition with macroscopic consequences. In relation to identity formation, it is palimpsestic in the sense that each new experience overwrites what has already been written, either to reinforce it by retracing its lines, or by slightly modifying it.<sup>47</sup> Over time, layers build up and interact in idiosyncratic ways, with some of them compacting into the solid core of one’s “identity,” and others becoming part of a more superficial crust. Ideology is thus a material composition that is dynamic, even if the sedimented results of past ideological formations are often so deeply anchored in one’s sense of self that they are stubbornly recalcitrant to change.<sup>48</sup>

This is why one of the most widespread understandings of ideology, which is that it is a monolithic, one-size-fits-all worldview that is mechanically imposed by the infrastructure, does not capture its full compositional power. For if there are psychological warfare campaigns carried out by the ruling class and their ideological hirelings to impose a dominant vision of the world, even these are often undertaken with an explicit knowledge of the marketing power of *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear)—or more precisely *prêt-à-penser* (ready-to-think)—ideology. What we mean by this is that ideology often comes in all imaginable sizes, shapes, colors, and styles, so that each individual can have the impression of freely choosing their unique ideological wardrobe by selecting different items and regularly combining them in eccentric ensembles.<sup>49</sup> Certain pieces, which stand out in their uniqueness, are sometimes even made *sur mesure* (made to measure) in the sense that they are tailor made for one’s singular sense of self.

Rosaura Sánchez has developed a useful heuristic for thinking through the ideological aspects of identity-formation, as well as the way people can exercise agency in regard to these. Instead of presuming that there is a direct or transparent relationship between one’s structurally-determined social location and one’s identity, she demonstrates how identity formation is itself “a process shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces that come together and mutually constitute one another in distinctive and dynamic ways.”<sup>50</sup> Drawing on the work of Roy Bhaskar to formulate a “critical realist theory of identity formation” that rejects the intellectual retreat from class, she foregrounds class positioning—understood as one’s structural relationship to processes of exploitation or, more broadly, processes of capital accumulation—as integral to “*all* social conjunctures and inseparably connected to every distinctive conflictual difference.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, she insists that this positioning is interconnected with gender, racial/ethnic and sexual struc-

tures in various ways.<sup>52</sup> She reserves the term *positionality*, in juxtaposition to one's social *location* or *positioning*, for "one's imagined relation or standpoint relative to that positioning."<sup>53</sup> Whereas positioning is structural and extra-discursive, even though it is conceptually mediated, positionality is discursive and ideological: it refers to how social agents *make sense* of their structural positioning, which can range from "I'm poor, even though I work all of the time, because it's God's will" to "I'm poor because capitalism is a socioeconomic system in which the increased wage labor of the working classes is a form of unrelenting theft that augments the wealth of the capitalist class." The interconnection between positioning and positionality determines social agents' lived experience and is, therefore, a crucial aspect of identity-formation.

The fact that there is no unmediated or monocausal relation between positioning and positionality is because people's apprehension of their social location, while being significantly conditioned by the material realities of their lived experience as members of a particular class, largely depends on their cultural education and the discourses to which they have been exposed.<sup>54</sup> It is in this sense that Sánchez insists on the agential aspects of positionality: by encountering different frameworks of sense-making, social agents can identify discrepancies between their structural location and their discursive understanding of it, pointing out the insufficiency of the latter in certain instances, and developing forms of sense-making "that provide more satisfactory accounts of 'reality.'"<sup>55</sup> In terms of the compositional model of ideology, this means that positionality is part of the sense-making mechanism that composes a world, but that this mechanism can itself be recomposed through collective education and social transformation.

## IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE, CONSCIENTIZAÇÃO, AND AESTHETIC REVOLUTION

*"'Cultural revolution' takes the total society to be reconstructed, including all human activities, as the object of its remolding action. . . . 'Cultural revolution' is the revolutionary regime's maximum effort at conscientização—it should reach everyone, regardless of their personal path."—Paulo Freire*

If ideology is much more than a set of false beliefs, then its critique requires a lot more than rational arguments that reveal the true nature of the world. It needs to go to the root of matters by attacking the collective sensorium that produces and naturalizes an entire universe of experience that *makes sense* for all of those participating in it. Antonio Gramsci's preferred vocabulary works perfectly for our compositional account because he argued for a reconfiguration of common sense (*senso comune*), or the self-evident but ideological sense of the world that forms an incoherent whole, as good sense (*buon senso*), meaning the self-critical composition of a meaningful and coherent world (the term *senso* in Italian—like



*Sinn*, which Marx uses in German—refers equally to both the theoretical and the practical or perceptual).<sup>56</sup>

This re-composition of sense does not result mechanically from science and truth, nor can it occur solely through individual introspection or road-to-Damascus enlightenment. It also cannot, as Paulo Freire has explained, simply be bestowed upon people in a top-down model of education in which the facts are unveiled *for* the benighted masses. “Although one Subject may initiate the unveiling on behalf of others,” he wrote, “the others must also become Subjects of this act.”<sup>57</sup> This means that a bottom-up collaborative procedure of collective education is necessary, in which everyone’s sense of the world is taken into account in a collaborative exchange. Such a pedagogy of the oppressed cultivates what Freire called *conscientização*: a lived critical consciousness that is simultaneously theoretical *and* practical. It is a form of awareness and perception that allows people to identify socioeconomic contradictions and to take action against the capitalist system of exploitation and oppression. Within the compositional framework of ideology, we could say that *conscientização* refers to the collective process of materially recomposing the very sense of the world.

One of the most powerful tools for collective education and the cultivation of *conscientização*, as we propose to understand it here, is the act of modeling alternative worlds of sense in their totality. This can be done through aesthetics in various ways, by plugging social agents into a revolutionary culture that includes an entire cosmos of representations, perception, thought, feeling, value, etc. It is also often performed by activist communities, social movements, communes, co-ops, alternative cultural institutions, occupations, and so forth. For it is one thing to *tell* people that another world is possible; it is quite another to *show* them that another possible world is actual. This is one crucial aspect of the educational power of aesthetics: it has the capacity to recompose the collective world of sense by providing people with another sense of the world.

The struggle to transform the sensorium, however, is not, and cannot be, purely superstructural or cultural, in the limited sense of these terms. It requires intervening in the socioeconomic framework to seize control of it and harness its incredible power of world-making. The way in which we understand this process does, however, have an aesthetic dimension in the sense that it has to do with how we envision the current world order and its revolutionary transformation. This is what Raúl Zibechi has argued in his important studies of radical social movements: rather than another world being possible, or imagining a distant future in which capitalism would be definitively overthrown, he demonstrates how another world is already being composed all around us through myriad social projects. The problem is that our aesthetic education by the dominant ideology does not allow us to see it: “the long-awaited new world is being born in the movements’ spaces and territories, embedded in the gaps that are opening up in capitalism. It is ‘the’ real

and possible new world, built by indigenous people, peasants, and urban poor on conquered lands, woven into the base of the new social relations between human beings. . . . This new world exists; it is no longer merely a project or program but rather a series of multiple realities, nascent and fragile. The most important task that lies ahead for activists over the coming decades is to defend it, to allow it to grow and expand.”<sup>58</sup> It is our hope that this account of the compositional model of ideology will contribute to this very real and ongoing struggle to recompose the world order in such a way that it actually makes sense for all of us.

*Jennifer Ponce de León, University of Pennsylvania  
Gabriel Rockhill, Villanova University*

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## **NOTES**

1. Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 489.
2. In this article, we use the term *sensorium* in its broad sense to mean the entire sensory and intellectual apparatus of experience, which is irreducible to structural oppositions such as mind and body, theory and practice, culture and nature, etc.
3. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 106.
4. It is not insignificant that “The Communist Manifesto” was published in 1848, whereas *Alice in Wonderland* did not appear until 1865. Godard’s historical montage is thus a fictional provocation, but it is arguable that it is a fiction with very real consequences insofar as it mobilizes the power of fiction to compose an alternative world of sense. “It mustn’t be forgotten that film has to, today more than ever,” Godard wrote, “keep as its rule of conduct this idea of Bertolt Brecht: ‘realism is not how true things are but how things truly are [*le réalisme, ce n’est pas comment sont les choses vraies, mais comme sont vraiment les choses*]” (Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, 238).
5. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 253.
6. *Ibid.*, 254.
7. *Ibid.*, 256 (translation slightly modified).
8. *Ibid.*, 260.
9. *Ibid.*
10. This is not to suggest, of course, that there are no signs of a representational account of ideology in the writings of Marx and Engels, but rather that a number of

- key passages can be woven together and developed in order to contribute to the compositional model of ideology.
11. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 36. Later in the same book Marx and Engels explicitly state that historical materialism “does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice” (ibid., 54).
  12. Ibid., 36.
  13. The famous duck-rabbit image is a good example of how ideological gestalts often function. Although the empirical content of the drawing remains identical, the shift from one gestalt to the next changes the very sense of the image: the *same* lines are once a duck, then a rabbit.
  14. See, for instance, Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 108–09: “Not only the five senses [*Sinne*] but also the co-called mental senses—the practical senses (will, love, etc.)—in a word, *human* sense—the humanness of the senses—comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. The *forming* [*Bildung*] of the five senses is a labor of *humanized* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.”
  15. Sarah Kofman’s *Camera Obscura of Ideology* imputes this representational framework to Marx’s text in order to stage its deconstruction. She thereby attempts to reduce Marx’s complex understanding of aesthetics and his materialist analyses of society and history to a simple, abstract system of “metaphysics” and “difference,” where the former presumes the existence of an “original meaning” and the latter subverts this presumption. A materialist response to this reductive textualism should begin by disregarding the idealist assumption that the totality of language is haunted by nebulous conceptual specters such as “metaphysics” and “difference,” and then proceed by demonstrating how Kofman actually projects these abstractions onto specific material texts, as in her blanket assertion that “all these specular metaphors [employed by Marx] imply the same postulate: the existence of an original meaning” (Kofman, *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, 3). Moreover, by claiming that metaphors and analogies do not function “perfectly,” Kofman wildly misconstrues the function of figurative language in acts of social communication.
  16. Stratton, “Some Preliminary Experiments on Vision,” 611. Also see Stratton, “Upright Vision and the Retinal Image” and Stratton, “Vision without Inversion of the Retinal Image.”
  17. Stratton, “Some Preliminary Experiments on Vision,” 613.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Ibid., 615.
  20. Sachse et. al., “The World Is Upside Down,” 222–32.
  21. Stratton, “Some Preliminary Experiments on Vision,” 617 (our emphasis).
  22. Marx, *Capital*, 165.
  23. Ibid.
  24. “Fetishism,” as Étienne Balibar explained, “is not a subjective phenomenon or a flawed perception of reality. . . . It constitutes, rather, the way in which reality (a certain form or social structure) cannot but appear” (Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 60; translation slightly modified). Similarly, David Harvey wrote that Marx “is not saying that this disguise, which he calls ‘fetishism’ . . . is a mere illusion, that

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- it is a made-up construction that can be dismantled if only we care to try” (Harvey, *Companion to Marx’s Capital*, 43).
25. The unconscious is, of course, socially composed in profound ways, as authors as different as Frantz Fanon, Erich Fromm, and Cornelius Castoriadis have argued.
  26. Terry Eagleton defines ideology as “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 13).
  27. See Hall, “Signification, Representation, Ideology,” 102.
  28. See, for example, Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 130.
  29. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capital*, 264; translation slightly modified.
  30. *Ibid.*; translation slightly modified.
  31. *Ibid.*; translation slightly modified. Pierre Macherey provides a precise terminological summary of these qualifications by claiming that the call (*appel*) of interpellation is actually only a reminder (*rappel*) addressed to subjects that are already ideological (Macherey, *Le Sujet des normes*, 94).
  32. It is, of course, possible that the interpellation scene is simply the result of Althusser’s own entrapment within ideology, and that the amount of interest in this scene in subsequent literature—at the expense of materialist analyses of ISAs—is an indication of their degree of ideologization.
  33. As we know from the history of thought control experiments like MKUltra, the ruling class and their henchmen have long been preoccupied with the possibility of total control of the sensorium.
  34. Also see Mayor, “Ficción inmunitaria y falsa conciencia,” 16–18.
  35. The film *They Live* (1988) provides a perfect illustration of how this magic button understanding of ideology is also operative in one of the most widespread—and quintessentially ideological—understandings of how ideology is overcome: the main character discovers a pair of magic glasses that allow him to instantaneously and systematically overturn the camera obscura of ideology.
  36. Göran Therborn has developed a theory of ideologies as ongoing social processes that “unceasingly constitute and reconstitute who we are” (Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, 78).
  37. Far from constituting a pre-given unity, a social agent is strictly speaking only heuristically delimited as a site or force field traversed by multiple and conflicting agencies.
  38. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91; translation slightly modified. Pierre Macherey has provided an interesting comparison between Althusser’s and Fanon’s interpellation scenes in *Le Sujet des normes*, 66ff.
  39. Althusser failed to fully account for the particular functions that ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality have in the social reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Materialist accounts of the ways race, gender, and sexuality are implicated in class struggle and processes of capitalist accumulation can be found in the work of Domitila Barrios de Chungara, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Silvia Federici, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, Shulamith Firestone, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Stuart Hall, and Adolph Reed Jr., among others.
  40. Galeano, *Upside Down*, 2.
  41. *Ibid.*, 5–7.

42. Ibid., 40.
43. Ibid., 91.
44. Ibid., 148.
45. Ibid., 170.
46. Ibid., 209–10.
47. In a revealing passage in his essay on ISAs, Althusser described his own personal ideological constitution as a subject in palimpsestic terms, recalling how the young Louis, as a familial subject, was interpellated as a religious subject, then an academic subject, a juridical subject, a political subject, and so forth. Highlighting the idiosyncrasies of his historical conjuncture and personal life, he emphasized how these various ideologies intersect, are superimposed and contradict one another.
48. On the palimpsestic temporality of psychic life, in which the past remains present even as it is overwritten by the future, see Sigmund Freud's comparison between the archeological history of Rome and the layered time of the mind in the opening pages of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 15–19.
49. Numerous examples could be cited here, but for the purposes of concision, let us note but one: the “feminist” argument for imperial intervention in Afghanistan (the “liberation” of Afghan women), which offered to self-proclaimed defenders of gender equality their own unique “feminine” drum to beat in the drum circle organized by the warmongers bankrolled by the permanent war economy.
50. Sánchez, “On a Critical Realist Theory of Identity,” 35.
51. Ibid., 35.
52. For a succinct discussion of the importance of class analysis in analyzing this interconnection, see Foley, “Intersectionality.”
53. Sánchez, “On a Critical Realist Theory of Identity,” 38.
54. One of the reasons why class is such an important factor in one's ideological formation is that it structures every aspect of the material, lived world of social agents, meaning the things they do or do not do, the places they live, the parts of the world that they see (or not), the way they are educated, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the culture they have access to, the forms of transportation they use, the institutions they interact with, etc. All of these material elements of daily life compose social agents' “innate” sense of the world, and they often seamlessly merge with a collective schema of sense-making that frames this shared experience within an explanatory gestalt that makes perfect sense to that class (and is constantly reinforced by it).
55. Ibid. 43. Althusser proposed a similar distinction when he wrote: “Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous. Class position is objective and rational. To arrive at proletarian class positions, the class instinct of proletarians only needs to be *educated*; the class instinct of the petty bourgeoisie, and hence of intellectuals, has, on the contrary, to be *revolutionized*” (Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 2).
56. “The starting-point of critical elaboration,” Gramsci wrote, “is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Such an inventory must therefore be made at the outset” (Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 326).
57. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 169.
58. Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance*, 20.

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