The Aesthetic Process as Reversal

Stendhal’s famous phrase about the novel being a mirror “going along the main road” frames the problematic of realism, in which art would simply be a reflection of reality and the ideology of the time. This is also the conception of various Marxist readings—derived from Marx’s basis-superstructure metaphor—of literature that have often ran along the lines of a reflection theory of art in general. Introducing the idea of the “reversal” as the inversion or turning upside down of these theories of art, this essay revises four different positions regarding the problem of the relationship between art and reality as mediated by ideology in the mimetic or representational act so as to unsettle the deadlock of this relationship. The first one is Althusser’s reading of art as a procedure that does not simply makes reality visible, but also redoubles or renders visible ideology through a certain décalage or non-identity. Likewise, Macherey’s conception of literature is that of a fragmented mirror that renders visible the hidden contradictions of ideology. The third position, that of Alain Badiou, breaks away from the two previous ones going beyond the logic of the reversal and instead proposing scission as a procedure to demarcate the autonomy of the field of art with respect to ideology and science. For Badiou, no element of the aesthetic process is by itself ideological or aesthetic but is instead produced as ideological in the structure of the aesthetic mode of production. Finally, Macedonio Fernández’s position against realism opens up a possible disentanglement of the art-ideology-knowledge knot. Fernández’s work challenges realism by proposing that the autonomy of a fiction has a certain effect in reality and it becomes quite literal when he devises that there can be a novel—a reflection—walking on the streets.