LOUIS ALTHUSSER

Key Concepts

- Base and Superstructure
- Practices
- Ideology
- Repressive State Apparatuses
- Ideological State Apparatuses
- Interpellation

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) was a French Marxist political philosopher. He was born in Algeria and educated in Algiers and France. He was admitted to the Ecole normale supérieure in 1939,
but World War II disrupted his studies when he was called to military duty. During the German occupation of France, Althusser was captured and placed in a German prison camp where he
remained until the end of the war. Once he was freed, he resumed his studies. In 1948, Althusser completed a master's thesis on the German philosopher Hegel and later passed the *agrégation* in Philosophy and was given a teaching appointment.

Althusser was a practicing Catholic for the first thirty years of his life, and during that period he displayed a strong interest in Catholic monastic life and traditions. In the late 1940s, he joined the Communist Party and was a member for the remainder of his life. During the May 1968 Paris strikes, he was in a sanitarium recuperating from a bout of depression, an illness he struggled with throughout his life. Unlike intellectuals such as Alain **BADIOU**, Althusser supported the Communist Party in denying the revolutionary nature of the student movement, though he reversed this view.

Althusser murdered his wife in 1980. Declared incommé stand trial, he was institutionalized, but then released in 1983. subsequently lived in near isolation in Paris and died in 1990 of a heart attack. During the last years of his life he wrote two different versions of his autobiography, both of which were published posthumously in 1992, and are included in the 1995 edition of *The Future Lasts Forever.*

Althusser is especially important for the ways in which he reinterpreted Marx's ideas and made them resonate With the intellectual currents prevalent in Europe during the 1960s, most importantly structuralism. His work is sometimes referred to “structuralist Marxism” or ”postmodern Marxism." In addition to structuralism, Althusser’s work is marked by a positive reconsideration of psychoanalysis, a body of thought facilely rejected by the Communist Party. Thus, Althusser’s rereading of Marx is informed by the work of Jacques **LACAN**. In important ways, Althusser’s ”return to Marx" runs parallel to Lacan’s famous “return to Freud (see Jay, 1993, note 147, p. 373). Althusser’s return to the founding texts of Marxist discourse was aimed at liberating Marxist ideas from their Soviet interpretation, as well as from humanistic ones, This rereading was meant to revitalize Marxist ideas and to put them back to use for revolutionary purposes.

Of Althusser’s many writings, three have been particularly influential: *For Marx* (1965), *Reading Capital* (1968), and the oft-cited long essay ”Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1969;
included in *Lenin* and *Philosophy* and *Other Essays*). Althusser’s influence has been widespread, helping to shape such diverse fields as cultural studies, film studies, literary theory and art history.

The reassessment of Marxism Althusser undertakes includes a rejection of some key Marxist assumptions about society. For example, he argues against the version of determinism found in
the orthodox Marxist formation of **base** and **superstructure**. Base refers to the particular economic mode of production operating in a given society. Different societies are organized around different economic systems (modes of production)-for instance, agricultural or capitalist. The concept of superstructure refers to political, social, religious, and other non-economic aspects of a society. Superstructure, then, includes the political and cultural aspects of a society,

such as civic, religious, and other institutional structures. The traditional Marxist view is that the base determines the superstructure. In other words, political, social, and religious spheres are not autonomous, but are dependent on and conditioned by the economic mode or base. Althusser prefers to talk about the idea of social formation (society) as a decentered structure comprised of three conflicting, indeterminate practices: the economic, the political, and the ideological. In Althusser's rethinking, the base and the superstructure are in a relationship that affords the superstructure considerable autonomy. Although in the end, he concedes that the economic is determinant even if it is not dominant in a particular historical moment.

The term **practices**, for Althusser, has a specific meaning: it indicates processes of transformation. ”By practice in general,” he writes, ”I shall mean any process of transformation of determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production')" (1965, p. 166). Economic practices use human labor and other modes of production in order to transform raw materials (nature) into finished (social) products. Political practices deal with the uses of revolution to transform social relations. Ideological practices concern the uses of ideology to transform lived social relations; that is, the way a subject relates to the lived conditions of existence. (It is from this position that any discussion of art history must begin.) Theory is often treated as the opposite of practice, but for Althusser theory is a type of practice. Thus, Marxism is a practice of class struggle.

The term **ideology** is central to Althusser’s work. In ”Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser melds ideas taken from both Marxist and psychoanalytic thought in order to develop his theory of ideology and its relation to subjectivity. His primary concern in this essay is with the question of how a capitalist society reproduces existing modes of production and their relationship to people: why do people support. these processes when, according to Marxist thought, they are in effect acceding to their own domination by the ruling classes? Althusser formulates his answer through the concepts of ideology, ideological state apparatuses and interpellation.

The construction and maintenance of capitalist society occurs at two levels, the repressive and the ideological. On the one hand, social control can be coerced by the exertion of

repressive social control can be coerced by the exertion of repressive force through such institutions as police, armies, courts, and prisons--what Althusser calls **Repressive State**

Apparatuses (RSAs). These institutions suppress dissent and maintain the social order as envisioned by the ruling power. But the use of repressive force is not the only way to guarantee assent to capitalism. In addition to the RSAs, Althusser argues that ideology must also be employed to maintain the dominant social formation. He refers to these ideological modes of control as **Ideological State Apparatuses** (ISAs)---including education, family, religion, sports, the arts, television, and other media--which reproduce capitalist values, standards, and assumptions. Ideological discourse produced by ISAs acts on individual subjects in such a way that they see themselves and others as standing within the dominant ideology, subject to it, and willingly supportive--consciously or unconsciously--of the replication of this ruling power. In short, ideology imposes itself on us, but at the same time we act, in effect, as willing agents of the ideological agenda, which we repress. In Althusser's thought, the ISAs represent the means by which capitalist ideology operates as a seductive system in which individuals are instantiated as subjects without being conscious of this subjugation as such. What Althusser adds to Marxist doxa is a knowledge of Lacan's discussion of subject formation within language and the visual (imaginary) realm.

Departing from the earlier Marxist notion that ideology is false consciousness, Althusser understands ideology as an inevitable aspect of all societies--even socialist societies where capitalist exploitation has presumably been eradicated--that serves, in part, to provide human subjects with identities. For Althusser, ideology is a requisite, fundamental structure of subject formation. For this reason, he argues, that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (1969, p. 162). Distinguishing between the imaginary and the real (see Lacan's theory of the mirror stage) allows Althusser to counter the traditional Marxist notion that ideologies are false because they mask an otherwise accessible and transparent world. In contrast to this notion of ideology as misrepresentation, Althusser views ideology as a narrative or story we tell ourselves (i.e., one that we author) in order to understand our relationship to the modes of production. A real, objective world is not accessible to us, only representations of it. A Consequence of this line of thought is that our very sense

of ourselves and our lived-experience is a by-product of ideology. There is no exit from ideology in Althusser's political philosophy.

Ideology, then, is a discourse that has marked effects on each individual subject. Althusser understands this effect through the concept of **interpellation**. This concept

describes the way ideology hails and positions (”interpellates”) individual subjects within particular discourses. As Althusser puts it, ”ideology ’acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ...’transforms’ the individuals into subjects" (1969, p. 174). We assume our interpellated position, identify with received social meanings, locate ourselves within these meanings, and act as if we had the freedom of choice in the first place. Althusser's Structuralist notion of ideology is antihumanist because it questions the centrality of the autonomous, freely choosing individual in the process. On the contrary, the subject is subjected to the ruling ideology, misrecognizing ideological interpellation for the actions of a freely choosing individual.

Althusser provides an example of interpellation in action. Suppose, he says, an individual is hailed (interpellated) in the street by a policeman who says, ”Hey, you there!” This individual turns around to face the policeman. Althusser states: ”By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ’really’ addressed to him, and that ’it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else)” (1969, p. 174). The hailing or interpellation of the individual creates a subject who is, without necessarily knowing it, acceding to the ideology of state authority, its laws, and the systems that support and generate it. Ideology transforms us into subjects that think and behave in socially proscribed ways.

Although ideology is understood to subject individuals to the needs and interest of the ruling classes, it is not, according to Althusser, fixed and unchangeable. Rather, ideology always contains contradictions and logical inconsistencies, which are discoverable. This means that the interpellated subject has at least some room to destabilize the ideological process. Change or
revolution is possible.

Works of art have a curious and often contradictory position in Althusser’s thought because he attempts to construct a threshold between art and ideology-one that would enable what he
designates as ”real art” to distinguish itself from mere ideology. “The Problem of the relations between art and ideology, ” he writes, is a very complicated and difficult one. However, I can tell

you in what directions our investigations tend. I do not rank real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology”(“A Letter on Art,” 1966,p. 221). The difficulty arises with Althusser’s inability to fully articulate the complexities of this ”quite particular and specific relationship” between art and ideology, as

well as never having articulated the criteria by which one would discern”real art” from the mediocre. This remains something that has been left to those working after Althusser. Nevertheless, Althusser did sketch out some of his thoughts on
Art and ideology.

In an essay entitled ”Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract” (August 1966, four months after his ”A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre”), Althusser discusses the work of this Italian abstract painter in terms that reflect the larger scope of his structuralist Marxism, In an assertion that may perhaps be used to extract the criteria by which to judge ”real art,” he argues that Cremonini ”‘paints’ the relations which bind the objects, places, and times. Cremonini is a painter of abstraction. Not an abstract painter, 'painting' an absent, pure possibility in a new form and matter, but a painter of the real abstract.. real relations... between ’men’ and their ‘things’, or rather, to give the term its stronger sense, between ’things' and their ‘men’” (p. 230). In unmistakable Marxist language, Althusser calls for the production of artworks that make evident structural relations between people and others, people and mere things.

This is the relation of alienation Marx elaborates in his work on commodity fetishism. For this reason, Althusser also argues that the aesthetics of consumption and the aesthetics of creation are identical. This is because they both ”depend on... the category of the subject, whether creator or consumer (’producer' of a ‘work’, producer of an aesthetic judgment), endowed with the attributes of subjectivity (freedom, projects acts of creation and judgment; aesthetic need, etc.)" and second, ”the category of the object (the ‘objects’ represented, depicted in the work, the work as a produced or consumed object)" (pp- 230--231). However, Althusser wagers that ”real art”-- a legitimate abstract art which makes the ”real relations” that constitute a society evident--although still an ideological effect can present us with a ”radical anti-humanism" Wherein ”it is because we cannot recognize ourselves in [the artworks] that we can know ourselves in them, in

the specific form provided by art" (p. 240). In other words, art is an ideological effect that is able to refract the relations that constitute capitalist society. This refraction of ideology makes visible that which previously was unseen, unacknowledged, unknown, namely, the forces of production and the forces of interpellation.
The distance from ideology that ”real art" affords us is a direct result of its undeniable intimacy with the ideology that produces it. Althusser posits that

> the specific function of the work of art is to make visible (donner a voir), by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology (of any one of its forms), the work of art cannot fail to exercise a directly ideological effect, that
> it therefore maintains far closer relations with ideology than any other object, and that it is impossible to think of the work of art, in its specifically aesthetic existence, without taking into account the privileged relation between it and ideology,
> i.e. its direct and inevitable ideological effect. (pp. 241-242)

Exactly how and why art can construct a critical distance even as it remains immanent to ideology is one of the most challenging aspects of Althusser's work. The question of why art takes precedence over other ideological effects is one that he never fully developed. And yet, Marxist art historians continue to grapple with whether or not art is merely a reflection or a refraction of ideology. Does it make visible the very structure of society, the interpellation of humanist subjectivity as an attendant and requisite illusion (a Lacanian méconnaissance) of capitalism? Or is the privileging of art above other cultural productions (including mass-produced kitsch, for example) merely symptomatic of that very ideological-aesthetic interpellation? These are two of many possible standing questions that Althusser's work provides contemporary art historical practice.

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