Louis Althusser - How Texts Create an "Ideal Reader"

The persuasive aspects of all kinds of texts are what fascinated Althusser; he saw how even innocent-seeming texts act to reinforce or 'position' their audience at an ideological level, creating them as the text's **ideal reader**.

By this he meant that any text acts to persuade its target audience **to adopt the ways of thinking of its creator**. Althusser saw that texts act to reinforce what it means to feel a 'normal' member of society. For Althusser, texts have the power to normalise the power differentials that operate within society by reinforcing ways of thinking that keeps society's social structures in place.

Althusser saw ideologies as a 'representation of reality'. He knew that reality can only exist at the level of idea – we think we know what reality is, but all we can know is **ideas**. Althusser didn't believe that any reality other than this effectively existed; for Althusser, reality becomes a constructed thing, reinforced and maintained by those in power.

- There no doubt that reality can only exist, in important ways, as ideas. The question for Althusser is: whose ideas are they? And he believed that they were the ideas of the ruling and powerful classes – those who had the means to persuade us that certain ways of thinking were the natural ways to think. To give an example, think how men and women's relationships are ideologically created. Who do you think created these relationships and who now acts to reinforce them?
- Who constructs masculinity and femininity "on our behalf" and how do we come to believe their ideas? Althusser might well have pointed to the media, for a start.

Althusser believed that the powerful in society are able to create systems through which we each become socialised into willingly accepting *their view* of society's norms of behaviour and attitude. After all, they gained their wealth, power and influence **in an existing system of values** (referred to as the **status quo**) that they would hardly wish to change… After all, would you risk losing all by promoting change – revolution even? Would your power remain in the new order?

The means through which we become socialised, claimed Althusser, is through the actions of what he called society's 'Ideological State Apparatuses' – ISA for short. These are the *family*, *school*, *religion*, the *media*, the *arts* and *culture*, the *law* and *government*.

Althusser is famous for declaring that 'what is represented in an ideology is... not the system of *real relations* which govern the existence of individuals, but the *imaginary relation* of those individuals to the *real relations in which they live'* (Althusser 1971). He developed this into an idea he famously called **interpellation**; this is what he said:

> *'Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (and it recruits them all) or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (and it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or 'hailing', and which can be imagined along the lines of when a policeman (or other) hails us: 'Hey, you there!'*
> *Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. 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).' (Althusser 1971*

INTERPELLATION

Althusser's concept of **interpellation** can be used to explain the ways in which a text – even an apparently mundane text such as a magazine article or advertisement, for example – works powerfully in persuasive ways to affect its target audience.

According to Althusser, the **subject** (that is, the audience for the text) is **created** – or what he called **constituted** – by the text. The power of the text resides in its ability to **position the subject** – or, as Althusser put it, to create the audience as subject to the text akin to the "subject" of a king – in such a way that the subject cannot easily adopt an alternative or contrary interpretive position without feeling 'the odd one out' – as an outsider from the mainstream.

THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF TEXTS: 'MESSAGE' AND 'CODE'.

Althusser recognised that it was vital to make the distinction between what can be called the '**message'** of a text and the text's '**code'**. He recognised that whilst the text's target audience could resist the text at the level of its **message**, resistance at the level of the text's **code** was far more difficult *when the code presents what its audience perceives to be the dominant ways of thinking – **of what it means to be normal** – within their social group, society or culture.* The **code** always operates as a part of society's discourse – at the **pragmatic level** of interpretation.

- Look closely at the **pragmatic codes** created – rather than the **messages** – of a number of texts in class and be sure you can separate 'message' from 'code'.
- Work out how and why these 'codes' work by representing or reinforcing what it means to be 'normal' within society or with the text's target audience.
- Why are the codes within the texts so difficult to resist?
- How do texts create a powerful sense of 'normality' so much so that, even if we did try to resist the code, in resisting it, we feel somehow 'reduced' as a person, as an 'outsider', as different from the 'normal'… as abnormal?
- A few codes are so important to society's functioning that if we did choose to oppose them, we would be in trouble. These codes are supported by **instrumental power**. This means that in rejecting them the force of the state can be brought to bear upon us in the form of the law and its courts, prison or even mental health 'sectioning'.

HOW IDEOLOGIES OPERATE WITHIN TEXTS

Whenever we perceive the 'natural' or the 'common sense' in a text's message, we should be alert to the fact that what we are in fact recognising is unlikely to be in any way 'natural' or 'common sense'. Rather, what we are recognising is the 'conventional': an ideological way of thinking that acts to reinforce our sense of ourselves as a 'normal' member of a hierarchical society. The text operates 'invisibly' to contribute to our own construction *as an ideologically conditioned individual.*

THE 'PLEASURES OF THE TEXT'

Few of us would wish to resist this 'construction' of ourselves as 'normal' (and for 'normal' read 'cool', 'laid back', 'having a life', 'a natural rebel', 'youthful', 'law abiding', 'not geeky', etc., etc., etc… …).

By allowing ourselves the independence of mind needed to reflect more closely and critically on – even opposing or rejecting – a seemingly trustworthy text at the level of its ideological code would surely begin to throw into doubt our own sense of security about ourselves belonging to a 'normal' group, casting ourselves as an 'outsider' – as the 'odd one out'. And the need to be part of a group, to be perceived as 'normal' is such a powerful psychological drive it is hard indeed to resist it. But who is creating this sense of normality?

Perhaps far more often than we should, we submit ourselves freely and uncritically to the ideological processes which construct us as *what we feel we ought to be*, rather than *what we might truly want to be*: a free-thinking, freely-determining individual. Instead, we become **positioned**, or more accurately, **constructed**, by the text. We find ourselves being seduced by what critics refer to as **the pleasures of the text**.

GENRE

*An important textual code that assists the positioning or construction of the reader as an 'ideal reader' is **genre**. Genre is so conventional that we tend to view it as a natural and neutral concept; it seems 'safe', no more than a way of recognising what **kind** of text is in front of us: genre simply gives us a rough and ready guide to the **form** and the **content** of a text...*

But – *simply because it seems such a natural way of thinking* – we should be on our alert to the possible ideological consequences of genre. What seems "natural" is often "ideological" in the sense that ideologies often hide themselves beneath "common sense" or "natural" seeming ideas.

A moment's reflection will allow us to recognise that genre can create an important **frame of reference** through which we identify, select and interpret the text in certain ways. In this way, different genres can suggest different frameworks of reality.

- Can you think of several genres and work out how they act to create 'frames of reference'.

Genres always embody certain values and ideological assumptions; they seek to create in their audience a particular worldview – *not a freely-determined worldview*.