Louis Althusser - How Texts Create an 'Ideal Reader'

The persuasive aspects of all kinds of texts fascinated Althusser; he saw how even an innocent-seeming text has the power to reinforce or 'position' its reader to accept a particular way of viewing the world, i.e. to accept a particular set of ideologies. This means that a text is able to create its own **'ideal reader'**.

By this, Althusser meant that a text can act to persuade its target audience **to adopt the ways of thinking intended by its creator**. Althusser saw that texts act to reinforce what it means to feel a 'normal' member of society – one within the norms of society rather than on the outside.

Althusser saw ideologies as being the way society presents itself as 'normal' but which in fact is no more than a 'representation of reality'. Central to this is Althusser's recognition that reality can only possibly exist for humans *at the level of idea* – we think we know what reality is, but all we can really know is an **idea**. Althusser didn't believe that any reality other than this *effectively* existed; for Althusser, reality becomes a constructed thing; and he believed, as a Marxist, that reality would tend to be constructed to suit those in power.

- There can be no doubt that reality can only exist, for us all, at the level of idea. The question for Althusser was always, whose ideas? 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 – the *only* way to think.

- Who do you think constructs and reinforces concepts such as what it means to be masculine or feminine 'on our behalf'? And how do we come to believe their ideas are right? Althusser might well have pointed to the media, for a start.

Althusser believed that those in power in society use various means to reproduce in society's individuals (i.e. you and me) ways of thinking that mean we willingly accept *their view* of society's norms of behaviour and attitude – ways that *keep them in power*. This is a very political stance, and Althusser was a Marxist. He might have argued in his defence that as the powerful gained their wealth, power and influence **in an existing system of ideas and values** (which is referred to as the ***status quo***), they would hardly be in favour of wanting major social change, even if this meant a move to a fairer, less competitive and more co-operative society. Why? Because in this new society, their power might diminish or disappear completely. What would you do in such a situation? Work to maintain the status quo or work to change society?

The means through which we become socialised, Althusser argued, is through the actions of what he called society's 'Ideological State Apparatuses' – ISAs for short. These are many but he named a few: the *family*, *school*, *religion*, the *media*, the *arts* and *culture*, the *law* and *government*. He saw these social institutions as helping to socialise individuals into certain fixed ways of thinking.

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 relations* 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'.

An important way through which texts position their reader is through a distinction between what can be called the '**message'** of the text and the text's '**code'**. The **message** is what a text offers at it 'surface level' (i.e. in an ad for jeans, 'here is a new pair of jeans'); the **code** is what the text offers at a 'pragmatic' or inferred level (e.g. buying jeans like these is what cool folk do…; and you are cool – aren't you??).

Althusser recognised that whilst the text's target audience could easily resist what the text at the level of its **message**, resistance at the level of its **code** was far more difficult. This is because at the level of code, the text presents what its audience perceives to be the dominant – the 'normal' ways of thinking, i.e. **of what it means to be normal** within their particular social group, society or culture.
- Look closely at the **pragmatic codes** – rather than the text's **messages** – of a number of texts 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' (i.e. 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**.