

IDEOLOGY AND THE FORMATION OF THE SUBJECT

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Abstract: The relation between ideology and subjectivity presents itself from the start as an ambiguous one, as each term seems to imply the other. In his essay on ideology, Louis Althusser describes the formation of the subjectivity as the hailing or interpellation of an individual by ideology. The described process is of such a nature that its effect (the existence of the subject) is always already implied as realized. Namely, according to Althusser, the subject comes into being by recognizing him/herself as the addressee of the interpellation, thereby recognizing him/herself as having always already been a subject. Moreover, this description brings into play three key concepts: language, recognition and subjectivity, while the concept of ideology remains open and indetermined. What allows for the stability of such a process – as the interpellation alone cannot be the only cause of a subject with a stable identity – is the repetition of rituals and acts of the subject that sustain the process itself. Thus, according to Althusser, subjectivity is the sustained repetition of material ideological rituals. In the following paper, I would like to address once again Althusser's essay on ideology and the concept of materiality it announces in their intrinsic relation to the formation of subjectivity. Furthermore, this process will be treated in a connection with the concept of labour and its determination by ideological rituals. The paper will also try to extend the topic, by posing the concept of subjectivity in relation to its moulding by image technologies, particularly image processing and surveillance technologies, while keeping a close connection to the labour – technology relation.

Keywords: ideology, subjectivity, Louis Althusser, recognition, labour

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*,¹ Judith Butler examines the legitimacy of the subject's actions, that is – starting from the premise of an ambiguous and constitutive relation between the subject and power – how can a subject be also constituted as an agent? Or, put in other words, how is opposition to power possible since it is already implicated in the constitution of the subject who opposes? In order to address this question, Butler goes back to an investigation on how consciousness is instituted, starting from Hegel and Nietzsche and all the way to Althusser's *interpellation* and to Lacanian psychoanalysis – throughout the book however, the question of the formation of the subject can no longer be posed as the effect of a singular, foundational instance, but as the effect of a continuous series of repetitions or practices that maintain the subject as a continuous, unified entity/identity.

The return to Louis Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)"² should serve as a way to pave the passage from a discussion of the institution of consciousness or of subjectivity to the material practices it

¹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, published by Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1997

² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, published by Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971, trans. by Ben Brewster, pp. 127 – 186.

entails – namely, it will serve as a way of overturning this relationship: consciousness no longer as the privileged locus of ideas from which the subject's actions spur forth, but rather as being indebted to the materiality of its practices. As such, this overturning can be paralleled by the one effected by Althusser on the concept of ideology. By focusing on the materiality of its practices, ideology is no longer a term used to refer to a false system of ideas, without any concrete existence (as representing the subject's relations to his/her actual conditions of existence), but becomes defined by Althusser as: "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"³. According to Althusser's line of argumentation, this thesis on ideology entails two aspects – firstly, ideology will still maintain a negative relation in regard to its object, while nonetheless (and secondly) preserving its materiality. In the first instance, Althusser affirms the relation between ideology and reality as an *illusion/allusion* – that is, while not corresponding exactly to a reality, ideology needs only to be interpreted in order to discover the reality behind the *imaginary* representation.⁴ What Althusser seems to stress in this description – is both the imaginary nature of the relation as well as the fact that what is represented is not "their real conditions of existence (...)" but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there."⁵ In other words, ideology is not merely an imaginary distortion of the subject's relation to actual conditions of production, but is the subject's representation of the imaginary relation of the individual to the relations of production and the social relations that further result.⁶

Moreover, the relation between the subject and ideology is not that of a system of ideas, but rather takes the form of an apparatus that regulates the limit between what can be imagined and what cannot, between what is visible and what remains non-visible.⁷ And it is this apparatus that allows Althusser to postulate a materiality of ideology, notwithstanding its characterization as an imaginary relationship.⁸ Furthermore, in order to prove this thesis, Althusser begins a detailed description/interpretation of the allusion pertaining to the "ideological representation of ideology,"⁹ seen as a system of beliefs that a subject freely accepts as his/her own and according to which the subject must act. Put simply, there must be a constitutive relation between a subject's actions and her beliefs or, in other words – the subject's beliefs must be manifested in her actions. However, what Althusser observes is that not only do those beliefs correspond to a certain ideological apparatus (be it the Church, or justice or a certain morality), but that insofar as they pertain to the apparatus, they are also

³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴ "However, while admitting that they do not correspond to reality, i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit they need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = *illusion/allusion*)." *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶ What I took the emphasis on the *imaginary* to mean is – not a system of false ideas (of illusions), but a representation of an imaginary relation where the imaginary is taken to be part of the constitution of the subject as well, not merely something outside him/herself, resulting from the subject's alienation. It is also in this sense that I interpreted Althusser's affirmation of an *organic* link between ideology and the unconscious (see *Ibid.* p. 161). Also, according to Althusser: "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live. (*Ibid.*, p.165)."

⁷ Here I would like to reference Žižek's description of ideology as a "generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as the changes in this relationship." (see S. Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology", introduction to the volume *Mapping Ideology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek, published by Verso, 1994, p.1). It is also starting from this description that the second part of the paper – the relation between the constitution of the subject and visibility – will be discussed.

⁸ "[...] an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material." Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, published by Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971, trans. by Ben Brewster, p. 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

inserted into certain practices that are, in their turn, regulated by rituals. Both the apparatus and the imaginary relationship announced before gain in this manner different modes of materiality through the actions of the subject. Thus, and by making use of Pascal's famous formula¹⁰, Althusser affirms the existence of the subject's beliefs only insofar as are they material, only insofar 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.*"¹¹ This sentence will go on to prove two fundamental theses for Althusser, namely that there are no practices exterior to an ideology and that all ideology manifests itself through the subject and as the constitution of the subject.¹²

Consequently, the materiality of the subject is conjoint with the materiality of ideology. If we were now to turn to Althusser's notion of the *interpellation*, there is also an ambiguous temporality at play in the constitution of the subject. According to his example, an individual (notion used by Althusser, only for the sake of the example, to denote something pre-existing the subject) responds to a hailing by turning around to face the authority who addressed the interpellation. It is the act of turning around that functions in his text as a metaphor for the becoming subject of the individual. However, what the example will clearly show is the way the mechanism of ideology is centred on the function of mis/recognition – if the individual chooses to turn around and respond to the interpellation, it is because he/she recognizes him/herself as the addressee of the interpellation and thus to already having been a subject. So, the only way for the mechanism to work is to assume an anteriority of the subject as having already been constituted.¹³

Furthermore, what the example seeks to underline is precisely the mechanism of mis/recognition so central to the functioning of ideology – recognition testifies to a certain transparency or a certain obviousness of language and meaning, namely "the 'obviousness' that you and I are subjects [...] is [...] the elementary ideological effect [... as well as] a material ritual practice of ideological recognition [manifest] in everyday life."¹⁴ Moreover, the obviousness and the mechanism of recognition, in addition to the fact the individual is always already constituted as a subject, also seems to imply that what the notion of interpellation describes is not the foundational moment of the becoming subject, but rather the constant re-forming of the subject through the repetition of interpellation taking place in the rituals and practices of everyday life.

And if we were to turn now to the connection between the formation of the subject through the interpellation and the constitution of labour through the ideological state apparatuses, the formation of subjectivity described above should also be considered from the point of view of labour formation. According to the first part of his essay on ideology, the reproduction of the relations of production also requires the reproduction of labour skills according to the professions they are destined for. Moreover, the reproduction of labour does not come independently of ideology, but is imbued with a certain set of practices, rituals and beliefs. In other words, the reproduction of subjectivity is intrinsically connected to the

¹⁰ "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe", quoted by Althusser in *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 170. See also, "[...] the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning." *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹³ For Althusser's description of the interpellation, see *Ibid.*, pp. 173 – 177.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

reproduction of labour – labour is not merely a reproduction of skills, but requires its know-how to be taught alongside a certain way of practicing that know-how, that is again regulated by a certain ritual and governed by an apparatus of ideology.¹⁵ In addition, the formation of labour is moralized – according to Althusser, the subjects must be taught, must "be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously' [...]"¹⁶

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* Butler takes Althusser's example of an interpellation as a possible description of the institution of consciousness, by interpreting the turning around of the individual as a reflexive turn (a metaphor for the institution of reflexivity and, hence, consciousness) towards the law.¹⁷ Moreover, the act of turning around is preceded by a *self-restriction* or an assumption of guilt that acts as a form of anticipation for the law. For Butler, the hailing acts as a *subjectivating reprimand*¹⁸ that institutes the subject in relation to an assumption of guilt so that to be a subject comes to mean to have acquitted oneself of the allegation of guilt through acquiring labour skills and acquitting oneself *conscientiously* of them.¹⁹

Consequently, acquiting oneself *conscientiously* of a task also implies the mastering of the required skills. Thus, for Butler there is a simultaneity at work between the (re)production of subjectivity and the acquiring of skill: "there is no subject prior to their performing; performing skills laboriously works the subject into its status as a social being."²⁰ Hence, in the reproduction of skills what is at stake is precisely the reproduction of subjectivity – implicitly, to acquire a set of skills, to master them, *is to reproduce them as one's own activity*.²¹

In this sense, the materiality of ideology has a *reproductive capacity* – the reproduction of subjectivity alongside the repetition of rituals and practices and the acquiring of skill. Nevertheless, this appears to be a grim account of subjectivity – it appears that the subject is completely constituted by the ideological apparatuses and as such can have no freewill. Althusser's essay tries to deal with this problem by suggesting that the ideological apparatus constitutes the subject in such a way, that he/she will submit to a certain ideology according to *his/her freewill*.²² The account is given in an analysis on how the religious apparatus interpellates subjects – namely, in the case of religious interpellation, the subject is formed through a *misrecognition* with an Absolute Other (an Other in whose image the subject has been made). However, the recognition takes place in such a way that the subject is constituted as a free agent, endowed with a free subjectivity – that is, the subject is free to recognize him/herself as a subject of the Law. For if the interpellation and the specular *misidentification* are recognized by the subject as his/her own conditions of possibility, then this free subjectivity is restrained to the recognition that the law is necessary and not contingent. In other words: "[...] the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that*

¹⁵ Not only this, but one can also reference the teaching of the proper use of language, the proper use of grammar. The constitution of the subject is never free from the functioning of language and here one can also reference the fact the interpellation/hailing is an ideological process that depends on the transparency of language.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, chapter 4 "«Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All.» *Althusser's Subjection.*", Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1997, pp. 106 – 131.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ "To acquit oneself 'conscientiously' is, then, to construe labor as a confession of innocence, a display or proof of guiltlessness in the face of the demand for confession implied by an insistent accusation." *Ibid.*, p. 118

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²² In his discussion of Christianity as an ideological apparatus, see L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, published by Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971, trans. by Ben Brewster, pp. 177 – 182.

he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject [the Absolute Other], i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection [...]. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection. That is why they 'work all by themselves'."²³

In Judith Butler's account, this free submission to the law is interpreted as a *passionate attachment*.²⁴ Roughly summarized, due to the fact that the subject misrecognizes his/her own submission to the law as their conditions of possibility, this submission takes the form of a passionate attachment to the conditions for one's own survival. Nevertheless, the question of the possibility of choice and agency on the part of the subject still remains open, although Butler will try to sketch the possibility of subversive action or resistance when discussing the formation of the subject through repetition.

But, for the time being, I would like to return to the connection between subjectivity and ideology in Althusser's essay and, particularly, to the description of ideology as regulating the limit between what is visible and what is not. However, I would like to bypass the investigation of the role of the image and the imaginary into the formation of the subject, a literature that has mainly been founded on Jacques Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience"²⁵ and which has subsequently passed into film theory as a means of criticizing the role of cinema into the ideological formation of the subject as spectator.²⁶ Instead, I would like to focus on the work of Harun Farocki and the connection he explores between the mapping of visibility, cognition, technology and labour. For the present paper I would like to focus on one of his films, namely on *Wie man sieht (As you see)*²⁷.

While his work is mainly placed into connection to Foucault's description of the post-disciplinary society and its further development into the control society²⁸, I would like to assess the connection between this film, its statements, and Althusser's re-working of ideology into the formation of the subject. Both of these terms will be addressed through the connection between the cinematic apparatus (the forms of visibility that ensue along with its implicit connection to technological development) and the determination of labour forms (also seen as attributes attached to the body, uses of the body and, hence, lines of intelligibility drawn on the body).

Harun Farocki discusses the image in terms of its possibility of being understood – thus, in terms of access and recognition of the image by the viewer. What should be stated already is that, here, the viewer is no longer placed into a relation of (almost helpless) formation by and through the image, but rather it has become a question of the encoding

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, chapter 3 "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification. Between Freud and Foucault.", Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1997, pp. 83 – 105. Butler connects the manifestation of the passionate attachment in the subject with the mechanism of melancholia and the interiorization of the oedipal interdiction. However, the present paper will not delve into those issues, as it would require a lengthy detour through psychoanalysis.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", text translated by Jean Roussel and published in S. Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, published by Verso, New York and London, 1994, pp. 93 – 99.

²⁶ A good introduction and overview of the importance of both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusser's theory of ideology for film theory is sketched in R. Rushton, G. Bettinson, *What is Film Theory?: an introduction to contemporary debates*, published by Open University Press, Maidenhead, England, 2010.

²⁷ Harun Farocki, *Wie man sieht* in Harun Farocki, *Filme 1967 – 2005*, absolut MEDIEN/Große Dokumentaristen, Berlin 2009.

²⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control", published in *October*, vol. 59, (Winter, 1992), pp. 3-7 and re-published online on the Jstor platform: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents] and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, published by Vintage Books, New York, 1977, translated by Alan Sheridan.

between the two, an encoding that seems to pass through forms of visibility and intelligibility attached to the body. Hence, the connection with Foucault's description of the Panopticon appears as almost inevitable, since the Panopticon immerses power and the visibility of the body.²⁹

In *Wie man sieht*, Farocki performs an archaeology of the image that traces the imbrication between visibility and cognition – starting with images that attest the conjuncture between agriculture and war technologies – such as the plow and the and the cannon, or the tractor and the tank³⁰ - the technology of cinema and of photography are traced back to their connection to the Jacquard loom. The Jacquard loom replaces the weaver and makes his/her use of hands unnecessary – the worker is only needed to observe the functioning of the machine (the use of the body is restrained to the eyes). Furthermore, the Jacquard loom is shown to function through punched cards – not unlike the earlier versions of the computer – and can be used to weave images, using a technique that splits images into points and arranges them into rows. For Farocki this means that the method of creating images through mathematics is at the same historical point where technology renders the worker unnecessary. And if the Jacquard loom was treated as a prototype for the computer and the computerized image and it rendered the worker's body unnecessary, then the development of the same technology will render the supervision of the machine by worker useless as well, completely erasing the worker and his/her body. From the point where the eyes of the worker are treated as useless, the image becomes separated from the necessity of human recognition. In other words, perhaps one could say that subject is no longer ideologically formed through the image, but rather that the image can bypass the subject.

In Harun Farocki's work, the image intervenes between subject and object. Thus, when discussing about the origin of photography, Farocki bring forth the case of Albrecht Meydenbauer, who, after almost having lost his life trying to measure a cathedral, comes up with the idea of scale measurement.³¹ Henceforth, there is a distance interposed between subject and object – the object becomes reduced to what can be recorded and measured, in what could then be photographed and translated into numerical figures. What Farocki is trying to exemplify is that from this point on, technology – the technology of producing and reproducing images – not only mediates, but actively destroys the actual object in favour of its representation.³² And since the relation between technology and the object is considered as a relation of destruction/preservation, the relation between the subject and technology is examined from the point of view of labour. However, the body of the worker is submitted to an analogous process of erasure – one of Farocki's image sequences from *Wie man sieht* attests to this: tracing the connection between the invention of mechanism of the rifle and that of the photography camera (in order to underline the analogy of violence and erasure between the two), Farocki also discusses how the development of technology – the rifle, then the

²⁹ For the time being, I would like to postpone an assessment of the compatibility between the two accounts – that of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser as well as the particular meaning that materiality gains in Althusser's work and its possible inclusion or exclusion into the Foucauldian analyses, along with the discrepancies between the two central notions of the two authors – ideology for Althusser and power for Foucault.

³⁰ Harun Farocki, *Wie man sieht* in Harun Farocki, *Filme 1967 – 2005*, absolut MEDIEN/Große Dokumentaristen, Berlin 2009. One of the opening lines of the film says: "War is rationalized as a means of earning one's daily bread."

³¹ Harun Farocki, "Reality Would Have to Begin", re-published in *Harun Farocki. Working on the Sight Lines*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, translated by Marek Wieczorek, Tom Keenan, Thomas Y. Levin, p. 194.

³² Allan James Thomas, "Harun Farocki's 'Images of the World and the Inscription of War' ", in *Stuff it – The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, edited by Ursula Biemann, Institute for Theory of Art and Design Zürich, Edition Voldemeer Zürich, Springer Wien, 2003, p. 113.

machine gun, then the tank – influenced military tactics and particularly, the way the body of the soldier was used. For whereas the rifle simply demanded a change in the arrangement of the troops, the machine gun took the body of the soldier out of the visibility of the battlefield and hid it, first into the trenches, and then into the tank.

Much in the same way, the visibility and intelligibility of both the object and the subject find themselves determined and encoded by an imaging technology that renders them unnecessary. However, while the body of the worker is no longer needed in terms of labour, her subjectivity is neither rendered invisible, nor useless, but merely re-directed. One of the main connections between Foucault and Farocki seemed to me to be that, while the body of the worker became invisible and thus the intelligibility of the body was changed accordingly, power became increasingly invisible and omnipresent and subjectivity became ever more visible under the form of surveillance. Thus, from what in Althusser was described as *the free agent that freely recognizes the necessity of his/her own submission*,³³ the subject can now also be described as freely acknowledging that the only way to keep reproducing his/her own subjectivity is through consumerism. Stated differently, I would to end this short article by recapitulating and posing the question of the changes and reciprocal determinations between labour and subjectivity, starting from Harun Farocki's analyses on how technology affects and makes certain types of labour obsolete. According to these, it would be possible to argue that the body gains another visibility (and intelligibility), as well as making other subjectivities possible. Not only this, but these changes should also be retraced according to the different meanings that materiality can occupy. If, for Althusser, the announced materiality of ideology was at the same a (re)productive capacity of rituals and practices to produce subjectivity (and, implicitly, beliefs, ideas according to which the subject acts) and the reproduction of labour was at the same time the reproduction of the subject as a social being, then the analyses brought forward by Harun Farocki's work should add another layer to this investigation. The materiality of the object for Farocki is not free from its codification by image technologies that measure and preserve the object. And the materiality of ideology should not be considered only from the means of the rituals it governs, but also from the different lines of visibility and intelligibility that it traces across the subject.

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