

Response to Ideology Takes A Day Off: Althusser and Mass Culture

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This fine essay by Chip Rhodes details both the limitations and possibilities of revised Althusserian Marxism for use by those interested in theory and practice of historical change. Althusser's privileging of some aesthetics to the denigration of others has troubled many cultural critics, but, in my opinion, unjustly. As Rhodes suggests, it may be possible to recognize the overdetermined and contradictory character and the unevenness of even popular texts, opening sites for resistance.

What does concern me, however, is how Rhodes describes where the possibilities exist for his revision of Althusser. Specifically, he contrasts "a strict Althusserian approach [which] should conceive of texts and subjects as both the bearers of structures" with a humanist approach that "affirms the existence of a subject that can be distinguished from its social context." Rhodes claims this opposition is an unfruitful one. Instead, what we need to do is start to read popular texts in a new Althusserian mode by elucidating how they provide subject positions for pleasurable consumption. This new mode would, he thinks, thus include the aesthetics ignored in Althusser's original presentation. Rhodes concludes by arguing that even the popular text only offers a contradictory opportunity for the subject as he asserts the dialectic to be inevitable, a simple, irrefutable outcome of a Marxist theory of history.

In attempting to make his argument, Rhodes neglects the signal importance of Althusser's description of the interpellation process, which specifically distinguishes between the individual and the subject. Althusser stresses that the function of ideology is to "hail" the individual to take up a subject position in a structural relation. Both the terms of "individual" and "subject" are theoretical—humans are never individuals in the abstract. Rather humans are always in process, moving from subject position to subject position. Yet simultaneously, subject positions are also theoretical. They are sites of structural relations, but Althusser's formulation suggests the possibility of refusal to take up a proffered position, to not recognize the ritual of a handshake or a calling by name. He writes:

I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that *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.* (Lenin 171; italics in original)

Consequently, Althusser creates the problematic description (because of its Lacanian foundations) of "hailing" individuals: "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. . . . I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) . . .*" (173-74).

As these passages continue, Althusser may not suggest any free will or unlimited agency on the part of individuals in connection with those hailings which they recognize to be addressed to them, but it seems to me that this is the place for a meeting between a "strict Althusserian" approach and a "humanist" one. Much of the work of cultural studies has been to understand how identities (also to be thought of as subject positions) are constructed for individuals. Althusser even provides the explanation for the variety of identities/subject positions available. The ISAs are private, they are plural, and they function by ideology. They are, for Althusser, "the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle" (147).

Like some other writers, I prefer to think of ideologies as having progressive and reactionary potentials, depending upon the transformation of ideologies through their encounters with subjects in historical contexts.¹ This is because I believe that while individuals are constituted as subjects, they are also capable of recognizing contradiction and structured oppression to the point of (at least) resisting. Yet as Jonathan Dollimore writes, it would be also a mistake to consider history as so unstable as to be at every moment capable of revolution: "So the critique of ideology identifies the contingency of the social (it could always be otherwise), and its potential instability (ruling groups doubly contested from without and within), but does not underestimate the difficulty of change (existing social arrangements are powerfully invested and are not easily made otherwise)" (87).

How is this possible? I think it is possible because of two features built into the Althusserian model. One is the contradictory nature of any specific ideology that will attempt to hail concrete individuals to take up specific subject positions; the second is that individuals may not recognize or may reject their being hailed as those subjects. While we

are always already subjects, as a "feminist," for instance, I am inclined by being the bearer of the meaning of that structure to resist evidences of patriarchy. I reject being interpellated as a "woman" into standard patriarchal addresses because that is contrary to my subject position as feminist. I am not, however, "free" nor do I have unlimited ability to be something else, since it is through opposition that I refuse that patriarchal subject position.

Let me illustrate this by using *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* as the example. Rhodes provides a fine ideological analysis of the film in relation to a "consuming" ideology and subject, but he presumes a (fully) interpellated subject. Moreover, for this to work in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, this subject seems to be an adolescent Anglo middle- or upper-class heterosexual male.

However, the reading might look quite a bit different if the analysis considered the subject addressed to be an adolescent female, a gay male, a Hispanic, or a working-class youth. For Rhodes focuses upon the main plotline and not the moments of contradiction or "discoherence"—an "incongruity verging on a meaningful contradiction"—to use Dollimore's term. In the case of contradiction, I speak specifically about the subplot in which Ferris' behavior forces his sister to confront her presumption that abiding by normative behavior will succeed in winning her the approval of authority figures or peers. What she learns (or what the individual interpellated into a subject position that focuses on the character's structural relation learns) is that neither her parents nor her schoolmates recognize her obedience as meaningful in opposition to Ferris' charm and charisma. If one were to foreground her conflicts during the day's sequence of events, one might well find contradictory the ideological insistence on acquiescence in authority with its structural lack of payoff for the woman. Ferris and Cameron become individuals—i.e., men; she gets a speeding ticket.

Where the sister is moderately effective is in her unintended battle with the scapegoat authority figure—the school principal. The displacement from the original oppressors (social norms and relations constructed for women in patriarchy and inscribed in family relations from the day of birth) to external figures (embodied in the institution of the school system and specifically the substitute male authority figure) may solace individuals whose subject positions allow them to consume this movie with pleasure. However, as Rhodes might also suggest, this is hardly a progressive text from a woman's subject position either. While the ideological message is not the same for her as for Ferris, it is still one of an imaginary, if contradictory, relation to her real position in relation to gender issues. Gaining victory over the school principal

is an empty victory compared with the failure relative to patriarchy as a whole. Yet, this hollow victory may be an instance of a dis coherence—an incongruity verging on a meaningful contradiction should the subject sense that *as a woman* she is neither rewarded for normative behavior nor for “individualism—as her brother and Cameron surely are. The constructed opposition only works for men.

Another subject position offered by the text is one for those hailed to take up a subject position identifying with the two ethnic minorities who oddly enough seem to come out with the only successful (unproblematized) consuming act of the day. Given the Ferrari owned by Cameron’s father to park in the garage, the Hispanic attendant and his African-American buddy get a free ride and the day off. From the viewpoint of this text, this strikes me as another instance of dis coherence—a textual gesture motivating Cameron’s illusionary break with production and patriarchy, which still also suggests some distorted reflection of the structuring absence motivating this film. Class is (nearly) absent. Ferris whips out cash as though its productive source were inexhaustible. Of course it is, for these are rich kids from the Chicago suburbs. The source of cash surely is not, however, inexhaustible for the parking attendants, who ignore property rights and do what is “natural”—appropriate the car for a day-long drive in the country. This display of the real relations of individuals in our social formation is surely unintended by the ideological address of *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, especially if it is about an ideology of uninhibited consumerism. But it is there anyway, to be read by the individual taking up the subject position of the Althusserian cultural critic.

I would agree with Rhodes that it would be theoretically and practically dangerous to conceive of popular culture as necessarily empowering. However, simultaneously, it seems important to think how Althusserian Marxism might illuminate the possibilities for subjects sensing the contradictory aspects of specific ideologies (such as patriarchy, racism, heterosexualism) that might lead to resistance. Additionally, I can conceive of the possibility of limited conscious agency by individuals who take up subject positions in ideologies that might address them in progressive or regressive ways. Thus, Rhodes’ call for “hard empirical work to determine the balance of class forces and the structural features of capitalist society at any given historical moment” also should be a call for work on how and when individuals are and are not interpellated as specific subjects in relation to the contradictory ideologies now under dispute.

Notes

1. Althusser makes a major distinction between Ideology in general (which has no history) and specific ideologies, which do transform historically.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.