



Wounds and Repetition: *The Death Drive in the Subject's Sensorium*

Nick Popow

Ph.D. Candidate, Rutgers University

### **Althusser and Lacan: Theory of the Subject**

From Descartes' Cogito to Husserl's transcendental consciousness, the Subject has undergone countless formulations over the course of philosophical history. In "*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*," Louis Althusser proposed a complete rethinking of the Subject. For Althusser, to be a Subject is to have one's thoughts, beliefs, and (as we shall later see) most intimate perceptions partly shaped by external influences. On this point, Althusser was avowedly influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan, who attempted to provide a concept of the Subject that would be commensurate with both structuralism's emphasis on scientific formalism and psychoanalysis. Lacan and Althusser's rejection of the post-structuralist view of the Subject as anachronistic put them in a liminal position as vanishing mediators between the heyday of structuralism and the imminent advent of post-structuralism. According to Althusser, Subjects do not preexist their ideological capture, but emerge through processes of interpellation within ideological state apparatuses (more on this later).

### **To cite as:**

Popow, Nick, 2022, "Wounds and Repetition: *The Death Drive in the Subject's Sensorium*," *PsyArt* 26, pp. 156-169.

For Lacan the Subject must be understood in a pre-phenomenological, purely formal sense, as a gap in the signifying chain. Miller ran with this in a famous essay "*Suture: Elements of the Logic of The Signifier*" and attempted to give it a fully formalized, mathematical "proof."

The idea is that the subject's only content is a sort of indetermination, an "ontological hole" as Žižek puts it, that manifests itself most saliently in the hitches and parapraxes of discourse, but that nonetheless remains opaque when compared to other signifiers. The subject in this sense is a prerequisite for the meaning effects that signifying chains generate, but it is not a signifier or "content" concept like any other.

While the emphases contrast (even conflict at points), Lacan and Althusser's theories complement each other nicely. The lack in the signifying chain (or, more broadly, in a certain symbolic/ideological universe) where the Subject insists (Lacan) forms a kind of anchoring point for ideological discourses (Althusser), the place where they latch onto and inhabit human bodies. Both, therefore, participated in the Subject's (de)centering while reaffirming the indispensability of the concept for philosophical thought.

But why should we care about the Subject in the first place? Didn't Hegel and Heidegger already show us that the whole point is to find a way out of the tired subject/object dichotomy? Without hesitation, following Althusser and Lacan, we can say that it is only by way of the concept of the Subject (significantly refashioned and recontextualized) that the various ideologies secreted by the capitalist system can be rationally understood. Rather than succumbing to the theoretical illusion that we are in a post-Subject and therefore post-ideological age, it is possible to understand the mechanisms of ideology through the mediation of the Subject – in some qualified, attenuated sense – to resist their baleful influence.

Althusser intended to salvage the concept of the Subject in order to address how a given ideology maintains its stranglehold on a subject in the absence of any police officer or other

external repressive apparatus. Even when completely alone, out of sight of any panopticon's gaze, how does the law retain its power over us? How does ideology manage to colonize our dreams?

### **Interpellation As Ideological Glue**

Ideas do not float in mid-air, exempt from relationality. They emerge during certain stages of history, even as they desperately attempt to efface their historicity. Ideologies issue from power relations and are embodied in concrete practices. One can de-idealize them through historical mediation, but doing so will not explain their peculiar *viral* quality, their powers of contagion. We must explain how ideas redound back upon the practices from which they emerge, dispossessing subjects of their autonomy and actively determining them from within. Ideology works by way of haunting, a possession that is simultaneously a dispossession.

Althusser places the Subject on one side of the subject-object divide and ideology on the other, a framework reminiscent of classical epistemology, which asks: how does the subject reach out and grasp the object? In his schema, the tables are turned; ideology is in the active position, poised to envelop us in its grip. Althusser introduces the concept of interpellation, otherwise known as "hailing." Ideologies "hail" people by offering a predetermined identity, which they accept as "naturally" their own. Such interpellation is the glue that allows Ideological State Apparatuses or ISAs (like schools, parliaments, the nuclear family etc.) to grip onto individuals, subjugating them from within without necessarily requiring the repressive force of a police or military unit.

Althusser's use of interpellation as a mediatory concept to explain the point of junction between ideology and the Subject is inadequate. Although he was on the right track in recognizing the need for such mediation, his classic example—the "hailing" of an individual by a police officer in the street—is vague and insubstantial. One soon realizes that, for Althusser, the

act of naming is the basis of interpellation. A name serves as the initial crystallization of personal identity. Lacan taught us to recognize everything sinister in the proper name as an instrument for the subjugation of the child to the name-of-the-Father. Althusser, however, was more interested in the deictic function of the pronoun “you” because it is generic and has a potentially universal extension. When a group looks up in response to an officer’s “Hey you!” confused and expectant, each member of that group has already assumed their place as the proper referent of the 2nd person pronoun. They ask themselves, “what did I do?” regardless of their innocence or guilt at that moment.

Althusser’s example fails to consider context-specific implications. Taking the example on its own terms, one might pose the following question: in the case of a police “hailing” in the street, does the process of interpellation occur in the same way for all kinds of people, on say, an American street corner? The moment of hailing is likely to have an entirely different affective complexion for a black male (potential threat) compared to a white male (law-abiding citizen equipped with “the benefit of the doubt”). It seems plausible that the white man would perceive the hailing as merely an annoyance or temporary obstruction. For the black man however, the hailing might signify a threat to his life, the possibility of being shot, maimed or brutalized in any number of ways.

While it may seem unfair to saddle Althusser with the burden of such a critique, the fact is that he surely wanted his theory to have maximal global relevance. Drawing out context-specific implications (as in the case of the black v. white man being hailed) need not necessarily constitute a sacrifice of the abstract power of a concept like interpellation. Without the concrete filling of its manifold instantiations, the concept lapses into a sort of contentless universality that lacks traction in the “real” world. I argue that the concept of interpellation is not dead, but must be parsed out in more detail.

## **Drive-Time**

Althusser's description of interpellation faces another serious problem. The act of naming Althusser describes is a synchronic phenomenon, occurring within a self-enclosed, punctual moment. This results in a failure to explain how ideology is diachronically inculcated in the Subject during its formative experiences. Although Althusser does acknowledge this distortion, he does not elaborate on how to correct it. The hailing example implies that in the instant of a single enunciation, the interpellated individual assumes the full psychic burden of an entire system of rules and prohibitions. This seems patently false upon considering the other ISAs that Althusser describes. For instance, in the case of the average nuclear family, what makes the patriarchal structure that a child encounters at home so pernicious is the uninterrupted constancy and duration of their exposure to it. Only in high school or college are they likely to encounter anything that seriously challenges the apparent "naturalness" of those norms. The same goes for the educational system, which requires a massive portion of an individual's formative years in order to churn out a "fully-disciplined" subject.

From these examples alone, it is clear that ideological inculcation is a fundamentally processual phenomenon grounded in a specific temporality; we are swimming in ideology even when we aren't being named. The relegation of interpellation to the synchronic act of naming fails to determine the very conditions of possibility that must be in place for it to function. This doesn't mean that interpellation should be dispensed with, but rather that it doesn't do the work that Althusser wants it to within his own theoretical framework. We must therefore deploy a different set of concepts to adequately mediate the gap between ideology and the Subject.

## **Repeat, Repeat**

It is important to take a step back to examine the ontological status of the individual before we can refer to it as the Subject, a move that Althusser took pains to avoid, but that Lacan (despite his reservations when questioned about the term), addressed head on. Perhaps Althusser thought that speaking of the inner constitution of the human individual before its ideological capture would reintroduce the humanist ideology that he had spent his career attacking so vehemently. However, the psychoanalytic question is what the human animal has to be like in order to be ideologically programmable in the first place. This would be a properly Lacanian response. Lacanian metapsychology attempts to maintain a precarious dialectic between the Subject's cultural determinations and the intrinsic ontological features that allow a Subject to be so determinable. The concept of the Freudian death drive as it is elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* provides a better understanding of the conditions of possibility for ideological inculcation.

The death drive is invoked here selectively, adapted from Freud albeit with a number of its more problematic aspects shorn off. The death-drive that emerges is elaborated most perspicuously in Lacan's seminars on anxiety, and my account will follow the patient elaboration of the concept that emerges from those seminars undertaken by recent interpreters. Freud's truly radical discovery in BTPP was a compulsion-to-repeat that cannot be reduced to the pleasure principle - that is incompatible with the hypothesis that humans are by-and-large engaged in a utilitarian search for pleasure or states of maximal well-being. To be human is to be possessed by repetitions operating at varying speeds and rhythms that are irreducible to the more stable cycles that we find elsewhere in nature. Repetitions externally imposed in the manner of behaviorist conditioning are therefore not enough for ideology to soak individuals all the way through. Instead, ideology must latch onto a person's death drive, entangling itself in the compulsive cycles of repetition that preexist ideology. Slovene philosopher and psychoanalyst Mladen Dolar writes:

What is at stake, beyond functionality, is an excess which manifests 'the compulsion to repeat,' ... Drives are endowed with a vector which compels them to return to the same place, the scene of the crime, that is, the scene of satisfaction beyond use and need, and this is what epitomizes the Object of the drive. There is a blind automatism built into the drive which entails ... the repetition of something which is "beyond the pleasure principle.

There is a surplus enjoyment in the very act of repetition that has the potential to exceed whatever pleasure is obtained from the repeated content. For Lacan, human civilizations' tendency to impose increasingly elaborate ordering systems on "untamed nature" is not driven by a utilitarian quest for increased pleasure and diminished pain, but by an automatism. The insistence on order surpasses mere utility; an excess of libidinal investment in repetition makes it possible for order to be implemented and made acceptable in the first place. It is true that Lacan changes his understanding of certain key concepts at various points in his career. He doesn't always speak of the subject as a purely formal negativity (that both enables and disrupts the signifying chain) in connection with the death-drive and repetition automatism. But even in *Écrits*, when he deploys his graphs in the "The Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire," he is always trying to show how his concept of the subject figures into the context of a diachronic progression wherein meaning effects are generated (*retroactively* generated, hence the arrows moving every which way across the graph in circular patterns). So the subject is purely formal, but it has both a synchronic aspect (*qua* gap in the signifying chain) and a diachronic, temporal aspect (as an impulse to repeat or repetition automatism). The death drive is a kind of transcendental condition--enabling and destructive--that is constantly at work, but only observable in the disruptions it perpetrates on the homeostatic functioning of individuals and, by extension, social groups. It is misleading however to call it a "disruption" insofar as that

term obfuscates the diachronic progression of the drive's operation as it bores its way through the Subject's history. Our argument is that the condition of possibility for the entanglement of subject and ideology goes beyond mere interpellation and is grounded in the death drive.

### **Before the Law**

The death drive is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for the concept of interpellation. The mediating region situated between the Subject and the ideology that latches onto it is itself split into two concepts: the death drive, which pertains to the composition of the Subject's interior border, and the phenomenological experience of that border, which remains to be developed in the remainder of this essay. In order to approach the phenomenological dimension of ideological interpellation, it is necessary to take a roundabout journey through the work of Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Franz Kafka.

It is our contention that Althusser's question regarding the mechanisms of ideology is at the heart of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* essay. Benjamin grapples with the Althusserian question by way of a completely different vocabulary. Rather than ideology or the Subject, the focus of Benjamin's essay is the concept of the law. Despite these terminological differences, I will risk using the terms "ideology" and "law" interchangeably to weave a kind of braid between Althusser's theoretical concerns and Benjamin's notion of "mythic violence."

How does Benjamin treat the concept of the law in the *Critique of Violence* and where exactly does the connection with Althusser lie? The essay begins with an analysis of the para-consistent logic of violence that subtends the concept of "the law" in capitalist societies. Two forms of violence support the law's omniscience: law-preserving violence (violence of means) and law-making violence (violence of ends). In reality, as Benjamin amply demonstrates, the distinction rarely holds; when a policeman shoots a black woman in her own home on the pretense of feeling "threatened," it is impossible to straightforwardly apply one category of

violence over the other. The officer, in order to *preserve* the law, needs to be able to (on occasion) *make* laws up on the fly, or have a law at his disposal that has no clear criteria of application.

As Benjamin's essay progresses, he introduces the notion of mythic violence, which extends the self-justifying violence that grounds the law into ancient history. In Greek mythology, the establishment of the State staunches the bloody havoc wrought by the gods on the helpless populace. Law and order emerge with the cessation of the cycle of ancestral violence that plagued its suffering heroes. Benjamin employs the concept of mythic violence to link the law to the concept of fate. Fate has no deeper justification, no principle of sufficient reason to justify its dictates beyond the violence it perpetuates. It thereby follows that no meta-language can fully wipe away the traces of paradox inherent in the law.

The exceptional status of a colonized Subject and its paradoxical relationship with the law recalls Carl Schmitt's notorious definition of the sovereign in *The Concept of the Political* as a ruling entity that functions inside and outside the law simultaneously. The Sovereign, for Schmitt, sanctions the laws while withholding the right to flout them at any moment that violence toward an enemy of the State is necessary. In a case that functions as a kind of symmetrical reverse of Schmitt's definition of the sovereign, the colonized Subject in French-occupied Algeria was beholden to a law determined by the French colonizers, punishable under the pretense of being completely "protected" under it. That very same law simultaneously governed a concretely unequal situation, in which colonized Algerians had absolutely no say regarding the content of the law and its means of enforcement.

For Benjamin, something is rotten not only in our epistemological failures to know the content of the law or to realize it properly, but also in the law's very essence. In order to approximate something that we could genuinely refer to as "actual social justice," a massive revision of our concept of the law would be necessary, a transformation that the complacency of

neoliberal gradualist reform cannot cope with. It follows then that the history of colonialism cannot be neatly separated from European enlightenment ideology, even and especially if that ideology does not make explicit mention of slavery and colonialism. It is not that the law has, by unfortunate happenstance, wounded colonized subjects; the law itself bears the mark of those wounds.

### **Maiming the Memory**

Let us return to the Althusserian question reformulated with Benjamin's conceptualization of the law in mind. How does mythic violence reproduce itself from generation to generation? Is it an inborn attribute of human nature?

The second section of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* may offer the beginnings of an answer. The first line of the second section reads: "To breed an animal with the right to make promises—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is this not the real problem regarding man?." For Nietzsche, creditor-debtor relationships act as civilizing sinews to tie together the body politic. From gift and obligation to law and punishment, from active and reactive force to personal freedom at the expense of collective emancipation, we are always dealing with the balancing logic of the law. None of this would hold, Nietzsche emphasizes, without the cultivation of human memory.

The principal form of such cultivation is, quite literally, torture. "Nothing is more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his mnemotechnics." That is to say, in order for the law to remain in one's memory, it must be *burned* in. "Only that which never ceases to hurt stays in memory." The dark, bloody past of human civilization, of expropriation, abuse, and incarceration, breathes upon us any time we remember, even and especially when we do not do so consciously. Ideology, "if it is to become inextinguishable, unforgettable, fixed with the aim of hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system" requires unspeakable cruelties. "The

worse man's memory has been, the more fearful has been the appearance of his customs; the severity of the penal code provides an especially significant measure of the degree of effort needed to impose a few primitive demands of social existence as *present realities* upon these slaves of momentary affect and desire." At stake is not merely the rote memorization of the intellect, the means by which we recite a poem or conduct a geometrical proof. Instead, the process Nietzsche describes affects the body, the human sensorium, which has to be taught to remember - such remembering cannot be dissociated from the feelings it envelops.

### **Kafka and The Law**

I turn to my last example, *The Penal Colony* by Franz Kafka, which I take to be an allegorical representation of Nietzsche's reflections on memory and the law. In the story, an unnamed "explorer" visits a colony to witness to the execution of a criminal. An officer shows the explorer a unique execution apparatus, which is run by an elaborate system of gears and pulleys. The machine inscribes the violated "commandment" in nearly illegible script on the body of the condemned man. It rotates the man slowly while cutting into his skin with tiny needles until the grisly deed is done.

Just when the reader feels that things couldn't get any more perverse, the officer explains that the criminal is only "enlightened" about the crime he committed upon reading it in his wounds. The officer sees this form of punishment as ingenious, exquisite even. Kafka's brilliant capacity for generating dark humor is on full display as the officer leaps around the apparatus, taking pride in its various mechanisms like an excited teenager showing off his new hotrod.

The moving blades of Kafka's execution machine represent the coupling of the law with the "repetition automatism" of the Lacanian death drive. The inscription on the guilty criminal's back is not made with a single incision, but must be mechanically repeated in order for the Subject to fully understand the *essence* of the law and his own exceptional status relative to it.

## **Wounds in the Sensorium**

Let us turn back to Althusser's example of interpellation one last time, viewing it through the lens of the two mediatory concepts explicated above: the death drive and wounds registered at the level of the sensorium. When a black man is hailed in the street by a cop, a nearly infinite list of laws and prohibitions does not suddenly swim into focus. The emotional and physical experiences bound up in the act of interpellation resist translation into a phrase that could be easily articulated, cleanly parsed. Our terminology, "wound in the sensorium," is an attempt to isolate the phenomenal content of experiences that cannot be exhausted by the established protocols of verification typically employed to register other, more stable phenomena.

Wounds – memories of lynching, flogging, and incarceration transmitted from generation to generation – do not constitute well-formed expressions; they do not constitute ill-formed expressions either. Here, the affective complexion of the event of interpellation is not the sort whose semantic content could be stabilized in a rule-bound context; it is not nonsense either.

In the case of the black man being "hailed," the threat that the act of interpellation poses – besides the immediate possibility of physical harm – coincides with the awakening of wounds in the sensorium. In that moment, a root system of scars – ever widening as it extends further into the past – fractures the present.

The Kafka story is so pertinent for our purposes not merely because of the connection it establishes between brutality and legality, but because it helps us resist the temptation to view sensorial wounds as inarticulate noise, pure nonsense, or silence. It is also important to note that because of the unitary nature of each wound, we are not exactly dealing with the realm of affect, the body's productive capacity to generate a sliding scale of variations that elude categorization into individuated emotions.

Ideology and the practices associated with it are 1) bound and oriented by the Subject's death drive, and 2) given form by sensorial wounds which are inscribed in the flesh. These signifiers are peculiar in that they cannot be presently phrased in dominant discursive regimes. This is why the immediate incommunicability of suffering, of the murder of members of a racial minority in this country, is vulnerable to being taken for nothing more than a blank in the argument.

### **The Shadow Life of History**

I introduced the death drive into the heart of what regulates the passage from ideology to the Subject. In the case of interpellation, the death drive subsists between the law and the accused. It occupies a strange region between the mind and body, branding scars into the flesh that lend history a shadow life in the sensorium. It repeats – it repeats with a difference – but always the same score, the same scar widening along the temple, running down the neck and shoulders, the grid-work of agony burned into the back. Blood pooling beneath a tree disarms the philosopher of the analytic machinery he would employ to make sense of it.

In the hitches and obstructions of both everyday and academic language, we read the grisly stigmata of slavery, colonialism, rape, and subjugation. It is partly a matter of knowing where to look. Etched into the flesh, we read the hieroglyphics of the law through wounds. Those wounds need not belong to us, but we still read them or we try to avoid reading them. In any case, they exist.

## Works Cited

Althusser, Louis, et al. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Verso, 2014.

Benjamin, Walter, et al. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Paul Patton. *Difference and Repetition*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. MIT Press, 2006.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Dover Publications, Incorporated., 2015.

Johnston, Adrian. *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*.

Northwestern University Press, 2005.

Lacan. *Seminar, Book X: Anxiety [Excerpt]*, <https://www.lacan.com/frameXXVI3.htm>.

Loading, [http://www.cubaism.uk/f/uploads/A0C3E8/concept-and-form-volume-1-concept-and-form-volume-1\\_pdf](http://www.cubaism.uk/f/uploads/A0C3E8/concept-and-form-volume-1-concept-and-form-volume-1_pdf).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Vintage Books, 2011.

Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008.