

Reinterpretation of the Materiality of Ideology from the Perspective of Mediology: A Dialogue between Régis Debray's Mediology and Louis Althusser's Theory of Ideology

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve deeply into the possibilities and theoretical value of conducting a constructive dialogue between the theory of Mediology established by the French philosopher Régis Debray and the theory of ideology advanced by Louis Pierre Althusser. Through a meticulous comparative study, the article reveals that while Althusser, within the framework of structuralist Marxism, profoundly emphasized the materiality of Ideological State Apparatuses at the institutional level and the mechanism of interpellation in the construction of subjects, Debray, building upon this foundation, focuses his attention on material conditions at a more fundamental and concealed technical level. He is centrally concerned with the cultural vehicles and symbolic forms that play a key intermediary role when ideology is transformed into actual material forces. Methodologically, whereas Althusser tends toward synchronic structural analysis, emphasizing the relative stability and ahistorical nature of ideological structures and functions, Debray creatively proposes the core concept of the “Mediaspheres”, aiming to uncover the intrinsic logical connections between media technological transformations and the metamorphosis of ideological forms, thereby converting the study of ideology into a diachronic and dynamic historical investigation. Furthermore, regarding the construction of the subject, Althusser asserts that ideology constructs the individual as a subject through “interpellation,” presenting a somewhat unidimensional, deterministic coloration; Debray, conversely, argues that the operation of ideology is in fact the product of a continuous negotiation and interaction between technical material conditions and human symbolic practices. In conclusion, Debray's mediology constitutes not merely a faithful inheritance of Althusser's theory of ideology, but also a critical attempt to effectively fill its theoretical voids and radically develop its premises.

Keywords

Mediology, Theory of Ideology, Althusser, Régis Debray, Mediaspheres.

1. Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Western Marxist theory underwent a profound and significantly influential “material turn.” Within this grand theoretical current, the French philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser undoubtedly occupies a pivotal position. In the 1970s, Althusser published his seminal long-form essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. In this text, he radically pointed out that ideology is by no means a mere system of ideas or false consciousness suspended above the social base; rather, it is a series of objective, substantive material practices. These practices operate primarily through a network of institutions named by him as “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs)—including the church, schools, the family, law, trade unions, communication media, and so forth. Their core function lies in “interpellating” individuals as subjects through specific mechanisms, thereby effectively guaranteeing the

reproduction of labor power [1] and the continuation of social relations under capitalist conditions. This theoretical breakthrough forcefully expanded Marx's discussion of ideology from the traditional epistemological or ideational level to the level of institutional practice and social operation, providing a solid theoretical cornerstone for subsequent cultural studies.

However, although Althusser's theoretical framework is immensely enlightening, the specific operational mechanisms by which these Ideological State Apparatuses function—namely, the microscopic mechanisms by which ideas are embodied within institutions and transformed into dominant forces—were not elaborated upon in sufficient detail in his initial exposition. This theoretical gap or void was filled and responded to, thirty years later, by another French scholar possessing a dual identity as a social activist and a thinker, Régis Debray, in a unique and highly original manner that possesses an interdisciplinary vision. The "Mediology" founded by Debray is not research limited to the effects of information transmission in the traditional sense of communication studies; rather, it is a discipline dedicated to investigating "by what means of intermediation an idea becomes a material force" [2]. In brief, it inquires into how discourse exercises power, and how thought generates social efficacy. Debray explicitly stated: "Mediology is not interested in ideology per se, but in that which makes these ideologies possible; that is, how new social institutions are born from the usage and practices of new species of tools, and how activists emerge from these institutions to become the driving force of social movements/trends." [3] This assertion directly and profoundly establishes the dialogic relationship between Mediology and Althusser's theory of ideology: if Althusser is concerned with how ideology operates through material institutional machines, then Debray, building upon this, further inquires backward: what deeper technical conditions, material vehicles, and logics of transmission shape and support these very material institutions that bear ideology?

The theoretical dialogue between the two is by no means an academic coincidence, but an inevitable succession deeply rooted in the lineage of French intellectual history. The sources of Debray's thought are clearly traceable to the profound influence of Western Marxist giants such as Althusser and Gramsci, presenting a creative continuation and transformation of his predecessors' theories within his own unique theoretical construction. This paper aims to systematically comb through this academic dialogue spanning half a century, connecting structuralist philosophy and media cultural studies. Through a detailed textual analysis, it attempts to reveal how Debray utilizes his mediological horizon to conduct a deep theoretical supplementation, revision, and development of Althusser's structuralist analysis of ideology, thereby providing a more complex intellectual tool for understanding the complicity between contemporary technology and power.

2. Theoretical Divergence and Interplay: A Framework Elaboration of Althusser's Ideology Theory and Debray's Mediology

Prior to deeply analyzing the intrinsic dialogic relationship between Debray's mediology and Althusser's theory of ideology, it is necessary to first independently and systematically expound and position their respective theoretical frameworks.

2.1. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses and the Theory of Interpellation

Althusser's theory of ideology is essentially a radical reconstruction and reinterpretation of the Marxist theory of the state. In classic Marxist theoretical formulations, the state is usually understood as coercive institutions such as the army, police, courts, and prisons. Althusser referred to these institutions as the "Repressive State Apparatus" (RSA), the core logic of whose operation lies in violence and coercion. To distinguish these from the traditional state apparatuses, Althusser creatively proposed the concept of the "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA). A strict distinction exists between the two: firstly, the Repressive State Apparatus is

singular in number and belongs to the public domain; whereas Ideological State Apparatuses present themselves in the plural, being numerous and diverse in nature, including religion, education, the family, law, politics, trade unions, communications, culture, etc., and they primarily belong to the “private domain.” Secondly, the Repressive State Apparatus functions through violent means, while Ideological State Apparatuses function primarily through complex “ideological” means, in an inconspicuous, diffuse, and subtle manner [1]. However, despite these differences, both types of state apparatuses often cooperate tacitly in actual operation, jointly serving the ideological hegemony of the ruling class, and their dominant values are fundamentally convergent.

In Althusser’s view, the ultimate goal of Ideological State Apparatuses is to accomplish the “reproduction of labor-power” and the “reproduction of the relations of production.” This entails not merely the reproduction of labor skills, but more importantly, the reproduction of submission to the rules of the existing ruling order. To achieve this, ideology must “interpellate” the individual as a subject. Althusser employed a famous analogy: when a policeman shouts “Hey, you there!” on the street, the moment the passerby turns around, he is interpellated as a subject. Under this mechanism, the individual imagines himself to be a free and self-determining “subject” due to the presuppositions of ideology, and uses this as a starting point to understand the relationship between himself and others, and between himself and the world; conversely, ideology summons and interpellates the individual, causing him to identify with and belong to it, and to recognize himself within it alongside others. As Althusser famously stated, “Man is essentially an ideological animal.”

Furthermore, Althusser offered a novel structuralist interpretation of Marx’s proposition in *The German Ideology* that “ideology has no history.” Unlike Marx, who elucidated this proposition from the perspective of the falsity of ideological content or its changes alongside the economic base, Althusser argued from the perspective of structural universality that regardless of historical changes or shifts in social formations, the structure and function of ideology—as a “mirror structure” that interpellates individuals as subjects—always remain constant [1], possessing a kind of ahistorical universality.

However, while Althusser’s theory is grand, it did not further expound upon the specific mechanisms of operation within the Ideological State Apparatuses—that is, how ideas are implanted into individual practice through specific material media. This theoretical void at the microscopic level precisely provided the opportunity for the intervention of Debray’s mediology.

2.2. Debray’s Mediology: The Materialization and Mediation of Ideas

The Mediology founded by Régis Debray emerged precisely against the backdrop of filling this theoretical void. Debray’s dual experience in his early years as both a French philosopher and a social activist (having devoted himself to revolutionary movements in Latin America) made him particularly sensitive to the process by which ideas are transformed into practice and how faith is converted into action. He inherited the profound French academic tradition of “mediation” studies, attempting to bridge the chasm between the spiritual and the material. As a term, “Mediology” first appeared in Debray’s 1979 work, *Le pouvoir intellectuel en France*. In his subsequent *Introduction à la médiologie*, he provided a more systematic definition: “Mediology is not a theoretical science, but only a tool... its starting point is the study of the relationship between technology and culture, aiming to clarify the various phenomena in the process of transmission.” [4]

In short, Mediology is dedicated to investigating “how ideas rely on technical vehicles to become a material force of social mobilization”; it is an interdisciplinary historical research method whose core concern lies in the articulation of the symbolic and the technical material. Debray is not concerned with the efficiency of information transmission or the error of decoding, but

rather with how the “vehicle” of transmission itself alters the content being transmitted. He emphasizes that for any ideology to become a real social force, it must undergo a process of “materialization”—that is, it must attach itself to specific material vehicles (such as books, images, screens, networks) and specific organizational forms (such as political parties, churches, schools). Therefore, the core task of Mediology is to reveal the decisive role of these intermediary links in the historical process.

3. Theoretical Dialogue: Deepening from Structuralism to Mediology

Based on the combing of the theoretical frameworks above, we can clearly see how Debray’s Mediology, in its deep dialogue with Althusser’s theory of ideology, realizes the inheritance, revision, and transcendence of the latter. This dialogue is mainly manifested in three dimensions: the expansion of materiality, the dynamization of the historical dimension, and the interaction of operational mechanisms.

3.1. The Duet of Materiality: From Institutional Practice to Technical Mediation

Althusser held a strictly critical attitude toward the traditional ideological conception of ideas, profoundly emphasizing that ideology always exists in material machines and practices. He pointed out: “If one believes in God, one goes to church to attend mass, kneels, prays, repents... and thus one naturally feels that one is guilty.” In this process, the active cooperation of the participant and the embodied ritual practice “endow those visual symbols and the meanings they express with an indisputable “power of truth” and “material attributes” [5]. In other words, in Althusser’s view, bodily practice itself participates in the reproduction of ideology, and the materiality of the institution (such as the church) is the foundation of ideological operation.

Debray completely inherits and upholds this basic materialist stance, but with great insight, he pushes this analysis of materiality toward a more fundamental and basic technical level. The core proposition of his Mediology—“how ideas become a material force”—almost directly echoes Althusser’s emphasis on the practicality of ideology, while simultaneously taking a crucial step forward. Debray argues that ideas, or more accurately, “systems of thought as constraining mechanisms,” must be transformed into material forces in the real world through specific “equipment” and “institutions.” These pieces of equipment are not merely material tools but also materialized vehicles of memory. Memory is placed upon them to be extended, shifting from a fleeting “unmemorable” state to a “memorable” state that can be repeatedly invoked and institutionally preserved [4], thereby making the manufacturing of social consensus through means of memory possible.

This concept of mediation actually builds a bridge between Althusser’s “Repressive State Apparatus” and “Ideological State Apparatus.” Debray’s analysis reveals that whether it is the coercive machine of the state or the non-coercive ideological machine, both need to function by establishing operable technical connections between symbolic forms and material practices. Only after the process of mediation institutionalizes ideas into routines and customs can the Repressive State Apparatus serve as its background deterrent, providing ultimate support and guarantee through violence.

For example, for Christian doctrine to become the “dominant ideology” in medieval Europe, it required not only the organizational support of the religious Ideological State Apparatus such as the church system, but also the support of an entire set of material technical systems, including manuscript production techniques, the scriptorium system of monasteries, parchment processing crafts, ink formulations, and the complex Latin education system. These technologies are not external decorations or accidental conditions of ideology, but constitute the internal elements and ontological foundation that makes the practice of ideology possible.

Without these material vehicles, ideology would be merely a phantom floating in the air, unable to “interpellate” any subject.

In summary, while both thinkers firmly focus on the material dimension of ideology, there is a significant difference in their focus: Althusser focuses on the materiality at the level of institutions and bodily practices, emphasizing how institutions discipline individuals through rituals; whereas Debray delves into the micro-technical conditions that support the operation of these institutions, inquiring into the material foundation that bears ideas. This shift represents a theoretical deepening from the functional description of “how ideology operates” to the conditional analysis of “what makes the operation of ideology possible.”

3.2. From Static Structure to Historical Dynamics: The Introduction of the Concept of the Mediaspheres

Although Althusser’s theory of ideology is highly explanatory, it is slightly insufficient in the historical dimension. His structuralist method tends toward a kind of synchronic analysis, emphasizing the relative stability and ahistorical universality of ideological structures and functions, arguing that ideology has no history. While this perspective is instrumental in revealing the deep structure of ideology, it pays insufficient attention to the dynamic mechanisms of historical change and how technological innovations trigger the evolution of ideological forms. This limitation is powerfully supplemented in Debray’s Mediology.

In *Cours de médiologie générale*, Debray proposed the core concept of the “Mediaspheres,” injecting a strong dynamism and historical sense into the analysis of ideology. Debray defined the “mediasphere” as “a periodization of the history of civilization formed by the media configuration of information dissemination (including technical platforms, spatiotemporal combinations, game rules, etc.), which encompasses social institutions and political power.” [3] The mediasphere is not merely a technical concept; it is a dynamic, complex ecosystem that marks the dominant systems of communication and transmission in a specific historical period. In such a system, cultural forms, social organizational patterns, modes of subject construction, and practices of ideology remain relatively stable around this dominant medium [6], forming a unique zeitgeist.

Based on Mediology’s definition of the relationship between technology and culture, Debray, in *Cours de médiologie générale*, highly inspiringly divided the history of human civilization into three distinct mediaspheres: the Logosphere (the realm of the Word/Logos), the Graphosphere (the realm of Writing/Print), and the Videosphere (the realm of the Image/Video). These three mediaspheres imply not only different modes of information coding and transmission but also correspond to entirely different social organizational forms, power structures, modes of subject construction, and practices of ideology.

First, in the Logosphere, the period dominated by oral transmission and manuscript writing, the transmission of ideology relied heavily on face-to-face communication, the collective ritual memory, and the authoritative oral tradition. In this period, knowledge was scarce, and memory was the core of power. The centers of knowledge and power were concentrated in the elders, priests, or scribes who could memorize, recite, and interpret the tradition. In this environment, the “interpellation” in Althusser’s theory of ideology was realized primarily through ritualized speech acts and bodily presence practices, such as swearing oaths, blessings, and sermons. Ideology possessed a sacred, inaccessible mysterious color.

Secondly, with the invention and popularization of the printing press, humanity entered the Graphosphere. This transformation had a revolutionary impact on the practice of ideology: standardized texts replaced the oral tradition, which was constantly changing and full of variation; the private act of reading broke the monopoly of collective rituals on the interpretation of meaning; and linear, logical thinking became the dominant cognitive mode. When the *Bible* could be mass-produced and read directly by individuals, the position of the

church as the sole intermediary between God and humanity began to waver, and the original vertical structure of knowledge authority was gradually disintegrated. Furthermore, unified printed languages promoted the imagination of the community and the formation of national identity; large-scale information replication technology provided the necessary technical support for the establishment of the modern bureaucratic system and the expansion of the capitalist market economy, becoming important material conditions for the formation of the modern nation-state and civil society.

Finally, the rise of the Videosphere brought entirely new practices of ideology. If the media basis of the public sphere in feudal society was ritualized visual spectacles (such as court ceremonies), then modern society has created a new visual system through electronic technology [5]. In the Videosphere, “the visible is actually authority, forming a contrast with the ubiquitously invisible greatness (God, History, or Reason) that was universally recognized in the past.” [2] Ideology no longer operates primarily through obscure rational arguments or complex logical deductions, but through the emotional mobilization of visual symbols, the hypnotic effects of images, and the construction of spectacle through media events. Television, cinema, and subsequent screen technologies have made the operation of ideology more emotionalized, instantaneous, and embodied.

Debray profoundly pointed out: “The disappearance of a specific mediasphere leads to the decline of the social ideology it nurtured and sheltered, causing these ideologies to decay from organized living forces into surviving or dying forms.” [3] His theory of the Mediasphere not only describes the superficial changes of history but also profoundly reveals the intrinsic connections and causal logic between technological changes and the transformation of ideology. The arrival of each new mediasphere is not a simple technological substitution, but triggers a reconstruction of the entire social ecosystem, including political power forms, belief systems, and individual modes of perception.

It is worth noting that Debray emphasizes the overlap, interweaving, and coexistence of different mediaspheres, rather than a simple linear substitution or clean break. Even in today’s highly digitized and networked era, oral traditions, print culture, and audiovisual culture still coexist and interact, jointly constituting a complex field of ideological struggle. This complexity implies that contemporary ideological analysis cannot merely focus on the latest digital media, but must consider the cross-influences, legacy effects, and hybrid powers of multiple media forms.

3.3. The Interactivity of Ideological Operation: From Unidirectional Interpellation to Collaborative Construction

Debray not only supplemented the historical dimension of Althusser’s theory but also made important revisions and supplements to Althusser’s theory of “interpellation” regarding subject construction. Althusser emphasized that ideology constructs the individual as a subject through “interpellation.” While this process is subtle, to some extent it neglects the individual’s agency in the operation of ideology, and also gives the operation of ideology a somewhat unidimensional, deterministic coloration, as if the individual were entirely passively accepting the summons of ideology.

However, in Debray’s mediological theoretical landscape, the situation is more complex and dynamic. “Mediology analyzes the interaction between culture and technology related to the ‘highly advanced social functions’ (such as religion, ideology, art, politics, etc.) of the transmission-transport environment, as well as the interaction between memory-transference-transfer technologies and faith-thought-organization modes.” [6] This expression clearly indicates that the operation of ideology is not a unidirectional, top-down deterministic process, but a field full of tension, a result of the continuous negotiation, mutual adaptation, and co-evolution between technical material conditions and human symbolic practices.

Technology is not a static tool; it possesses specific affordances, capable of “empowering” certain ideological forms while inhibiting others; conversely, humans also creatively utilize technology, discovering its potential political uses. For example, although the printing press was initially used primarily for the dissemination of religious texts, it ultimately spawned the Reformation and the Enlightenment; this process was not an automatic determination by technology, but a result of the intense collision and negotiation between social forces and technical characteristics in the river of history. Therefore, Debray’s perspective liberates us from Althusser’s somewhat rigid structural determinism, guiding us to focus on how, in specific historical contexts, technology, organization, and belief are specifically “articulated” together in practice.

4. Conclusion

Through the systematic combing and deep analysis of the dialogic relationship between Debray’s Mediology and Althusser’s theory of ideology, we can clearly see a productive and highly inspiring academic succession and innovation.

As a master of structuralist Marxism, Althusser’s outstanding contribution lies in forcefully pulling ideology from the idealist world of ideas back to the realm of materialist practice. He emphasized the material existence of Ideological State Apparatuses at the institutional level, as well as the microscopic process of constructing subjects through the mechanism of “interpellation”, opening a brand new theoretical path for breaking through economic determinism and deepening the study of the superstructure.

As a successor, Debray, standing on the shoulders of giants, turned his gaze toward a more profound technical stratum. He focused on the technical material conditions that support the operation of Ideological State Apparatuses, paying attention to the cultural vehicles and transmission networks that play a key intermediary role when ideology is transformed into material forces. If Althusser revealed the “institutional body” of ideology, then Debray dissected the “technological skeleton” of this body.

Methodologically, while Althusser’s structuralist method tended toward synchronic analysis, emphasizing the relative stability and ahistorical nature of ideological structures and functions, and paying slightly insufficient attention to the dynamic mechanisms of historical change, Debray creatively proposed the core concept of the “Mediaspheres.” Through the periodization of the history of human civilization based on technical media, he profoundly revealed the intrinsic connections between technological changes and the transformation of ideology, converting the analysis of static structures into a dynamic historical investigation.

Finally, regarding the issue of subjectivity and agency, Althusser emphasized that ideology constructs the individual as a subject through “interpellation,” viewing the operation of ideology as a relatively unidirectional deterministic process; Debray, based on the interactive perspective of Mediology, emphasized that the operation of ideology is the result of a continuous negotiation, game, and co-construction between technical material conditions and human symbolic practices.

As Debray stated: “Mediology does not necessarily guarantee providing new knowledge, but it is certainly a new form of knowing.” The value of this new form of knowing lies in its ability to break down disciplinary barriers and build a bridge between the philosophy of technology, political science, historiography, and communication studies, providing us with a brand-new frame of reference for understanding the relationship between theory and reality, and between ideas and matter. In the current era, where technological changes are rapid with each passing day and algorithmic logic increasingly permeates daily life, Debray’s mediological interpretation of Althusser’s theory of ideology not only helps us retrace the historical trajectory of the materialization of ideology but also provides indispensable intellectual

resources for us to maintain critical sobriety and the wisdom of action. Therefore, this academic dialogue spanning time and space is not only a memorable segment of academic history but also a sharp weapon for us to face the future and decode the mechanisms of power operation in the contemporary mediatized society.

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