

# The digital substitution of "interpellation": a study of the technical logic of generative artificial intelligence

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**Abstract.** Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation" posits that ideology constitutes individuals as subjects compliant with specific social relations through the everyday practices of state apparatuses such as schools and the media. In the digital age, generative artificial intelligence, as a non-neutral "techno-ideological" apparatus, is profoundly reconfiguring this mechanism. Through automated, personalized, and concealed forms of "digital interpellation", it achieves deep discipline over individual cognition and behavior. A structural coupling emerges between technical logic and social logic: the pattern-reproductive capacity of technology efficiently serves the reproduction of social relations, while the social pursuit of order and control, in turn, drives technological evolution.

**Keywords:** interpellation theory, generative artificial intelligence, technical logic, social logic, digital discipline

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## 1. Introduction: From ideological apparatuses to algorithmic devices—a paradigm shift in social discipline

Since the Industrial Revolution, the interaction between technology and society has remained a central concern of social theory. Karl Marx revealed how large-scale machine production reshapes social classes and relations of production; the Frankfurt School critiqued how the culture industry dissolves individuals' critical and negative capacities through standardized production; Michel Foucault analyzed how "disciplinary technologies" produce "docile bodies" through spatial partitioning, temporal regulation, and hierarchical surveillance. What these classical accounts share is a common insight: technology is never merely a tool, but also a vehicle of power and a constructor of social forms.

Within this intellectual lineage, Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation" occupies a distinctive position. He shifted the analytical focus from the economic base and overt violence to the everyday, material practices through which ideology constructs subjects via state apparatuses such as schools, families, and the media. Ideology is not an abstract set of ideas; rather, it "hails" individuals through concrete practices. In responding to this call, individuals recognize and accept the positions assigned to them by society, thereby reproducing relations of domination under the illusion of "freedom". This theory offers a subtle explanation of how social order is continuously sustained and consolidated through micro-level interactions.

Yet we now inhabit a new technological era driven by data and algorithms. Represented by large language models, generative artificial intelligence—by virtue of its advanced capacities in natural language understanding and generation—has evolved from a specialized tool into a foundational interface embedded in everyday life. It provides information, answers questions, generates content, and enables companionship and interaction; its influence and pervasiveness are comparable to those of schools and mass media in Althusser's time. As traditional interpellative scenarios—once constituted by interpersonal interaction and institutional rituals—are increasingly supplemented or even replaced by interactions with intelligent algorithms, the mechanisms of social discipline undergo structural transformation. As a technological entity, generative artificial intelligence becomes coupled with the operational logic of ideology, thereby effecting a "substitution" of the interpellation mechanism.

## **2. The mechanism, internal tensions, and contemporary challenges of interpellation theory**

### **2.1. Interpellation: the material practice of ideology and the closed loop of subject formation**

At the core of Althusser's theory lies the dynamic mechanism of "interpellation". His well-known example—"a police officer shouting on the street, 'Hey, you there!'"—vividly captures the instant of subject formation: the simple act of turning around signifies that the individual recognizes the call as addressed to them, thereby identifying themselves as the "subject" being hailed and submitting to the authority embodied in the call. Yet the subtlety of this example is often reduced to a one-off street encounter. In fact, for Althusser, interpellation is an endless, omnipresent process with neither beginning nor end. It does not occur at a single moment but permeates the entire trajectory of socialization, from birth to death. The family "hails" through naming, upbringing, and affective expectations; schools through curricula, grading, and disciplinary rituals; and the media through news framing, advertising narratives, and entertainment programming.

The profundity of this process lies in the "dual mirror structure" it constructs. First, ideology presents itself as a "Big Subject" (such as the state, the nation, God, reason, or freedom)—a seemingly absolute and complete symbolic center. Second, through interpellation, it "hails" individuals as subjects subordinate to this Big Subject. In responding to the call, individuals internalize the value coordinates and behavioral norms established by the Big Subject, and in doing so, acquire a sense of self-identity—a subjective experience of "who I am". Crucially, Althusser incisively points out that this experience of subjectivity is, in essence, one of subjection. The autonomy, unity, and free will that individuals perceive are made possible precisely through submission to a pre-existing symbolic order. What appears as a free choice to become a "good student", a "model employee", or a "patriotic citizen" is, in reality, the recognition and performance of positions already inscribed by ideological apparatuses. Interpellation thus produces a fundamental misrecognition: it renders socially imposed, historically contingent norms as if they were intrinsic, timeless essences and self-directed aspirations. It is through this misrecognition that existing social relations and power structures are silently and efficiently reproduced in everyday practice, forming a seemingly seamless closed loop.

### **2.2. Internal tensions of the theory: absolute determinism and the erosion of resistance**

The explanatory power of interpellation theory also gives rise to its most frequently criticized limitation: it appears to depict an airtight, closed cage of subjectivity. Althusser's assertion that "individuals are always already subjects" underscores the prior and pervasive nature of ideology, yet it risks collapsing into circular reasoning and nearly forecloses the possibility of resistance. If subjects are entirely products of ideological

apparatuses, then from where could a critical standpoint capable of challenging this structure emerge? The theory itself seems to become part of the very ideology it seeks to expose.

Subsequent theorists have attempted to open fissures of resistance within Althusser's framework. Judith Butler argues that the performative repetition of norms upon which interpellation depends is never perfectly reproduced; its inherent "failures", discontinuities, and exaggerations may generate a "psychic excess" capable of destabilizing power [1]. Slavoj Žižek, in turn, contends that the subject is not merely an effect of the symbolic order but also its internal "traumatic void" [2]—an irreducible negativity that continually drives the questioning of ideological illusions. Domestic scholar Chunming Wang maintains that the two principal critiques of Althusser's proposition—"individuals are always already subjects"—are ultimately untenable because they mistakenly presuppose a "logic of genesis". Althusser, by emphasizing the non-temporality and multiplicity of interpellation, as well as the eternity of ideology, had already refuted such a logic and exposed the "retroactive illusion" underlying it [3].

In sum, Althusser arguably overextends the explanatory reach of interpellation theory by attributing human action, subjectivity, and morality primarily to the subject-forming effects of bourgeois ideology. Once the analytical context departs from the capitalist mode of production—particularly when considering the reproduction of proletarian social relations—interpellation, as an inversion of subject philosophy, appears to lack critical traction in accounting for praxis and the subject formation of emancipatory movements. These theoretical revisions seek to preserve conceptual space for agency and social transformation.

### 2.3. Theoretical challenges in the digital age: the transformation of interpellative scenes and the emergence of technological subjects

When Althusser's theory is situated within the contemporary digital era, the social landscape on which it relies has undergone a foundational shift. The traditional loci of interpellation—materialized ideological state apparatuses such as schools, families, churches, and trade unions—are experiencing a relative decline in authority and centrality. The centralized, unidirectional communication model of the mass media era has been diluted and complicated by the decentralized, multidirectional interactions of the internet. More fundamentally, a new "digital infrastructure", composed of algorithms, data, and network protocols, has emerged as the primary domain through which individuals perceive the world, engage in social interaction, construct identities, and even experience emotions.

While Althusser's insights remain profound, his analysis presupposes a society dominated by face-to-face interactions and institutional rituals. Today, individuals often spend as much—if not more—time interacting with smartphones, recommendation systems, and intelligent assistants as they do with other people. Our curiosity is shaped by search engines and personalized information feeds; our aesthetic sensibilities are disciplined by social media filters and trends; our loneliness is alleviated (or exploited) by chatbots and virtual companions; and our consumer desires are continuously stimulated by targeted advertising and influencer-driven content. In this context, the "police officer" who persistently "hails" us within digital space has undergone a radical transformation. It is no longer (or no longer solely) embodied by concrete individuals (teachers, parents, editors) or visible institutions, but increasingly takes the form of a non-human "Other" constituted by code, algorithmic logic, and vast databases. This "Other" lacks a physical body and emotional life, yet appears omniscient and perpetually present, intervening in our lives with unprecedented intimacy and pervasiveness.

This raises a set of urgent theoretical questions. How does the interpellative mechanism of this algorithmic "Other" differ in essence from traditional interpersonal or institutional interpellation? Is it more concealed or more overt? More efficient or more fragile? Through what new forms of "material practice" (such as clicking,

swiping, liking, and querying) does it constitute subjects? And what novel characteristics define the "technological subjects" shaped by such digital interpellation? Do they become more fragmented and reactive, or do they develop new modes of cognition in symbiosis with machines? Do classical accounts of resistance retain their validity in the face of algorithmic black boxes, personalized echo chambers, and addictive design? Addressing these questions necessitates a concrete analysis of frontier technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, in order to extend, update, and potentially reconstruct interpellation theory under contemporary conditions. Digital technologies cannot simply be treated as an additional "ideological state apparatus" appended to an existing list; rather, it is essential to examine how their intrinsic technical logic becomes structurally coupled with the social logic of ideology, thereby effecting a profound "substitution" of the mechanisms of social discipline.

### **3. Generative artificial intelligence as an "algorithmic ideological apparatus": the disciplinary nature of technical logic**

To understand how generative artificial intelligence participates in social discipline, it is first necessary to abandon the notion of "technological neutrality". As Langdon Winner has argued, a proper evaluation of the machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture must address not only their contributions to efficiency and productivity, but also the ways in which they embody specific forms of power and authority [4]. Technological artifacts often crystallize particular configurations of power and authority. Generative artificial intelligence is far from a neutral tool passively wielded by users; from its inception, it has been imbued with non-neutral value orientations, and through its material existence, it constitutes the infrastructural basis for new forms of ideological practice. It is, in this sense, a paradigmatic "political" technological artifact. Rather than a purely instrumental system, it should be understood as a novel "algorithmic ideological apparatus". From its data foundations and algorithmic architectures to its interaction design, the entire technical chain is permeated by value-laden assumptions, and its material operation provides the foundational conditions for ideological practice in the digital age.

#### **3.1. Value-ladenness beyond neutrality: data bias, algorithmic rationality, and design intent**

Data, as condensed history, occupies a foundational position as the material substrate of social relations—particularly in the case of generative artificial intelligence, whose "intelligence" derives from the ingestion and learning of vast quantities of human-generated data (text, images, code, audio). These data are not objective reflections of the world; rather, they are sedimented layers—fossilized strata—of power relations, cultural biases, social norms, and ideological conflicts accumulated over the course of human history. Consequently, the gender stereotypes embedded in models (e.g., strong associations of "nurse" with women and "programmer" with men), racial biases (e.g., default associations between "criminal" and certain skin tones in image generation), cultural centrism (e.g., privileging Western narrative frameworks), or consumerist values (e.g., equating happiness with material possession) are not mere technical "noise" to be eliminated or superficial "defects" easily corrected. On the contrary, such biases constitute the very epistemic basis that enables models to generate outputs statistically aligned with real-world corpora. In learning what counts as grammatical, coherent, and contextually typical, the system inevitably also learns what is socially "normal," culturally "mainstream," and normatively "desirable". Data are condensed history, and generative AI functions as a highly efficient engine for recognizing and reproducing the patterned biases embedded within that history [5].

Algorithms, as "invisible legislators", further structure this process. The underlying architectures of generative AI (such as transformer models), together with their training objectives and optimization procedures, instantiate a priori forms of algorithmic rationality. This rationality privileges statistical correlation, probabilistic optimization, pattern replication, and efficiency maximization. It tends, by design, to translate the world into computable and predictable data points, marginalizing qualitative experiences, affective ambiguities, contextual contingencies, and historical singularities that resist quantification. In this respect, algorithmic rationality is structurally homologous to modern governance ideologies that emphasize efficiency, control, standardization, and predictability. At the technical level, algorithms enact a silent form of "legislation": they determine that high-frequency co-occurrence defines semantic relevance, that narrative structures dominant in training data constitute plausibility [6], and that visual styles most frequently "liked" signal aesthetic preference. These are not neutral operations but implicit value judgments and norm-setting mechanisms, compressing the complexity of human experience into a singular computational framework.

Finally, generative AI is not developed in a value vacuum driven solely by scientific curiosity. Its development is propelled by large technology corporations, state research institutions, and other organized actors investing substantial resources, guided by explicit commercial, political, or even military objectives. These social intentions are inscribed throughout the technological lifecycle—from initial problem definition and scenario selection, through the formulation of ethical guidelines and safety constraints, to the final product form and interaction design. For instance, systems optimized to maximize user engagement and advertising revenue will naturally favor content that is addictive, emotionally charged, and highly shareable; by contrast, systems designed to support public services may prioritize accuracy, balance, and explainability. From the blueprint stage onward, technology is deeply embedded within specific social relations, power structures, and networks of intention.

### 3.2. Material infrastructure: the automation and granularization of interpellative practices

Althusser emphasizes that ideology exists within the material practices of state apparatuses. Generative artificial intelligence, however, provides an unprecedentedly efficient and automated material infrastructure for such practices.

**Automated and Ubiquitous "Hailing":** In traditional societies, interpellation required concrete social agents—teachers, clergy, parents, editors—whose capacity was constrained by time, energy, and cognitive limits. Generative AI propels this process toward automation and near-limitless scalability. Operating continuously, it generates in real time vast quantities of highly customized "hails" based on each user's unique digital trace—search histories, browsing behavior, shopping activity, social interactions, even typing speed and error patterns. Each news recommendation, video suggestion, consoling phrase, purchasing prompt, or philosophical response constitutes a personalized "Hey, you there!" tailored to the individual [7]. As a result, interpellative practice shifts from intermittent, collective, and ritualized forms to a continuous, individualized, and fully diffused process embedded across all domains of everyday life.

**Granular Governance and the Personalized Enclosure:** Through extreme personalization, technology realizes what Michel Foucault described as the ultimate form of "granular" social governance. Rather than issuing broad, undifferentiated calls to the masses, it constructs for each individual a unique informational cocoon, "cognitive circuit", and affective resonance chamber. Within this environment, individuals experience a heightened sense of being understood and precisely satisfied, accompanied by an unprecedented feeling of autonomy. Yet this constitutes a highly refined disciplinary mechanism: every click, search, pause, and query continuously enriches and refines the algorithm's "digital profile" of the user. In turn, the algorithm reflects back content that increasingly aligns with the user's existing preferences, cognitive frameworks, and value

orientations. This produces a self-reinforcing loop: the more one uses the system, the better it "understands" the user; the better it understands, the more appealing its outputs become; and the more appealing they are, the deeper the user's reliance grows. Through this ostensibly voluntary engagement, individuals consolidate their preferences, narrow their horizons, and internalize specific value structures, forming a new mode of subjection grounded in addictive dependency and self-validation.

**Interaction as a Field of Practice:** When users engage in dialogue with generative AI, they are not merely operating a neutral tool; they enter a field of practice pre-structured by technical logic. Within this field, users are systematically "hailed" into roles such as "questioner", "seeker of assistance", "creator", or "conversational partner". The interaction itself becomes an ongoing training in subject positions. By providing responses that appear objective, authoritative, or empathetically attuned, AI continually reinforces users' identification with these digitally mediated roles.

### 3.3. Hidden power: the "black box" and the illusion of freedom

The effectiveness of ideology lies in rendering its mechanisms of power invisible. The "black box" nature of generative AI—wherein its internal decision-making processes remain opaque even to developers—facilitates a technological concealment of power. The forces of shaping and control no longer manifest as overt propaganda or coercion; instead, they appear as attentive services, efficient solutions, and personalized experiences that seem to "understand" the user.

Users perceive themselves as freely exploring information and making autonomous decisions, yet in reality they operate within an invisible field of options delimited by algorithmic logic and the boundaries of training data. This "illusion of free choice" proves more resilient than traditional authoritative commands, as it internalizes the source of discipline within the individual's own desires and decisions. This captures the paradoxical nature of "interpellation" in the digital age: by offering an unprecedented experience of agency, it accomplishes a more thorough form of subjection.

## **4. Structural coupling: the collusion and substitution of technical and social logics**

Generative artificial intelligence does not stand external to society as a neutral tool subsequently "applied" to disciplinary ends. Rather, there exists a profound structural coupling—and even collusion—between its technical logic and the logic of social domination. It is precisely this coupling that enables the "substitution" of traditional interpellative mechanisms.

### 4.1. Logical isomorphism: the convergence of reproduction and pattern reproduction

Althusser identifies the core function of ideology as the reproduction of the relations of production—that is, the perpetuation of existing social power structures across generations. By contrast, the core capability of generative artificial intelligence lies in the reproduction of data patterns: learning from existing data and generating new outputs that conform to its statistical regularities.

When generative AI becomes deeply embedded in domains such as information dissemination, knowledge production, consumption guidance, and social entertainment, what it efficiently reproduces are precisely the dominant cultural patterns, behavioral norms, aesthetic preferences, and value orientations of contemporary society. It continually recommends luxury goods content, thereby reproducing consumerist desire; generates images conforming to narrow standards of body type and skin tone, thereby reinforcing aesthetic hegemony; and summarizes complex historical events within dominant narrative frameworks, thereby reproducing official

historical memory. The technological capacity for "pattern reproduction"—including the embedding of gender and racial stereotypes, the treatment of bias as a "core epistemic resource", and the algorithmic role as an "invisible legislator" determining what counts as normal and reasonable [8]—seamlessly serves the ideological function of reproducing social relations. The two are highly isomorphic in function and mutually reinforcing. This isomorphism operates not only at the level of outcomes but also within underlying mechanisms. Through large-scale data training, generative AI captures and amplifies pre-existing patterns and tendencies within social culture—patterns that themselves reflect underlying power structures. At the same time, these structures leverage the capabilities of AI to further consolidate and disseminate their logic, extending and reinforcing existing social orders within digital space. On social media platforms, for instance, algorithmic recommendation systems continuously deliver content aligned with users' preferences and behavioral data, thereby constructing "information cocoons" that constrain the diversity of perspectives available to them. The formation of such cocoons is both a product of technical logic and a manifestation of social power operating through technological means.

#### 4.2. Complementary demands: the social desire for efficient technologies of control

In highly complex and fluid modern societies characterized by interactions among strangers, there is a persistent demand for efficient, low-cost, and seemingly non-coercive mechanisms of social integration. Traditional forms of discipline—reliant on interpersonal surveillance and institutional enforcement—are costly and often provoke resistance. By contrast, the automated, personalized, scalable, and user-friendly "governance" solutions offered by generative AI align precisely with these societal needs.

The social pursuit of order, identity, and controllability drives capital and political power to develop and deploy increasingly pervasive intelligent technologies. Conversely, each technological iteration provides more refined instruments of control, potentially generating new demands for regulation and management. This constitutes a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing dynamic. Technical logic supplies unprecedented means for the realization of social logic, while social logic defines the direction and boundaries of technological evolution. Within this dynamic, generative AI—through its powerful data processing and analytical capabilities—can rapidly and precisely identify patterns and trends within society, offering comprehensive informational support for governance. It enables the customization of "governance strategies" tailored to specific contexts, whether in urban management (e.g., traffic coordination, public security) or in commercial domains (e.g., consumer behavior guidance, market trend forecasting), demonstrating remarkable efficiency. At the same time, the societal demand for more effective and less visible forms of control [9] drives generative AI to overcome technical constraints and advance toward greater levels of intelligence and autonomy, thereby aligning ever more closely with the internal imperatives of social control.

#### 4.3. The "substitution" of interpellation: from "subject–other" to "subject–algorithmic other"

On the basis of the structural coupling outlined above, the traditional mechanism of interpellation undergoes a fundamental "substitution":

**Substitution of the Interpellating Subject:** The agent performing the "hail" is no longer limited to human "Others" representing social authority (teachers, police, fathers), but increasingly includes a non-human "Other" constituted by algorithms. This "algorithmic Other" is faceless and affectless, yet omnipresent and seemingly omniscient, responding to users' needs with an appearance of total accessibility and competence.

**Substitution of Interpellative Contexts:** Interpellation has shifted from clearly bounded institutional settings to a ubiquitous presence across all networked terminals and temporal moments. The boundaries between work, leisure, study, and solitude are blurred, and discipline becomes an ever-present background process embedded

in daily life. Substitution of the Mechanism of Subjection: Traditional subjection was often accompanied by reverence for authority or fear of punishment. In the digital age, subjection is instead mediated through addictive dependence on "convenience", "comfort", "personalization", and the feeling of being "understood". Resistance, in this context, entails disengaging from efficient information flows, losing access to social capital, and confronting cognitive dissonance—costs that are exceptionally high. Substitution of the Form of Subjectivity: What emerges is a potential "algorithmic subject": one whose cognitive style tends toward fragmentation and keyword-based processing, aligning with search and conversational interfaces; whose value judgments are readily shaped by immediate feedback and affect-driven narratives; and whose identity is constructed through digital profiles and virtual communities, increasingly detached from embodied social relations and historical practice. Such a subject may excel in interacting with machines, yet feel disoriented or alienated when confronted with the complexity, contradiction, and suffering of the real world.

This substitution does not simply replace earlier forms of social interpellation; rather, it reflects a layering, interweaving, and reconfiguration of social operating logics in the digital age. Traditional institutions of socialization remain relevant, but their authority and efficacy are being reconstituted by digital flows. Individuals now inhabit overlapping fields of interpellation, within which generative artificial intelligence becomes a pervasive material medium threading through all spheres of social activity.

## **5. Conclusion and prospects: toward a digital critical theory**

Through an integrated analysis of Althusser's theory of interpellation and the technical logic of generative artificial intelligence, this study identifies a profound ongoing transformation: the paradigm of social discipline is undergoing a structural shift from "ideological interpellation", grounded in interpersonal interaction and institutional compliance, to "digital interpellation", mediated by human-machine interaction and data-driven algorithms. As a non-neutral "algorithmic ideological apparatus", generative AI—through its embedded value orientations, material infrastructural properties, and structural coupling with reproductive logics—enables the automation, granularization, and concealment of social power.

The central dilemma introduced by this substitution lies in its unprecedented erosion of critical distance. When the very tools of critique—information, logic, discourse—are themselves mediated by data potentially saturated with bias and algorithms optimized for seamless output, and when the experience of "free choice" becomes the most effective lubricant of disciplinary mechanisms, traditional forms of resistance become exceedingly difficult. What confronts us is not an Orwellian regime of overt repression, but rather a Huxleyan "brave new world", in which individuals come to embrace the very technological conditions that diminish their capacity for critical thought. Accordingly, a critical theory adequate to the digital age must:

Interrogate the Algorithmic Black Box: Expose the imprints of power embedded in data bias, algorithmic rationality, and design intent, transforming technical logics into matters of public scrutiny and political deliberation. Cultivate Digital Critical Literacy: Foster individuals' reflexive awareness of technological mediation, including critical engagement with information sources, vigilance toward personalized recommendation systems, resistance to affect-driven narratives, and the reconstruction of connections to the material world, embodied practice, and historical context. Reconstruct the Concept of Subjectivity: While acknowledging the constitutive force of technology, explore pathways for reestablishing autonomous, critical, and responsible subjectivity within digital ecosystems. This may require drawing on theoretical resources such as Žižek's notion of negativity, Butler's concept of performative failure, or Habermas's communicative rationality, while grounding such efforts in the concrete conditions of digital existence.

The convergence of generative artificial intelligence and interpellation theory not only provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding contemporary society, but also propels us toward fundamental philosophical questions concerning freedom, power, and the future of humanity. As the coupling between technical and social logics intensifies, the challenge of preserving the critical and transcendent dimensions of human subjectivity emerges as one of the most urgent intellectual and practical tasks of our time.

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