
The Detour of Metaphor: Metaphor, Concept, and Strategy in Althusser and Derrida

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Abstract

Following some of the main arguments Derrida develops in ‘White Mythology’, in this article I propose an unexplored dialogue between Derrida and Althusser considering the use and the place that each of them gives to metaphor in their philosophical strategies. I give special attention to some rather isolated passages of ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’ and ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, where Althusser, against all evidence, seems to be quite aware of the importance of metaphor and mataphorization in every philosophical practice. As Balibar has argued, contrary to the metaphysical tradition, metaphor would not be the opposite but what anticipates the concept. In this sense, it is possible to observe how Althusser’s work has continuously put into practice – as the singular signature of his theoretical practice – something that I call the ‘detour of metaphor’ as a necessary ‘deviation’ for the production of new concepts. Without any evidence that Althusser may have known Derrida’s essay, I show how Althusser’s own theoretical work, one in which ‘metaphor’ as a philosophical theme appears to be rather anecdotic, is unexpectedly close to Derrida’s own positions concerning the margins of philosophy and its ‘outside’, the relation to the metaphysical tradition, and the importance of strategy in philosophy.

Keywords: Althusser, metaphor, concept, detour, strategy, theoretical practice

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Thinking is an experimental action carried out
with small amounts of energy, in the same way as
a general shifts small figures about on a map
before setting his large bodies of troops in motion
– Sigmund Freud (1981, 89)

Dans cette aventure, le « concept de la
rhétorique » s'est bel et bien perdu. Ou, ce
qui revient au même, il a tout envahi, il a
disparu de se confondre avec tout, de se
« généraliser » (...). La frontière qui séparait
la philosophie de son *autre* aura donc
commencé à se brouiller.
– Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1979, 47; 66)

Among the different kinds of metaphors that Aristotle distinguishes in his *Poetics*, the last one, in fact, is that of analogy, which is basically understood as a relation of proportion (Aristotle 1985, 1457b1). I would like to begin here, strategically, by establishing a disproportion. Whilst 'metaphor' constitutes a whole field of research among Derrida's scholars, we hardly find any reference to metaphor among Althusser's commentators. Of course, this disproportion is due to the quite evident difference that we may verify between the many pages that Derrida devotes to metaphor throughout all his work, and what it might seem as Althusser's complete indifference, not only to metaphor as a philosophical (or theoretical) problem, but also to the general field of literature and language as a whole.¹ Leaving aside the important place that metaphor and metaphoricity occupies in *Of Grammatology* and many of *Writing and Difference*'s essays (see for example: Derrida 1997, 15, 67, 89, 105–6, 270–80, 291–2; and Derrida 2005, 7, 17–9, 31–2, 88–9, 140, and so on) it is above all in his 1971 essay, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' (first published in the issue 5 of *Poétique* journal, an essay which turns 50 this year), where Derrida confronts in a more systematic way this rhetorical (or rhetorico-philosophical) figure (Derrida 1982, 207–71). As it is also known, the other important piece on metaphor is his 1978 'The Retreat of Metaphor' (Derrida 2007, 48–80), where he engages a discussion on his 'disagreement' with Paul Ricœur's reading of his 'White Mythology', presented in his 1975 book, *La métaphore vive* (specifically in the eighth study, 'Métaphore et discours philosophique', in Ricœur 1975, 323–99;

on this ‘disagreement’, see Amalric 2006). As for Althusser, there is not a single title from his entire work where we might find something of the kind. But following one of Althusser’s most productive lessons (a lesson that Derrida himself acknowledges in his 1971 interview with Houdebine and Scarpetta; see Derrida 1981, 63), if we are to read carefully – this is, *not literally* – we might find ourselves shocked by some isolated remarks on metaphor that may lead us to a very different judgment of this rather apparent disproportion. One of them, perhaps the most astonishing one, and which I think it is worth quoting from the outset, comes from a passage of his *Éléments d’autocritique* (1974) / *Elements of Self-Criticism* (1976) that clearly has gone unnoticed to most readers, where Althusser asserts: ‘in philosophy you can only think through metaphors’ (1976, 140), a translation which alters what I consider to be a rather crucial detail in Althusser’s words: ‘on ne pense en philosophie que sous des métaphores’ (1974, 79), that is, not ‘with’ or ‘through’ metaphors, but ‘under’ metaphors. This subtle nuance, seemingly irrelevant, must be retained in order to understand what I would like to suggest in what follows.

My aim in this paper will be not so much to retrace or reconstruct Derrida’s sharp thoughts on metaphor, or to put forward the significance of ‘White Mythology’ within Derrida’s more general philosophical project, something that has already been done by some of his most distinguished commentators, notably Rodolphe Gasché (1986, 293–318; 2014) and Geoffrey Bennington (1999, 119–33; 2014; 2016a; 2016b). I would rather like to show how Derrida and Althusser’s *positions* concerning metaphor and metaphoricity are at the heart of each of his conceptions of the inherent strategic dimension of theoretical practice.

As any attentive reading of Althusser and Derrida’s main works from the 1960s and 1970s may reveal, they both assign great importance to strategy in their own theoretical elaborations. In the case of Althusser, it is well known how he loved to recall Kant’s idea of the *Kampfplatz* from the preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; this is, the definition of metaphysics as a ‘battlefield’ of endless controversies (Kant 1998, 99), a formula that is fundamental to Althusser’s own definition of philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory’. His 1968 article ‘Philosophy as a revolutionary weapon’ (a somewhat fictional interview, one of Althusser’s many ruses) is in fact entirely inspired by this strategic, even ‘warlike’ imperative. This political conception – or even this political *concept* – of philosophy is of course one of the most characteristic features of Althusser’s entire work. As Alain Badiou has correctly argued, the ‘central enigma’ of Althusser’s oeuvre, consists in this

indecidable nature of the relationship between philosophy and politics (Badiou 1993, 30).

This same year also takes place what it would be possible to consider almost as an encounter, or more precisely, a *failed* encounter between Althusser and Derrida, to which I would like to draw special attention. In January 1968, Derrida delivers a conference in front of the Société Française de Philosophie under a title that will quickly become an emblem of deconstruction: 'La différance' (1982, 1–28). Just a month later, in February 1968, and invited by this same Society, it will be the turn of Althusser, who will give a conference under the title 'Lenin and Philosophy'. It is highly remarkable how both interventions are indeed strongly engaged with a problem of philosophical strategy. Just to recall some passages from the very first pages, Derrida states: 'In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous ... we will be introduced to the thought of *différance* by the theme of strategy and the stratagem' (1982, 7). Unlike the traditional, that is, military strategy however, this is a strategy deprived from all transcendental finality, 'a strategy without finality', which Derrida also designates as a 'blind tactics' (1982, 7). But just as this lack of finality is not reducible to an absolute lack of purpose, the blindness is not to be thought *literally*, as an absolute blindness. Some years earlier, in 'Force and signification', giving an idea of how deconstruction as a philosophical strategy should be understood, Derrida had already declared:

Our discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions. The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a *certain* organization, a certain *strategic* arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strengths of the field to turn its own *stratagems* against it, producing a *force of dislocation* that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting* it. (Derrida 2005, 22)

If we turn back our attention to 'Lenin and Philosophy', Althusser begins by recalling Lenin's 'tactics' facing the 'Otzovists' (something like the 'revokers', a leftist dissident group of the Bolshevik party who opposed every participation in legal organizations), which he explicitly takes as an example of a totally new '*practice of philosophy*' (Althusser 2001, 24; 32). The way Lenin executes this new practice is described by Althusser almost in the same terms used by Derrida to describe his own:

Lenin manages the *tour de force* of taking up these *anti-empiricist positions precisely in the field of an empiricist reference problematic*. It certainly is a paradoxical exploit to manage to be anti-empiricist while thinking and

expressing oneself in the basic categories of empiricism, and must surely pose a slight “problem” for any philosopher of good faith who is prepared to examine it (Althusser 2001, 51)².

It is also in this conference where Althusser develops his thesis of the history of philosophy as the eternal struggle between two philosophical tendencies: idealism and materialism, a thesis that taken to the extreme, results in another famous Althusserian thesis: that philosophy has no history at all. According to Lenin’s lesson, philosophy has no history because it is a never-ending practice of tracing lines of demarcation, the endless *repetition* of the emptiness of a distance taken (one of the most enigmatic of Althusserian’s metaphors), which nevertheless has its real effects, specifically over politics and over science. For that reason, this new practice of philosophy, as a materialistic practice of philosophy, must always proceed as an *intervention*, following a specific strategy, considering the multiple determinants of the theoretical conjuncture (or in other words, of the philosophical battlefield).

I would like to turn directly now to the question of metaphor, and to this practice of metaphorisation as a practice of detour, what I would like to call the ‘strategy of metaphor’, or the *detour of metaphor*. If I am paraphrasing here on purpose Gregory Elliott’s book title, *the detour of theory*, it is because I would like to suggest that the detour of metaphor could also be understood (by *analogy*, if I may say) in the same way as Elliott has defined this gesture in Althusser, following Clausewitz famous definition, that is, as the ‘continuation of politics by other means’ (Elliott 2006, 52), an idea that, needless to say, Althusser himself formulates in ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ (Althusser 2001, 33; 65). From this point of view, the process of metaphorisation should be considered as a fundamental mechanism in the Althusserian theoretical device (*le dispositif théorique*). Among the many metaphors at work in ‘Lenin and Philosophy’, I would like to underline specifically one, which is in fact one of the most important moments in Althusser’s process of self-criticism. Indeed, it is here that it is possible to find for the first time the idea that the thesis of the ‘epistemological break’ must be considered as a *metaphor*, that is, not as the brutal cut into Marx’s intellectual biography (as the historical ‘*coupe d’essence*’, that Althusser evokes in *Reading Capital*, which is of course another metaphor; see Althusser 2015, 241–2), but as the ‘commencement’ of a history without end, as a ‘continual break’ (*une coupure continuée*):

Obviously this epistemological break is not an instantaneous event. It is even possible that one might, by recurrence and where some of its *details* are

concerned, assign it a sort of premonition of a past. At any rate, this break becomes *visible* in its first signs, but these signs only inaugurate the beginning of an endless history. Like every break, this break is actually a sustained one within which complex reorganizations can be observed (Althusser 2001, 39)³.

In an essay which remains to this day the most rigorous and convincing explanation of Althusser's thesis of the epistemological break and its permanent rectification, Etienne Balibar has distinguished five 'moments' of this process of constant amendment and transformation of this thesis: (1) 'the break before the break', (2) 'the break named, identified', (3) 'the break generalized', (4) 'the break "corrected"' and (5) the 'disappearance of the break' (Balibar 1994, 161–74). It is precisely this fourth moment of the 'break corrected' where Althusser introduces the most important rectification and modification of the thesis of the epistemological break, which is now understood as a metaphor. What is most striking in Balibar's analysis is that contrary to a long metaphysical tradition that considers metaphor as the opposite of the concept (or at least as something clearly differentiable from it), he considers that metaphor is what *anticipates* the concept. In this way, says Balibar, 'the metaphor of the break (...) must be corrected and reworked by the concept' (Ibid., 170–1). If this is not exactly the same argument developed by Derrida, it shares in a certain sense its general inspiration, insofar as it moves away from the metaphysical tradition that considers metaphor as something fundamentally different from the concept, something introduced, and therefore distinguishable 'in' the text of philosophy.

This hypothesis of metaphor as the anticipation of the concept though, has been already explored, in a certain way, by Dominique Lecourt, another close collaborator (and former student) of Althusser, in his reading of the "reduction of metaphor" in Gaston Bachelard's epistemology (Lecourt 1975, 142–61). This reading was in fact originally presented as a paper in Derrida's own seminar at the École Normale Supérieure, 'Théorie du discours philosophique: la métaphore dans le texte philosophique' from 1969–1970, a seminar which, by the way, constitutes the genesis of 'White Mythology'. Actually, it is not by chance that Derrida explicitly mentions Bachelard's project of a 'meta-poetics' in 'White Mythology' (with very few exceptions, this is the only work in Derrida's whole oeuvre that confronts Bachelard's epistemology in a more or less systematic fashion). Let us briefly recall Derrida's main argument on this issue. Derrida points out the impossibility of constituting a "concept" of metaphor, which would be somehow 'pre-philosophical' (a sort of 'originary' concept of metaphor), or even a certain 'meta-philosophical' discourse on metaphor that would be able

to explain the difference of concept and metaphor throughout the history of western philosophy, a discourse, says Derrida, ‘analogous to what Bachelard (...) called *meta-poetics*’ (Derrida 1982, 229). Further on, Derrida argues:

Bachelard, on this point, is faithful to tradition: metaphor does not appear to him either simple or necessarily to constitute an obstacle to scientific or philosophical knowledge. It can work for the critical rectification of a concept, reveal a concept as a bad metaphor, or finally ‘illustrate’ a new concept. (Ibid., 259)

If the opposition between metaphor and concept as two perfectly different genres reveals itself as a ‘positivist’ perspective, as Balibar has sustained (not far from Lecourt on this point), there would be then an irreducible positivism in Bachelard’s consideration of metaphor. As Bachelard points out recurrently in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* (from 1947): ‘the scientific mind must never cease to fight against images, against analogies, and against metaphors’ (Bachelard 2002, 47). Just as every ‘naïve images’ or ‘first intuitions’ that belong to the common sense and which inevitably ‘seduce reason’ (Ibid., 85), in order to properly establish scientific knowledge, metaphors are always to be fought and reduced. Compared with Balibar’s suggestion, one might even say that the relation of antecedence or ‘anticipation’ between metaphor and concept seems to be in Bachelard exactly the reverse: metaphor only is useful to ‘illustrate’ the concept, this is to say, metaphor comes always *after* the concept, it follows the concept as an example or representation of it. As the preceding quote from Derrida shows, the task in Bachelard’s epistemology would be double: a work of surveillance and denunciation of ‘immediate metaphors’, meaning ‘bad metaphors’ (as it is the case with the sponge as an explanation for electric conduction in iron), and at the same time a pedagogical work of ‘illustration’, that is, of the correct use of ‘non immediate’ or ‘constructed’ metaphors, which would correspond to ‘good metaphors’. Despite this traditional or even ‘positivist’ perspective at work in Bachelard’s texts, Lecourt’s reading tries to ‘rescue’ Bachelard from that traditional discourse, or at least to indicate a contradiction or ambivalence in his position. In his study, Lecourt examines the idea of ‘a theory of the scientific use of images’ in Bachelard (1975, 149), in the horizon of thinking a necessary ‘complementarity’ between epistemology and poetics (that is, between concept and metaphor):

It seems that we have here a confirmation of the thesis I put forward about the scientific use of images: Bachelard’s epistemology is psychologicistic through and through. Epistemology and poetics are homologous and complementary;

they find their unity in a conception of psychic dynamism which, although it has a double face, is nonetheless unique and unitary (Lecourt 1975, 158).

Lecourt contention seems to be supported by a more recent study of Bachelard's thought, written by Vincent Bontems. Bontems argues that there is in fact a shift in Bachelard's position concerning metaphor and scientific knowledge. In a first period Bachelard does in fact conceive scientific knowledge and poetic imagination as two opposed dynamics, but later on, one might recognize an effort to think a sort of common ground between each other. 'Bachelard's thought in no way opposes scientific culture to literary culture, it combines them without mistaking them: it conjugates the dynamics of the mind' (Bontems 2010, 24; my translation). Either way, Lecourt's analysis not only complicates Derrida's reading of Bachelard's epistemology as being completely 'faithful' to metaphysics, but also 'anticipates', so to speak, the hypothesis suggested by Balibar concerning Althusser's metaphor of the epistemological break, namely, that metaphor would anticipate the concept.

Balibar goes on to suggest that the concept which the metaphor of the break actually anticipates, is the concept of 'topography' (*la topique*), arguing that "'break" and "topography" never stopped being studied by Althusser together' (Balibar 1994, 174), in a process which ends up reversing the relationship between them, and ultimately replacing the metaphor of the break by the theoretical concept of topography, a replacement which corresponds in fact to the fifth moment of the 'disappearance' of the epistemological break, according to Balibar's reading. However, the logic of anticipation, this very idea of metaphor as the anticipation of the concept is actually an argument already present in some of Althusser's own texts. Specifically, in 'The Discovery of Dr. Freud', written in 1976, Althusser proposes an analysis of some of Freud's main concepts, suggesting a relationship between metaphoricity and 'structural causality'. Through the very last pages of this article – published for the first time without the authorization of his author (see on this issue what the editors of this text have called 'The Tbilisi Affair', in Althusser 1999, 79–84) – Althusser consecrates some comments on the 'concepts' of 'drive' (*pulsion*) and 'phantasm'. Even if he presents these terms as concepts, they are not other than more or less 'stabilized' metaphors.

First, Althusser sustains that Freud was obliged to make use of metaphors due to the impossibility to produce a *scientific* theory of the unconscious, an impossibility of which the whole of Freud's work could

be a clear demonstration. This is what Jean-Michel Rey, in a rather ‘derridean’ line of thought (but not at all incompatible with Althusser), has called the ‘necessary detour’ in Freud’s theoretical practice:

With exemplary rigor, Freud recognizes the inescapable need to multiply metaphors, *to differentiate them to the point of contradiction*, in the formulation of theoretical statements. But he also points to a complementary obligation: to ‘calculate’ the major risks of this metaphorical profusion, the shifting it allows, the backfire effects it triggers. From a certain point of view, metaphor would be the indication of a delay and a forced detour (*détour obligé*) of the theoretical device (*dispositif théorique*). (Rey 1975, 82; my translation)

Regarding this first remark, it is difficult not to associate this same gesture as a kind of ‘identification’ of Althusser with Freud himself, considering that the work of the latter is described by the former as being ‘in *perpetual motion*’, that is, in constant rectification or even in permanent self-criticism. ‘Freud never stopped, until the last days of his life, recasting his thought, his concepts, and what he himself called his general “hypotheses”’ (Althusser 1999, 92). Althusser’s argument cleverly underlines that ‘paradoxically, the most profound proof of Freud’s genuinely scientific spirit, his criticism, his antidogmatism, is revealed in his instinctive reluctance to describe as *scientific* in the strong sense the provisional formulations he arrives at’ (Ibid., 93–4). Thus, facing this impossibility, Freud would have been in need of making use of metaphors that allowed him to ‘anticipate’ concepts such as the unconscious. In other words, Freud’s theoretical practice must constantly deal with this ‘necessary detour’, with this ‘obliged’ or ‘forced’ detour through metaphor. This gesture alone accounts for the idea of ‘the *necessity of the paradox* of a body of thought’, which Althusser considers one of the main lessons from Freud’s psychoanalysis. It is ‘a thought that never stops saying the same thing, deepening it, but that at the same time says it in forms that are new at every turn and at every turn disconcerting’ (Ibid., 94) (and here again, it is hard to know whether Althusser is only speaking of Freud’s work, or if he’s also describing his own conception of theoretical practice). The concepts (or metaphors) of ‘drive’ and ‘phantasm’ therefore, may also be considered as ‘limit-concepts’, says Althusser:

Taking up Freud’s phrase about the drive . . . , I will say that the concept of the phantasm in Freud is at once the concept of the unconscious, but not its *scientific* concept, since it is a metaphor, although it can, on the other hand,

be *for us* the concept of *the limit* that separates a theoretical formation that has not yet become a science from the science to come. (Ibid., 104)

As a concept of the limit, then – a concept of the *difference* between a prescientific or ideological theoretical formation and the science to come – the ‘metaphorical concept’ of phantasm announces or anticipates the scientific concept of the unconscious.

Secondly, this metaphoricity in Freud’s thought expresses the ‘scientifically scandalous’ path that he followed, a ‘method’, as it were, ‘going from the inside to the outside, from the unseen to the seen, from the unobservable to the observable’; in a word, a *strategy* that reveals the materialist dominant tendency in his thought: ‘as a good materialist scientist, since he observed effects, being convinced that those effects could not exist without a “cause”, he attributed a cause to them, even if he could not see it’ (Ibid., 96). In this sense, Freud had to suppose this cause that he calls ‘unconscious’, and in order to designate this cause he was forced to turn to metaphors. This ‘scandalous’ path, however, is the way that every science must follow according to Althusser:

It is in hypothesizing the existence of a cause they do not manage to see *that they manage to see it* The cause of the effects is in perpetual flight from science, and that, moreover, is what motivates all sciences, subjectively, to live. (Ibid.)

In this way, just as Althusser will elaborate the theory of ‘structural causality’ from Spinoza (see for example, Fourtounis 2005; Balibar 1996; Morfino 2015), he also observes in Freud’s thought the theoretical elements to conceive an ‘absent cause’. Even more, when reading Freud’s metaphors, Althusser not only recovers Freud’s metaphor of the ‘topography’ (*la topique*), but he also picks up the idea of the necessity of metaphor in the anticipation of the concept (or to say it otherwise, the necessity of supposing an absent cause in order to designate a reality unobservable in its phenomenality).

So even if this very concept of ‘topography’ is in itself also a metaphor – which is, as it is well known, a reformulation, through this ‘detour’ by Freud, of the best known of metaphors in Marxist discourse, the ‘architectural metaphor’ of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ – I would like to consider here another metaphor closely related to the metaphor of the break, namely, that of the ‘inversion’ of the Hegelian dialectic. It is important to underline here that Derrida himself in a footnote of ‘White Mythology’ mentions this metaphor, where he explicitly refers to Althusser’s work regarding metaphor in a Marxist problematic⁴. In fact, if the epistemological break was once conceived as a theoretical

concept, it was a concept that Althusser opposed to the whole idea of the inversion, the ‘turning right side up’, ‘on its feet’, of Hegelian dialectics (and this famous passage from the afterword of the second German edition of *Capital*, makes use of another equally famous metaphor: the one of the ‘mystic shell’ and the ‘rational kernel’; see Marx 1982, 103). In ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, Althusser says: ‘this “turning right side up again” is merely gestural, even metaphorical, and it raises as many questions as it answers’ (Althusser 2005, 89–90). It may seem odd to realize that later on Althusser will try to solve some of these questions by replacing one metaphor – that of the ‘inversion’ or the ‘reversal’ – with another one – that of the ‘break’. It is at this point that we should recall Althusser’s statement in his ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, ‘*on ne pense en philosophie que sous des métaphores*’, an almost dogmatic statement if it were not precisely because of the radical anti-dogmatism that it contains. If we read this statement together with the use, misuse and abuse of metaphors in the work of Althusser (and there are in fact numerous other metaphors throughout his writings), one may begin to have a better picture of the place and the status of metaphor in Althusser’s theoretical practice, and how he conceived the need for metaphors and the practice of metaphorisation as inherent to every philosophical practice (not only the Marxist one).

From this standpoint, and in line with Balibar’s suggestion, it is possible to argue that, far from the traditional consideration of metaphor as a figure or a ‘trope’ proper to *poetics* or *rhetoric*, Althusser considers metaphor as a *political* and *strategic* resource, which is to be evaluate following a materialistic criteria of ‘justness’ (*justesse*) or ‘adjustment’ (*ajustement*). As Stéphane Legrand and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc have pointed out: ‘Althusser connects the requirement for thought to work from its irreducible metaphoricity, to the standard of justness (*justesse*), of adjustment of his discourse to the coordinates of the conjuncture’ (Legrand and Sibertin-Blanc 2007, 2; my translation). This is why, in ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ as well as in ‘Elements of Self-Criticism’, Althusser considers that the new practice of philosophy must always seek to create new and ‘better’ metaphors, that is, metaphors as ‘revolutionary weapons’, ‘adjusted’ for the specific theoretical conjuncture where the materialist philosopher is supposed to intervene. In this sense, we might begin to acknowledge how Althusser’s position is not far from one of Derrida’s main contentions in ‘White Mythology’. In this sense, if ‘Althusser has appeared to speak from a point external to the field so imprecisely designated as “structuralism”, outside the game and its rules, to use a Derridean figure, able to observe and judge

precisely because he was not in play' (Montag 2013, 73), this is only because the very concept of 'theoretical conjuncture' has not been taken into account in a sufficient and rigorous way. As Warren Montag makes this point clear, the concept of the theoretical conjuncture is:

a concept that replaces the image of the game and its rules with that of struggle, of war, a war that 'leaves nowhere for a shelter', excludes in advance any place outside of or beyond the conflict: every thesis about philosophy is simultaneously a taking of a position within philosophy. (Ibid.)

For Althusser, as much as for Derrida, philosophical discourse cannot but work at the margin between a kind of discourse which is believed to be purely 'conceptual' or 'literal' (in a proper sense), and another kind of discourse symmetrically imagined as purely 'metaphorical' or 'figurative' (in a non-proper or inappropriate sense). In fact, this could be exactly the reason why Althusser speaks of the break as a 'theoretical metaphor', and why Balibar also speaks of the 'topography' (*la topique*) as a 'conceptual metaphor'. These expressions could only be read as oxymoronic from a traditional, that is, metaphysical point of view, the one that considers metaphor and concept as two heterogeneous linguistic regimes. As Derrida has carefully pointed out, metaphor is in itself a concept, more precisely, a metaphysical concept, one of the most classical 'philosophemes' of western thought. But this concept in fact indicates the paradoxical effect that the very process of metaphorization produces inside the philosophical text: the concept of metaphor indicates the impossibility of a 'general metaphorology', a 'meta-metaphorology' as it were, recalling by this formulation the project of a 'meta-poetics' as proposed by Gaston Bachelard.

If one wished to conceive and to class all the metaphorical possibilities of philosophy, one metaphor, at least, always would remain excluded, outside the system: the metaphor, at the very least, without which the concept of metaphor could not be constructed, or, to syncopate an entire chain of reasoning, the metaphor of metaphor. (Derrida 1982, 219–20)

This metaphor of metaphor, the abysmal and endless process of metaphorisation, is what Derrida calls the 'tropic supplementarity' (something that he also designates by the expression '*plus de métaphore*' from the first subtitle of the essay, a formula that, as it is clarified by the translator, must be understood simultaneously as 'more metaphor' and 'no more metaphor'). The paradox consists in the fact that the same movement by which philosophy has tried to dominate the

metaphorical by a concept of metaphor (or by ‘the concept’ tout court), this same effort stubbornly collides with the necessity of producing new metaphors. In other words, what is to be defined is always already implicated in the defining of the definition. This is why Derrida says: ‘Neither a *rhetoric* of philosophy nor a *metaphilosophy* appear to be pertinent here’ (Derrida 1982, 230).

Of course, this problem leads to a quite unsettling situation for every philosophical practice. As Derrida maintains, ‘metaphor also opens the wandering of the semantic’ (Ibid., 241). From this stance, metaphor turns to be at the same time something ‘untamable’ but from which philosophical discourse cannot do without. Each time that philosophy resorts to a metaphor, there is always the risk of ‘loosing sense’. In a way, all metaphor bends towards its abyss, the ‘metaphor of the metaphor’. And yet, philosophy has always tried to dominate this risk, whether by trying to define the ‘correct use’ of metaphors or by simply expelling metaphor from philosophical discourse (and trying then to settle the limits, the margins, between the conceptual and the figural, between philosophy and rhetoric, and so on). After analyzing the main passages of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, Derrida makes an important remark on the process of metaphorisation (making use of the Hegelian element of negativity, it is worth noting): ‘The metaphORIZATION of metaphor, its bottomless overdeterminability, seems to be inscribed in the structure of metaphor, but as its negativity’ (Ibid., 243). Metaphor then is structurally overdetermined. In this sense, if in philosophy it is not possible but to think under metaphors, as stated by Althusser, and at the same time metaphor is structurally overdetermined, as suggested by Derrida – the ‘bottomless overdeterminability’ in the structure of metaphor, as Rodolphe Gasché puts it (2014, 2) – one finds oneself in a situation of a ‘double overdetermination’, or an overdetermination in ‘second degree’: the overdetermination of the theoretical conjuncture and the overdetermination of philosophical discourse itself.

Before concluding, I would like to highlight some further remarks on strategy and metaphORIZATION, or rather, on what it would be possible to call – improperly – a strategy of metaphORIZATION as a practice of detour, the detour of metaphor. This would be a practice, almost a sort of art (as in the ‘art of war’), that it would require a very peculiar ‘knowledge’ or even an ‘intuition’, in order to produce adequate metaphors, that is, metaphors that ‘fit’ or ‘adjust’ to the conjuncture. If the process of metaphORIZATION is always a process of ‘idealization and reappropriation’ as Derrida argues (Derrida 1982, 253), perhaps

Althusser's strategic use of metaphor calls for a different process of metaphorization, a practice of detour, which is not necessarily run by that movement and its economy. It would be instead a process of diversion, of deviation, of a detour without return (*un detour sans retour*), a '*détournement*' of metaphor without reappropriation, in order to produce a displacement, a reorganization, a reconfiguration of the different positions and forces which conforms the 'topography' of the philosophical battlefield.

Again, as Warren Montag correctly argues, 'to move things, to shake things up, to shift the balance of power internal to philosophy, to open the possibility of thinking otherwise required a language of force and provocation' (Montag 2013, 210), including, certainly, the use of metaphors. Not far from this argument is what Derrida seems to be thinking of with regard to the category of *catachresis*: 'The latter does not emerge from language, does not create new signs, does not enrich the code; and yet it transforms its functioning, producing, with the same material, new rules of exchange, new values' (Derrida 1982, 257). Literally, the catachresis would be the forced misuse of a metaphor, and in a way, the abuse of metaphor, in order not to illustrate or to recover a 'proper sense', but to produce something new, at the risk of losing sense or producing 'nonsense'. In this point Derrida adopts Nietzsche's position concerning the continuity between metaphor and concept, which necessarily implies the problem of taking risks. If 'metaphor allows for a certain risk with respect to meaning and truth', as Geoffrey Bennington observes (Bennington 2014, 93), a deliberate practice of detour would have to assume this risk not only as a mere possibility opened up by metaphor but as the intended effect of using metaphors in a concrete theoretical situation. A strategy of metaphorization though, would require assuming the 'nonmasterable dissemination' of an always non-proper sense, of 'generalizing' metaphors in order to produce new configurations, to produce an *other* articulation between concept and metaphor, which opens the way to different relations of 'anticipation', 'rectification' and 'illustration' between each other. According to Sarah Kofman's excellent study on Nietzsche and metaphor (which by the way, was also originally presented as a paper at Derrida's seminar on metaphor from 1969–1970): 'the new philosopher does not put metaphor or rhetorical use but subordinates it to the prospect of an accurate language, or to the strategic objective of using non-stereotyped metaphors in order to unmask the metaphors which constitute every concept' (Kofman 1993, 18). Nietzsche's maneuver, so to speak, releases the metaphorical detour from the movement of idealization

and the economy of reappropriation, and by doing so he opens the possibility of a non-idealizing metaphor, that is, a ‘non-humanist’ and ‘non-logocentric’ metaphor (Bennington 2014, 95), which at the same time should lead to think an ‘anti-humanism’ of metaphor and language in general.

As the process of class struggle, or the process of history in general, the process of metaphorization is also a ‘process without a subject’, which means without guarantees, without the assurance of a *telos*, not only because there might be always ‘bad metaphors’, but also because there might be always too much metaphors. The permanent threat of ‘one more metaphor’ (*une métaphore de plus*) is as unavoidable as it is naïve to think that one might be in control of the process of metaphorization, in order to simply state ‘no more metaphors’ (*plus de métaphore*). The structural overdeterminability of metaphor then points to its inherent untamability. This is why the detour of metaphor has always something of a bet; it necessarily involves taking a risk, a risk however that is also always a chance. In this perspective, it would be possible to return to Napoleon’s famous motto, later recovered by Lenin, that seems to have so fascinated Althusser: ‘*on s’avance et puis on voit*’, that is, ‘we move forward and then we see’ (see Balibar 1991, 71, note 16; Macherey, 2012), in order to reformulate it in our context as: ‘*on métaphorise et puis on voit*’.

What I have tried to suggest in these brief remarks is the importance and even the decisive centrality of the use of metaphor, of the process of metaphorisation – what I have called a practice of detour or the strategy of metaphor – in both Althusser and Derrida’s philosophical strategies. It is well known how aware was Althusser on the inherently strategic nature of theoretical practice as a philosophical intervention. What is even more interesting is that Althusser always looked Derrida’s own theoretical work as a model or a great example (Derrida is literally described by Althusser as a ‘giant’) of this strategic conception of philosophy. In one of the ‘fragments’ that he had written for his autobiography, *The Future Lasts Forever* (which nevertheless is not included in the English translation), Althusser explicitly stated:

Jacques Derrida has spoken a lot about strategy in philosophy and he is absolutely right, since every philosophy is a theoretical combat device which disposes of theses as so many strongholds or salient places in order to (...) besiege the theoretical fortified places occupied by the adversary. (Althusser 2007, 482; my translation)

Derrida, for his part, in his interviews with Elisabeth Roudinesco, declares the following concerning his relationship with Althusser:

I believe that in what it had of most secret, of most unrecognizable, from the point of view of everyday, or, as we say, “dominant” political language, our alliance was *also* political. Some of his texts published after his death seems to me to attest it. (Derrida and Roudinesco 2003, 132; my translation)

In his long interview with Michael Sprinker from 1988, Derrida explains his ‘conjunctural’ (that is, ‘strategic’) silence in the midst of the Marxist debates held by the ‘althusserians’ in the 1960–70, using the following terms (and metaphors) to describe the French intellectual milieu from that period:

one has to take into consideration a sort of overtraining in the treatment of problems from an economical, potential, algebraic standpoint—like chess players who don’t need for the game to actually advance in order to anticipate the opponent’s moves and to respond in advance virtually, to preinterpret fictively all possible moves and to guess the other’s strategy to the finest detail. All this is related to the theory of philosophical games within a tiny milieu overtrained in decipherment But implicitly, underhandedly, there was such a war, so many maneuvers of intimidation, such a struggle for ‘hegemony’ that one found oneself easily discouraged There were *camps*, strategic alliances, maneuvers of encirclement and exclusion. Some forces in this merciless *Kampfplatz* grouped around Lacan, others around Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze. When it had any, that period’s diplomacy (war by other means) was that of avoidance: silence, one doesn’t cite or name, everyone distinguishes himself and everything forms a sort of archipelago of discourse without earthly communication, without visible passageway In spite of these differences and *différends*, I was part of a great ‘camp’: we had common enemies—a lot of them. Never, between Althusser and me, for example, was there any publicly declared hostility. (Derrida 1993, 193–94)

Of course, the possible proximities between Althusser and Derrida concerning this strategic (and political) conception of theoretical work are at the same time the reason of many of their profound divergences. Not being able to analyze here every possible encounter and dis-encounter (or ‘failed encounter’) between them, among other important philosophical problems such as the critique of metaphysical humanism or the critique of the concept of history (which, put like this, is actually a bit redundant), I think it is particularly around this issue, that is, the detour of metaphor and the strategy of metaphorisation in each of their theoretical work (their work with concepts precisely), that a very rich field of interrogation opens up between these two fundamental figures

of French contemporary thought. In this perspective, finally, it is worth to quote again Legrand and Sibertin-Blanc commentary who, following a close reading of Althusser, have offered a definition of metaphoricity which, in my opinion, also applies perfectly to Derrida, by describing this practice of detour or this practice of metaphorisation also as a practice of writing, a strategic ‘procedure’ of philosophical practice itself:

metaphoricity, as a procedure of detour, lets even say of diversion (*détournement*), it is not the stigma of who knows what original sin of a conceptual thought who would see itself eternally condemned to rewrite its own deviation from the Real (ontological version) or from the Signifier (hermeneutical version), but a procedure of writing and of thought necessary to *create a gap (detour) between thought and itself ...: create between thought and itself that gap that, in order to be philosophy, this thought is.* (Legrand and Sibertin-Blanc 2007, 6; my translation)

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Notes

1. This is of course just apparent, because not only Althusser will devote an important text to the ‘theory of discourse’, but also, because we know today that he was in fact quite interested in ‘literary history’ as well. See the ‘Trois notes sur la théorie des discours’, written in 1966 (Althusser 1993, 111–70) (unfortunately this text was not included in the English translation of *Writings on Psychoanalysis*), and ‘Une conversation sur l’histoire littéraire’ (Althusser 2018, 31–75), written in 1963, where he comments Roland Barthes’ structuralism. It is not possible to ignore here the important work of Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (2006) published in 1966, which constitutes the first (and almost unique) development of Althusserian thesis in the field of literary theory. See on this topic, Mulhern (1994, 142–58).
2. On Althusser’s reading of Lenin, see Montag (2015). On Althusser’s conference in particular, see also Macherey (1999, 265–81).
3. The first appearance of this ‘rectification’ though, happens in ‘The Humanist Controversy’, written in 1967 and published posthumously. See Althusser (2003, 221–306).
4. See footnote 10 of the ‘Exergue’, the first part of his essay: ‘In his *Notebooks* (...) on Hegel’s dialectics, Lenin most often defines the relation of Marx to Hegel as an “overturning” (head over heels), but also as a “decapitation” (the Hegelian system minus everything that governs it: the absolute, the Idea, God, etc.), or further as the development of a “germ” or a “seed”, and even as the “peeling” which proceeds from the skin to the pit, etc. On the question of metaphor in the reading of Marx, and in a Marxist problematic in general, see, notably, Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (...), part 3, “Contradiction and Overdetermination”; Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (...); Althusser, “Les appareils idéologiques d’État” (...) and Jean-Joseph Goux (...). (Derrida 1982, 214)