Chapter One

Persistence of the Epistemological ‘Cut’: Louis Althusser

Introduction: Of the Self-iterating Structure

This chapter starts with the working hypothesis that ‘knowledge’ at its basic assumes a ‘self’ or an organizing principle which is structured like a self-adequation. Any production of knowledge presumes ‘subject-predication’ where the self contemplates on objects around, which are away from itself (at a distance and not part of it). In effect, the subject re-presents the objects to itself. This representation also gives the subject its very content, since, without exhausting the knowledge of the other objects separated from itself as not-self, it cannot identify with its own essence. Knowledge constitution, therefore, is structured like a representation, the basic logic of which works like a self-representation. The “irreducible intendedness” of the “subject” toward the object can also be called

\[1\] This putatively ‘Hegelian paradigm’ (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770-1831; see Wentzer in Zahavi, Heinamaa, and Ruin 2003, 223-225) pre-empts the deconstructive critique of Hegel that I take up in ‘Chapter Two’ and the related notions to be found in the Heideggerian critique of the authorising ‘subject’ also discussed in ‘Chapter Two’. But this proposition in its basic is in no way limited to the Hegelian description, and can be taken as a general argument. Thus it also prefigures the deconstructive critique of ‘propriation’ and of the proper-improper binary taken up in ‘Chapter Three’.
“consciousness”\textsuperscript{2}, and it would seem that this other-orientedness produces the being and materiality of the subject. Judith Butler writes that “One comes to “exist” by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other” (Butler 1997, 5). This flight of the self from its location (spatially and logically) is a circuit through which it tries to come back to itself\textsuperscript{3}. But in this process the self is always

\textsuperscript{2}This is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the “‘idealist’ predication of the subject” (Spivak 1987, 154). At this point, I am trying deliberately to keep clear of making any definite commitment to the concept-term ‘subject’ (therefore using a more embracing ‘self’, the problem of the concept-metaphor ‘subject’ is taken up later in this dissertation). The thesis about centralisation of this ‘organizing principle’ and its self-adequation, however, can be related to the main streams of post-Descartian philosophical thought. Retrieving this commonality is an enormous task that this dissertation finds to be outside its scope. Instead I try to pose such a commonality as it comes out in the Derridian readings of this tradition of thought. Deconstruction therefore, becomes the vantage point for this dissertation for making such a generalisation. Descartes, Derrida writes, “does not call his “I think, therefore I am” subjectivity”, and yet, “it concerns a foundation of the subject” (Derrida 2008, 90), where ‘thinking’ becomes constitutive of ‘existence’. For Kant, the self-contemplative “‘I think’” accompanies “every representation, and this is what counts, defines the relation to self of reason” (90). Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’ too, even if it does well to avoid the word ‘subject’, “nevertheless, [...] concerns a matter of a Dasein anchored in an ‘I am’ and in a \textit{Jemeinigkeit}” (90). For Derrida, this self-referential nature, which he also calls “autobiographical and autodeictic relation to the self” (34), is a common thread which shows a basic anthropocentrism that relegates the ‘animal’ to the shadowy margins of ‘human’ consciousness. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I discuss in more detail the nearness of deconstruction itself to another kind of philosophical discourse of self-adequation, namely, of the Hegelian kind. Noticeably, Derrida does not include Hegel in the above mentioned list. As is discussed later, this might be prompted by the fact that Hegel gives more importance to the materiality and trajectory of the ‘distance’ of the self from itself in its autobiographical journey, a distance which the Cartesian tradition takes almost as immediate. “Hegel, is not the most “‘Cartesian’” of the philosophers”, Derrida notes (Derrida, 35).

already working within a limit that it cannot surpass. The ‘self’ cannot come back to itself as long as it is unable to exhaust all ‘others’, by knowing them fully. The very desire of exceeding the limit of self in knowing and mastering an ‘outside’ drives the itinerary of self-knowledge. I am referring specifically to what Jacques Derrida has called a very Heideggerian definition of “a modern hegemony of the subject of representation or of the principle of reason” (Derrida 1994, 265), which puts itself to work through an “intrinsic dislocation” or “dehiscence” (267-268), only to re-present itself as the same. Even if what this move of self-adequation ignores is the fact that this work (of othering) also puts in motion a “noncoincidence with self” rather than “pure will” or “identity to self” (Derrida 1994, 265). If re-presentation (i.e., presenting oneself at a different time and place, or othering of the self) is a fundamental opening of the self to the other, then at the same time it is also about a perpetuation of self, only at a different time and space. Letting the Derridian text wait, we first flesh out the notion of a division between a systemic closure and its ‘other’ or ‘outside’ in the context of the theoretical assumptions of the general conceptual climate known as ‘post-structuralism’. 

Can this drive away from the self be studied to think a theory of ‘change’? If the host of theoretical interventions that is usually brought under the umbrella-word ‘structuralism’ try to understand how a system is constituted (around the node of the subject, even if structuralism tries to suspend such a nodal sedimentations of signs),

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stage […] is “the moment that decisively tilts all human knowledge into mediatisation through desire of the other”” (Weber 1991, 18). This is a path which needs a very differently focused reading, one which falls beyond the pale of this dissertation.

5 Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).
6 Derrida mentions this in an interview (“‘Eating Well”, or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, in Cadava, Connor and Nancy 1991) translated by Peter Connor and Avital Ronell. It is republished in Points…: Interviews, 1974-1994 (Derrida 1994) in a different translation by Peggy Kamuf. My references are to the later.
then ‘post-structuralism’ revolves around the question: how does the ‘inside’ of a system negotiate with its ‘outside’, in effect asking, ‘how change is possible?’

This basic post-structuralist move has become increasingly important for recent feminist critical theory, since central to its concern is a theorization of the itinerary of the desire of man, which tries to sublate ‘woman’ merely as a subordinate moment, trying to appropriate itself in the process. Feminism, in this register of poststructuralism tries to ask, if something prevents that itinerary to fully realize itself then how can a politics be weaved around that interruption of the male desire for self-presence. In a related but slightly different axis, feminism tries to put this theory of ‘structural closure’ and ‘change’ to work in figuring the ‘body’ as material (and therefore under the authority of the woman-subject) which is, at the same time, changeable and dynamic (making body not limited to the body of the individual). We are definitely thinking of a feminism in alliance with deconstruction

8 ‘Structuralism’ in its Saussurian version (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857-1913, considered by many, the inaugurator of ‘structuralism’) tries to be a “synchronic analysis of ‘langue’” (Young 1982, 2) with the ‘diachronic’ (the temporal axis) suspended from the analysis. It can be argued that post-structuralism, and especially Derridian deconstruction introduces ‘difference’ into this system, in effect raising the question of time and change. Derridian différance would however indicate both temporal and spatial change, see below for detailed discussion.

9 A powerful critique of this tendency is to be found in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s critique of Jean Luc-Nancy’s notion of the ‘corpus’ (Spivak, “Response to Jean-Luc Nancy” in MacCannell, and Zakarin 1994). For Nancy, ‘corpus’ is the continuity of folds of the body in space undoing individuation and “not much marked by sexual difference” (Spivak in in MacCannell, and Zakarin 1994, 48). But this “desire” to persist with an “uninterrupted inscription”, Spivak argues, makes way for an unacknowledged re-introduction of the “phallus”: “I understand what the agenda is here; [...] to think of a space] where bodies are all connected in a space of bodies. Yet [...] we know – the penis, some sort of assignment of name is surely at work...” (49). Spivak goes on to argue that it is the specificity of a gendered body, or a woman’s body that this “assignment” tries to write-over in its urge of making a pre-libido theory. Also see Judith Butler’s critique of Freud’s “conflation of the penis and the phallus” in Butler 1993, 61; and her notion of a “lesbian phallus” in ibid, 57-92. For related discussion in this dissertation, see ‘Chapter Five’ and ‘Chapter Six’.
here, also pre-empting some of our arguments to follow in the present dissertation as a whole. This dissertation aligns itself with a certain feminism attentive to materiality, which is albeit not tied to an uncritical notion of pure or originary ‘matter’. A feminism attentive to a theory of change, and also concerned with making a sustained critique of any notion of individualist exclusive bodies. Consequently, the arguments taken up in this dissertation try to critique assured subject positions\(^\text{10}\), self-same and therefore perfect fit for a writing which can be termed phallogocentric\(^\text{11}\), or of the man. According to Derrida, “the necessity of phallocentrism” is not merely a “speculative” move authorized by the psychoanalytic tradition, but rather “an enormous and old root” (Derrida quoted by Spivak in “Translator’s Preface”, in Derrida 1997, lxviii-lxix). Spivak opines that:

> It is this longing for a center, an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall. The oppositions between intelligible and sensible, soul and body seem to have lasted out “the

\(^{10}\text{Commenting on such a critique, Judith Butler notes, “Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference suggests that women can never be understood on the model of a “subject” within the conventional representational systems of Western culture. […] Women can never “be”, according to this ontology of substances” (Butler 1999, 25). But if the globe as such is re-written by the insertion of the violence of ‘colonialism’ then this representational scheme cannot have its hegemony only in the ‘western culture. Moreover, the category ‘western culture’ is not convincing. I argue (see ‘Chapter Six’) instead that this is a generality which pervades knowledge production with a force which is universalizable.}

\(^{11}\text{‘Phallogocentrism’ is the Derridian notion that unites the psychoanalytic notion of phallocentrism (centrality of the phallus in the signifying chain which structures the symbolic, where by a short circuit the male sexual organ always already takes the position of the phallus) with the concept of logocentrism (the privileging of ‘logos’ or ‘voice’ in philosophical or indeed any discourse woven around ‘presence’, see Spivak in Derrida 1997, lxviii-lxix). Butler reminds how this key-concept can be put to use in understanding any binary opposition where one term is subordinated to the other, for example in colonial discourse’s “effort to include “Other” cultures as variegated amplifications of a global phallogocentrism” (Butler 1999, 18).}
history of Western philosophy," [...] The opposition between writing and speech takes its place within this pattern. (Spivak in Derrida 1997, lxix)

Phallocentrism, therefore, has a close relationship with the production of “hierarchized oppositions” in general. Judith Butler makes this point with an excellent grasp over the contemporary feminist literature when she talks of the “always-already-masculine subject” which makes the ‘woman’ “neither the subject nor its Other, but a difference from the economy of binary opposition, itself a ruse for monologic elaboration of the masculine” (Butler 1999, 25). We work our way to such a critical feminist thought in the course of the initial chapters of this dissertation and consequently start from a consideration of what I call the ‘self-iterating structure’\(^\text{12}\). This would be done chiefly in the way of deconstruction, to which I have already referred in setting up this specific critique of phallogocentrism. Deconstruction, one might remember is also a “critique of humanism as phallogocentrism” (Spivak 1984, 24) and by the dint of that, “a general critique of western thought” (22). It is “by the way of a critique of phallogocentrism”, that “the deconstructive impulse attempts to decentre the desire for the canon” (Spivak 1987, 154). This move, which would be unpacked in the latter half of this thesis, shows how a critique of phallocentrism remains necessarily tied to the work of a deconstruction. In approaching that ‘work’, I start this initial chapter with a discussion of the figure of the ‘self-iterating structure’.

A ‘self-iterating structure’ is how any consciousness or subjectivity constitutes itself through a difference within. To broaden the reach of this concept-

\(^{12}\) This is a spin on the expression “self-interrupting structure” which I borrow from Geoffrey Bennington for whom it is a recurring theme in the Derridian corpus (see Bennington 2002, 147-51). I have rechristened it ‘self-iterating’ because if one follows the Derridian argument about iterability (of any structure), then it seems ‘interruption’ would be an insufficient word to indicate that the desire for this interruption is as much of the inside as it is of the outside, and at the same time, it is of neither totally. It might still be argued that in that case even ‘self’ and ‘structure’ can be dropped and only iterability would be enough. Indeed, and yet, the ‘work’ of ‘thought’ is also important. I have named the problematic in its initial form, ‘self-interrupting structure’ to retain that trail of work which this chapter would try to go through.
metaphor, any ‘inside’ or any ‘structure’ as such also must work according to this logic, if it has to negotiate with its ‘outside’ and account for ‘change’. If ‘subject’ is an internal node of precipitation of a larger ‘structure’, then both are formed alike, through self-iteration, one might propose. In the present chapter, I propose to follow the logic of such a structure through a delineation of the poststructuralist drift. The question we ask here is this: how can the structure go beyond itself? If it can, then what propels such a break from its previous moment? And if it cannot, then what interrupts that desire, what cuts it off from the outside? This will be done by closely reading a few chosen texts written chiefly by Louis Althusser (1918-1990), for which, I explain my reasons below.

As the story goes, sometime in the 1960’s, ‘structuralism’ differed from and took leave of itself, acquiring the difficult prefix ‘post’ in the process. This event has an uncanny presence to it, more so because apparently it ‘happened’ at a date that can be fixed, plotted in the linearity of calendar time. But how to conceptually think of this drift, this all important fold of the structure on itself? What are its salient features? Before going into the murky terrain shaped by these questions, some straightening-up of the issue at hand is in order. To begin with, as Robert Young has rightly pointed out, ‘post-structuralism’ is an “umbrella word” defining itself in terms of an apparent “temporal, spatial […] development” over structuralism (Young 1982, 1). But what if we take this fiction a bit more seriously, and formulate our problematic juxtaposing these two terms divided by the addition of a ‘post’, not in a developmental scheme but simply as the shift of a ‘difference’ of something from itself? For Drucilla Cornell, “the very definition of a system as a system implies a beyond to it” (Cornell quoted in Kirby 1997, 85). Cornell here is thinking of the systemic closure in terms of the structure of law where for her the “outside” is merely a “reflection” of the “system itself” (Kirby, 85). ‘Knowledge’ therefore, “cannot acknowledge its limitations because the limit is always within knowledge” (emphasis in original, 85). One may go along this line and surmise that a broader description of structuralism may have such an elasticity that it can appropriate anything that tries to introduce a change or a diachrony into it.

In his influential introduction to the pioneering collection Untying the Text, Robert Young criticizes the prefix ‘post’ since it reminds one of the “spatio-
temporal” (“Christian”, Young reminds) metaphor of the ‘fall’, even if, “the notion of the Fall, and its complement (the concept of origin), is precisely what post-structuralism denies” (emphasis added, Young 1982, 1). In this way, for Young, ‘post-structuralism’ is more a critique and “interrogation” (1) of structuralism, rather than a mere offshoot of it. Agreeing with Young’s point in its broad thrust, one nevertheless wonders if this ‘denial’ is as finite and final as Young sounds it to be. One might even argue instead that it is structuralism that denies the origin, by forgetting it, relegating it to a darkness which might be called the ‘unthought’. It can also be added that especially for the work of Derrida, the notion of the ‘fall’ and the conceptual move of thinking such a ‘time before’ or prepropriative in thinking ethicality has a crucial importance. Deconstruction, it can be proposed, does not ‘deny’ but divides the ‘origin’ affirming its criticality in thinking the ethical. It can also be argued that the Saussurian model of the structure does not radically oppose temporality or the origin, it simply forgets it (as ‘diachrony’) at the very first move. Even if some have tended to read that as putting the temporal under erasure, that is a typical post-structuralist reading, forcing Saussure’s hand. Structuralism therefore, by proposing to think only of a structure stretched in space whose margins are well kept by norms and regulations, stopped thinking about the origin, like a loss not accounted for. It is post-structuralism that dares to think the origin, not by denying it, as Young would have it, but by incessantly trying to circumscribe this ‘unthought’ by thought, or, in other words, by nurturing the unthought as unthought, by remembering it, knowing the perils of such a remembrance. This becomes inevitable as soon as it takes leave of the fixed unchanging structure, by thinking time (in its impossibility). It is precisely that im-possible movement of time, one notes, which makes the structure go beyond itself. If it had not, then would there be any way for the structure to come into being? Without finding this basic initial gap from itself, there could not have been any self-representation, and without self-representation, the structure as such would have remained inaccessible to thought.

For a Derridian appraisal and undoing of the notion of an ‘origin’, see for example, “The Double Session” in Derrida 1981a. For a related detailed discussion in this dissertation see ‘Chapter Two’. Also see the same chapter for the deconstructive notion of ‘anamnesis’, which is the necessary act of thinking a prepropriative in thinking self.
Our problematic therefore is one of the ‘self-representing structure’. In the next chapter, it is shown that this figure is best expressed through the deconstructive notion of ‘iterability’. The self-iterating structure also has a very phenomenological ring to it, one to which I will try to be attentive, especially in reading Derrida’s texts which explicitly refer to Martin Heidegger. I take up this theme most explicitly in the next chapter. In the present, I read some texts of Louis Althusser in thinking how the production of structure in the realm of epistemology depends on the intervention of what Althusser calls a ‘correct’ ‘cut’. This chapter also prompts us to think of ‘materiality’ along with the production of knowledge through the intervention or the ‘cut’. This materiality is a dynamic concept and different from precipitated ‘matter’, and is in line with the concept of the ‘cut’ as a persistence in time, as will be shown in this chapter and generally in the course of this dissertation. Before embarking on such an argument however, I try below to explain the choice of texts for this chapter.

Texts and Contexts

This chapter and the next read Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida together and into the thematic scene of the ‘self-iterating structure’. But before placing these formidable signatures in that frame, a few words about the logic, if any, working behind the choice of specific texts taken up in this chapter (and the next) are in order. Indeed the scholarly output of these two thinkers are immense and it is not wise to focus on a few works giving them a certain privilege, even if thematic, without a clearly delineated limiting criterion. At the same time, no principle can itself be self justificatory without any share of arbitrariness. It would be seen that whereas in the case of Louis Althusser I have mainly concentrated on texts from the collections: *For Marx*, “Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the

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14 ‘Iterability’ according to Derrida includes both difference and identity in the act of repetition, which is best exemplified in the working of ‘language’ but by no means restricted to it. See ‘Chapter Four’ for more detailed discussion.

15 For more on the choice of the specific texts by Derrida, see ‘Chapter Two’.
Scientists (1967)” (henceforth PSPS\textsuperscript{16}), and Essays in Self-Criticism, in the case of Jacques Derrida the focus is more specifically on two longer essays “White Mythology” (to be found in Margins of Philosophy) and “The Retrait of Metaphor” (from Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I\textsuperscript{17}), along with references to other texts central to the Derridian corpus like Of Grammatology and Dissemination. Can these texts written in different historical moments have any connection other than thematic?\textsuperscript{18}

One cannot ignore the telling effect that the events of 1968 had on ‘theory’ and philosophy in general and on French thought of the time in particular. This historical ‘influence’ is to be put in perspective. If one thinks of the historical moment, the ‘philosophy course for the scientists’\textsuperscript{19} was arranged in 1967 (Althusser published his lectures later in 1974) and most of the other works I consult lead to it (for example, “On the Materialist Dialectic” was published in 1965). I do not pose any crucial ‘break’ in Althusser’s oeuvre around 1967-8, and instead argue for a continuous work of revision and reformulation along with a decisive perseverance of certain problematics at least in the works of the 1960’s. Still, one cannot ignore the centrality of a text like PSPS in a certain sense. The events of 1968 which take place in Paris, by Althusser’s own confession, have direct transactions with the prevailing academic scene of which the philosophy-course is a very important part. The lectures are immediately copied and circulated well beyond Paris. But, as if in a dramatic twist, Althusser himself calls these lectures “dated” within a few years,

\textsuperscript{16} In Althusser 1990. The lecture series gets published in French in 1974 with Althusser’s ‘preface’ also written in that year. This preface looks back at the lectures and their times.
\textsuperscript{17} In Derrida 2007.
\textsuperscript{18} Likewise, one might point out that these two sets of texts are not so far apart after all. Almost all the texts of Althusser are published in the late 60’s and early 70’s, whereas the two texts of Derrida (chiefly under discussion) are published (or delivered as lecture) in the 1970’s, even if as we go along, the ‘thematic’ would overwhelm the ‘publication date’ in our choice of texts.
\textsuperscript{19} The ‘Philosophy Course for Scientists’ took place in 1967 organized by Althusser and friends, more below.
with a stress on the word\textsuperscript{20}, adding that these “initial formulations” nevertheless “inaugurated’ a turning point in our research on philosophy in general and Marxist philosophy in particular” (PSPS, 71). The “great events of 1968” (PSPS, 71), in the Althusserian imagination, as if furrow the mundane rhythm of historical time, opening up a chasm that cannot be simply gauged in clock-measure. In the rush of desiring the future, suddenly the ‘past’ loses the connection of continuity with the ‘present’. For some, the years leading up to the upheaval feel like a single ‘moment’, as Alain Badiou puts it,

There was in France a philosophical moment of the 1960s […]. Even those who have apparently tried to organize its forgetting know that. Not much more, perhaps, than those five intense years between 1962 and 1968 […]. Just a moment, yes, but it really felt like a moment of searing intensity. (Badiou 2009, 125)

Therefore, seen from one perspective, series of temporalities and textualities leading up to 1968 can be understood as contained in a single, forceful, concentrated ‘moment’. I am trying to situate Althusser in this ‘moment’ which lasted some time, but our method in accessing that stretch is textual. We read Althusser’s texts to check how he fits to that ‘moment’. On the other hand, the textuality of Althusser which we try to recover and re-construe becomes a filtering matrix through which our study may make a parenthetical comment on the historical moment (of 1968) as well. It is somewhat in this sense that Michel Foucault opines, one needs to think of a “matrix” in re-configuring a “privileged period of historical-philosophical work” (Foucault 2007, 57); where the ‘privileged period’ may well become just a sign which is activated “in order to transit through a whole series of other possible domains”(57)\textsuperscript{21}.

\textsuperscript{20} See ‘Preface’ written by Althusser to PSPS in 1974. He adds that the lectures are published “as a retrospective testimony” (PSPS, 71).

\textsuperscript{21} Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault tries to think of the ‘period’ of enlightenment (\textit{Aufklärung}): “a period without fixed dates, with multiple points of entry […] this is a privileged period of historical-philosophical work, since […] relationships between power, truth and subject appear live on the surface of visible transformations” (Foucault 2007, 57).
To come back to PSPS and its textual strategies, one notices certain stylistic peculiarities in this series of lectures. For one, Althusser is talking here to an audience (the published text retains this sense of being prepared as ‘lectures to be delivered’) chiefly comprised of ‘scientists’, specialists coming from a different kind of knowledge-system (or such is the assumption which is performed in the very articulation of these lectures) and he is teaching ‘philosophy’. To be more precise, he is telling a group of scientists how philosophy can be a different kind of knowledge-system which, by its workings and ways of production, can redefine the ‘scientific’. The series also makes repeated efforts to criticise what it calls the ‘spontaneous philosophy’, always harping on the point that, ‘philosophy’ by its very definition retains the mark of intentionality, being a chosen labour. Consequently comes the all critical point of ‘correct intervention’ in the model of Lenin\(^{22}\) to which this chapter pays extra attention. Furthermore, Althusser takes special care not to make any ‘proposition’ in these lectures. Instead, ‘theses’ are being put forth with this assumption that philosophy “does not produce knowledges but states Theses” (PSPS, 72). ‘Thesis’ means here a certain statement that is reached not only through mechanical calculations, but also through a decisive taking of sides, something which involves an arbitrary leap inspired by the imperative of a “correct position”\(^{23}\).

May be it is this conscious distancing from ‘knowledge-production’ that prompts someone like Alain Badiou to think that “the entire development of Althusser’s thought is a de-epistemologization of philosophy” (Badiou 2009, 64), an observation with which I have not agreed entirely in my argument below. Althusser does test the limits of epistemological investigation, but it is not easy to argue that he de-epistemologizes ‘philosophy’, just as Jacques Derrida does not simply dismantle ‘philosophy’, to cite a parallel\(^{24}\). As I argue in this chapter and the next, the

\(^{22}\) Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924).

\(^{23}\) For Alain Badiou, Althusser’s insistence on the dogmatic nature of philosophy is key: “The three dimensions of thesis, dogmatism and system express the profound idea that any philosophy is a declaration” (Badiou 2009, 66).

\(^{24}\) Even if that has been the accusation against deconstruction on many occasions. Derrida offers a reply in an interview recorded as part of a documentary film on him and his work:
Althusserian insistence that philosophy is to be made a ‘science’ of correct interventions is much like what in a post-deconstructive parlance one might call a theory of (deconstructive) ‘justice’

PSPS also points a move away from the famous definition of philosophy as the “theory of theoretical practice” as formulated by Althusser himself. Instead, it is argued here that Philosophy has no definite object as such of its own, and that its role is to ‘intervene’, to have “stakes” (stressed by Althusser, PSPS, 71) in setting up science or politics as practice. Precisely for this reason philosophy produces only ‘theses’ instead of producing definite ‘knowledge’. This revised definition of ‘philosophy’, for many, indicates a major revolution in Althusser’s oeuvre. Pierre Macherey is of the opinion that one can only have a “coherent” Althusser if one “cuts off Althusser in ‘67”, since “Althusser was engaged in the following years in deconstructing [his more coherent earlier] system” (Kavanagh and Lewis, 46).

Badiou also sees a break in Althusser’s work around that time, even if he recognises a long preparation leading up to this point when Althusser finds himself “at the extreme point of the pendulum’s arc” (Badiou 2009, 81). In this chapter though, I

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25 Another curious fact about PSPS is that even if a shadow of Marxism is palpable in these lectures, the proper name ‘Marx’ is largely absent. This absence of the name of Marx is not very common in the Althusserian corpus. Why does it happen in PSPS? I think this follows from the fact that in this lecture-series Althusser puts forward his own theses and does not just read texts of Marx (or of Lenin or Hegel). Pierre Macherey does not agree, “But what is this ‘Althusserian theory’?” he asks, “Althusser is a Marxist. He is not an “Althusserian”” (Kavanagh and Lewis 1982, 46). Etienne Balibar, however, adds this rider that organising a set of “interventions” under the proper name of a thinker amounts to setting up a “system”, and that Althusser himself would be very much averse to the idea of such system building (see ibid).

26 In “Reply to John Lewis” (see Althusser 1976, 68).
have tried less to come to general conclusions about the trajectory of the work of a thinker, concentrating more on the unfolding of intertwined arguments in the narrow recesses of the texts.\footnote{Having posed the signature ‘Althusser’ (or ‘Derrida’) into the schematic of received pointers of reading (like for example the supra-signature ‘structuralism’), the point is now to try and produce a patient reading of the texts without much regard for the overwhelming headings. I am following Anirban Das here who cautions of the “common allure” of obvious positions marked by these supra-headings “[one] risk of academic writing is to treat theoretical arguments as transparent and belonging to obvious ‘positions’ marked by a certain proper name (Foucault, Derrida, Marx) or a denotative common noun (structuralism, phenomenology, hermeneutics). It is as if one need not engage with the specific dynamics of the proposition, once the ‘lineage’ is properly established for all to gloss readily over” (Das 2012, 133).}

Materiality I: Philosophy’s Self Iteration and the ‘Cut’

How is the scientific invested in exactitude, what is the essential logic behind any knowledge system which claims a certain scientific rigour? There might be two basic ways of looking at the specificity of the ‘scientific’, or for that matter, any knowledge system. It might refer to a central exemplar (/equation/set of equations), to which all its constituent parts are reducible, or alternately, it may involve a general ‘pattern’, a logic of organisation and verifiability, to which all parts remain subjected without being necessarily reducible to one common building block. Science understood within the positivist paradigm only plays too well to these moves since it has an exemplary reducibility in the way of mathematical equations as well as a logic of verifiability in the way of experimentation. Both these models, extracted from science, might then be used to straightjacket any other system/discipline, in trying to make them more ‘scientific’, trapping their contingent parts into a schematic of necessity.

But what if one proposes a specificity that works not with any deterministic model but instead to retain the infinite possibilities that might inform each node of a system? In other words, a specificity that labours vigilantly at the margins, choosing
the more ‘just’ instances of each node, albeit always keeping in mind their readability in other possible registers. It is this other kind of ‘specificity’, that I read in Althusser’s conception of science, mainly in the series of lectures published as “Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists (1967)”. For Althusser, the production of the scientific, which is chiefly a work of demarcation, also paradoxically is the crux of philosophy. The tracing of this demarcation constitutes philosophy’s understanding of its own circularity and signals the effort of the philosophical in separating itself from itself. As I have already mentioned, in the Althusserian parlance, this work of self-demarcation is called both ‘philosophical’ and ‘scientific’ (mostly referring to a ‘Marxist science’). According to this proposition then, the specificity of a system lies in the way that system differs from itself or its previous moment. A different kind of essentialism coming out of a certain persistence of specificity? Not quite, for it is a labour that opens up the possibility of talking about the specificity of a knowledge system, say, ‘science’, only by not being scientistic. Indeed, it makes, as we will try to show, the ‘scientific’ little more than one of “philosophy’s little surprises”(Althusser 1990, 88).

To argue, we need to have workable definitions for each of the key concept-metaphors: ‘science’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘ideology’. But Althusser does quite a jugglery with these terms. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notices this when she points out that Althusser “tinkers with the name of science itself, re-constellates it by spinning it out ... as a convenient metaphor” (Spivak 1987, 292-293n5). Still, to be consistent with the categories one has to deal with, I attempt to schematically summarize Althusser’s main points about these related concepts, as explicated mainly in the first two lectures of the PSPS:

A. The philosophical thesis has its stake on being ‘correct’, unlike the scientific which might be ‘true’ or ‘false’(thesis 1,2). Being correct can mean several things, for example that it can be experimentally proved, whereas true/false “implies a relationship to theory” (PSPS, 74). “Correctness” belongs to the realm of practice, e.g. “a correct decision” (74). Althusser uses the French word ‘juste’, which might mean, other than ‘correct’, ‘just’, ‘proper’, ‘right’ etc. Thus thesis 1 and 2 might be said to place the philosophical at the site of ethics, justice. This inference is supported by the Althusserian example of “a just [juste] war, a correct line” (PSPS,
Philosophy therefore is not only satisfied with building internally consistent systems, it is rather about taking sides. It is not as if philosophical propositions are not theoretically regular, but “in so far as they are ‘correct’”, they remain “haunted by practice” (emphasis in original, PSPS, 75).

B. The object of philosophy is its practice of demarcation, and its insistence on always siding with the correct/the just. *This philosophy*, which works at the very margins of the philosophical (taken as its own object), a work that is always haunted by practice, is the labour of the ‘philosophical’ (also called ‘theory’), according to Althusser. The is the extracted core of philosophy, the being scientific/theoretical of philosophy.

C. The philosophical, therefore, is philosophy’s perseverance of staying within itself, subjecting itself to enquiry, working in the margins of itself. This work consists “in this drawing of a line” (PSPS, 75).

D. Philosophy is also ‘science’, but “different from other sciences” (PSPS, 75). Therefore, the philosophical can also work at the margins of the sciences, but in that case, it re-poses ‘science’ as a philosophical object separating science from ‘ideology’ in the act. As a science, the philosophical is essential and also exceptional. We might infer that it is a ‘correct’ science, or science of the ‘correct’ (or of the ‘just’). But since it can never exhaust its object, it might never be *fully correct* in finishing the work of demarcation, of intervention. Its correctness consists in its infinite intervention.

I propose that one may use the English ‘just’ or ‘justice’ interchangeably for ‘correct’ and ‘correctness’ as used by Althusser here. This also means I am indicating a convergence of the Althusserian ‘correctness’ with a certain idea of ‘deconstructive justice’. This proposition can be contested by the fact that Althusser himself, in “Lecture II” makes it clear that “correct [*juste*] is not the adjectival form of justice [*justice*]” (emphasis in original PSPS, 102). It is instead more akin to what

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28 Althusser explicitly indicates that the French ‘*juste*’ is used in the sense of ‘correct’ and not as the judicial word ‘just’ or ‘justice’. More on this use of ‘*juste*’ in PSPS below, I have mostly used the preferred word of Althusser ‘correct’. 
Lenin calls a ‘correct line’ in the matter of class struggle. A standard dictionary shows two chief meanings for the French ‘juste’: just/fair and exact/correct, whereas the related word ‘justice’ corresponds to the English word fairness, or justice in the sense of legality. Althusser’s main problem with ‘justice’ seems to be rooted in his understanding of justice in the latter sense, as only existing within a (bourgeoisie) systemic closure of ‘law’. Therefore in his effort to think ‘juste’/‘correctness’ outside the structure of law Althusser rejects the concept-metaphor ‘justice’. Here is his clear motive, “‘Judge’ pertains to ‘Justice’, an institution of the State that pronounces and applies a pre-existing Law” (Emphasis added, 103). Althusser rejects this very structure where ‘justice’ is a matter of finite calculation based on a given structure, “the rules of the established Order, the rules of its reproduction” (103). In a later text “Elements of Self-Criticism” (1974), he comes back to this same argument:

In philosophy we are dealing with tendencies which confront each other on the existing theoretical “battlefield”. These tendencies group themselves in the last instance around the antagonism between idealism and materialism, [...] in which it is the social practices (political ideological, scientific, etc.) which are at stake. Thus, in order to mark this distinction, you have to introduce a category which plays an all-important role in Marxist political practice and theoretical reflexion on philosophical theses and tendencies: the category of correctness. That is why I proposed (in my Philosophy Course for Scientists, 1967) the express use of this category. (Emphasis in original, Althusser 1976, 142-43)

It is in this text that one finds more elaboration on his critique of ‘bourgeoisie law’ as well. “Bourgeois” “legal and philosophical ideology”, he writes, bases itself on the “antithesis between Person (Liberty = Free Will = Law) and Thing” (Althusser 1976, 117). This is a very important juncture, I contend, in understanding Althusser’s specific use of ‘juste’ in PSPS and indeed in the most part of the

Althusserian oeuvre. Now we may return to our problem and ask, which word should one use when referring to ‘juste’ in English? Althusser’s own statements seem to clinch the case for the word: ‘correct’. But still, giving priority to the ‘spirit’ of Althusser’s argument over his explicit choice of word, I propose to keep the word ‘correct’ and also use the word ‘just’ interchangeably with it. Here are my justifications for using ‘just’ in spite of Althusser’s reservations. I am using ‘just’ not to mean a definite conclusion which law can reach through calculations based on a pre-established structure (and therefore ‘just’ in my use does not imply calculability of things in the weave of ‘law’). Rather, the effort is to use ‘just/justice’ as that im-possible futurity, indicative of a basic incalculability which haunts such optimism of calculability. It is opposed precisely to the kind of uncritical faith in ‘finite justice’ which Althusser rejects. I am intentionally keeping this specific word, doing a certain catachresis to make way for a deconstructive thinking of justice, even if I seek to be careful not to merge the two (Althusserian ‘correctness’ and Derridian ‘justice’). It might be worthwhile to check if what we have just proposed tallies with Althusser’s use of ‘correctness’ in his reading of Lenin since from that reading, the choice of ‘correct’ to mean ‘juste’ flows. In short, we are going to verify the following: can ‘justice’ be used interchangeably with ‘correctness’ as is used by Althusser when he explains Lenin’s idea of a “correct line”?

In “Lenin and Philosophy” (1968) Althusser writes, “[French] academic philosophy cannot tolerate Lenin (or Marx for that matter)”, chiefly because “it cannot bear the idea that philosophy might be the object of a theory, i.e. of an objective knowledge” (Althusser 2006, 17). What might be that theory of philosophy, which tries to produce an ‘objective knowledge’ about it, a meta-discourse that takes philosophy, the meta-knowledge itself as its object? If Althusser calls this a ‘science’, inaugurated by Marx then that is not without a very clear qualifier:

When I say that Marx organized a theoretical system of scientific concepts in the domain previously monopolized by philosophies of history, I am extending a metaphor which is no more than a metaphor” (Emphasis added, Althusser 2006, 21)
No more, and clearly no less. How this ‘metaphor’ which is no more or no less, works, keeping philosophy at bay? The point of contention is the difference between the philosophical and scientific concept of ‘matter’. One has to face this in going forward since ‘matter’ is also the “touchstone for a materialist philosophy” (Althusser 2006, 28). If philosophy and science are indeed distinct, then Lenin proposes that there must be a “privileged link” between the two. This link, is “represented by the materialist thesis of objectivity” (Althusser, 30). But even if the status of ‘matter’ is never secured or certain in philosophy, scientists must work with a ‘spontaneous’ belief in the “existence of objects [...] and the objectivity of their knowledge” (Althusser, 32). In other words, science cannot not have a certain faith in full presence of things and concepts. On the other hand, philosophy as “der Holzweg-der Holzwege” (an expression used by Lenin, meaning ‘the falsest of all false paths’) leads nowhere, it cannot be sure of the presence of ‘matter’. Therefore one thinks (along with Lenin) of a ‘nodal point’, which falls between philosophy and politics. In this crucial ‘node’, philosophy both retains its infinite calculation and also, as if gives in to the ethical necessity of decision. Philosophy, in Lenin’s words, must side with ‘matter’ because ultimately, the point is to “draw a dividing line in most emphatic and irrevocable manner, between a materialist and non-materialist way of thinking” (Lenin quoted in Althusser 2006, 37). For him this line separates the materialist proletarian thinkers from “philosophical idealism”, from the “sophistry of the followers of Hume and Kant” alike (Lenin quoted in Althusser, 37). Note that Lenin is not arguing for what we might identify as uncontaminated full presence of things or ‘pure materiality’. He in fact points out that “absolute” knowledge is impossible, but rather knowledge can be “sufficiently definite” to demark a separate space for idealism “ruthlessly” (Althusser, 37). It seems possible, in the spirit of our general thematic in this chapter, to extend this argument a bit further and think of this ‘nodal point’ as that site which gives body to the aporia of decision. The aporia that stays between uncertainty of matter and the political necessity of drawing a line to decide on a separate space for materialism

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30 Can this be compared to the ‘gap’ Ernesto Laclau talks about which falls between the determination of the structure and the “creative” “jump” of decision? See ‘Chapter Four’ for detailed discussion (see also Laclau in Mouffe 1995, 50-52).
For Alain Badiou, this theoretical move which Althusser makes through Lenin has an important historical significance. According to him, this was Althusser’s way of clearing a space for affirmative political intervention in the context of the “post-Stalinist [...] crisis within revolutionary politics” and that this “strategic orientation” gravitated toward the “very concept of philosophy” as Althusser tried to organize Marx’s philosophy around a concept of necessary intervention (Badiou 2009, 56). It is this central idea of a necessity to think ‘intervention’ that prompts Althusser to think the validity of intervention, its correctness. But this validity is in turn based on the incalculable ‘correctness’ of the analytic of class-struggle. Does this subject the Althusserian ‘correctness’ to yet another law, to the doctrine of a Leninist view of class-struggle? It does, and yet there is more to it. By putting the concept of ‘correct intervention’ beyond the pale of the law-like structures which depend solely on calculability in the first place, Althusser nonetheless opens up an argument for the ethical, I propose. One must note here that the analytic of ‘class’ which takes the place of (as if) the ‘last instance’, is not merely a political intervention from above, but an intervention of a specific epistemological standpoint into the ontological. Laclau and Mouffe recognize this when they note that the “centrality” accorded to the ‘working class’ by the “Leninist tradition” within Marxism is “not a practical but an ontological centrality, which is, at the same time, the seat of an epistemological privilege: as the ‘universal’ class, the proletariat – or rather its party – is the depository of science” (emphasis in original, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 56-57). The Leninist suturing of the more open ‘correctness’ is not just another pragmatic solution contingent on the philosophical impasse, instead it tries to produce an “ontologically privileged agent” (emphasis in original, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 65). Not just an agent of ‘action’, but an agent more inclined toward a certain ‘doing’\(^{31}\). We might think the ‘agent of action’ as that position of the subject which tries to pose it as a pragmatic quick-fix to any double-bind which apparently stutters action. On the contrary, the ‘agent of doing’ would stay with the impasse trying to bridge the gap, but never quite being able to suture the aporia fully, being uncertain of its origin or telos and therefore aware of the contingency of a suturing justice in the present. This distinction

\(^{31}\) For the difference between doing and action see Derrida 1994a, also see ‘Chapter Four’.
between an action and a doing in thinking the agent or subject is taken up in greater detail later in this dissertation.

Next chapter endeavours to take up this argument as well as the possibility of thinking such a division in terms of Derridian deconstruction. But for now a more detailed discussion of the Althusserian notion of the correct intervention is in order. A good place to start is Althusser’s own example of this intervention, put forth in the ‘lecture II’ of the PSPS.

Intervention as Re-Presentation

The ‘Philosophy Course for Scientists’ took place in 1967 before the winter fell in Paris; Althusser and his other “friends” were involved. When later his inauguratory lectures are published, Althusser declares that the ‘experiment’ of theirs is in some ways connected to the “event of 1968” (PSPS, 71). In his “Preface” to the publication he also underlines that the ‘Philosophy Course’ marked a “turning point” in the research of the group on philosophy, Marxist philosophy to be particular, and yet, at the same breath he wants his readers to read the text as a “dated work”, as a work limited and unfinished in nature (emphasis in original, PSPS, 71). In no way, he takes the theses propounded in PSPS back, but only points out that they are to be found here in a “schematic” form, needing much more “work” (PSPS, 72). With these initial settings of the stage, let us attempt to understand the nature of the Althusserian ‘philosophical intervention’, that is, it’s being scientific, a bit more closely.

“Philosophy intervenes in a certain reality: ‘theory’”, and produces a “result”, Althusser tells his audience comprising of mostly scientists (PSPS, 106).

32 “This experiment, inaugurated by the present exposition and continued by the interventions of Pierre Macherey, Étienne Balibar, François Regnault, Michel Pêcheux, Michel Fichant and Alain Badiou, was to last up to the eve of the great events of 1968” (PSPS, 71). The course took place during Oct-Nov.

33 What is interesting is that these lectures are published as they were delivered, it has that feeling of theoretical practice being done live.
On the left hand side ("the reality in which this intervention takes place") we thus have a mishmash of things “sciences + theoretical ideologies + philosophy”, and on the right, a distinction, “between the scientific and the ideological” (PSPS, 106). One may reconstruct Althusser’s formulation in the following way:

[the work of philosophy]

Sciences + Theoretical ideologies + Philosophy ============== the Scientific
and the Ideological as distinct

Apparently nothing moves, nothing is changed. Althusser underlines this very riddle. “Note the paradox!”, says he, the two sides are “virtually the same”, and so, “are we not repeating in the result what we already have in the reality?” (emphasis in original, PSPS, 107). Althusser notes that “the enigma of philosophy is contained in the difference between the reality in which it intervenes [...] and the result that its intervention produces” (107). Between the ‘reality’ and the ‘result’ (which is apparently nothing more than a distinction made in that reality) remains the work of philosophy. Something gets uncovered in the apparent repetition of the same. Philosophy does intervene, but by only re-presenting:

Is the result produced by the philosophical intervention really distinguished from the reality in which it intervenes, if it is already inscribed in that reality? In other words, does not the whole of philosophy consist simply in repeating, in the same words, what is already inscribed in reality? (PSPS, 107)

Philosophy’s work, Althusser seems to be saying, consists in re-inscribing the real, in the very production of it. Nevertheless he stresses the point that what one witnesses here is nothing but a simple separation of things, in the way of translation (translating the real as a problem internal to the ‘philosophical’). But can it be only translation? ‘Thesis 21’ says: “philosophy does not substitute itself for science: it intervenes, in order to clear a path, to open the space in which a correct line may then be drawn” (PSPS, 88). Therefore we can conclude that it is not simply translation in the sense of word for word substitution. Rather, this work of

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34 See PSPS, 106-107.
translation *cuts* open a way, intervenes in opening a space where a certain ‘correctness’ might be tasted, a space where justice might take place. In the above operation, that ‘cut’ consists in the separation of the scientific from the ideological. What kind of ‘cut’ is this? It is here that I want to make use of the Althusserian concept-metaphor ‘cut’, most noted as figuring in the notion of the ‘epistemological cut’ (commonly referred in English as the ‘epistemological break’). I try below a closer examination of this specific kind of Althusserian (epistemological) intervention, concentrating most on the metaphor of the ‘cut’ itself.

**Cut (coupure) or Break (rupture)?**

How does Althusser’s notion of the ‘epistemological break’ stand in relation to that of Gaston Bachelard? Etienne Balibar believes that there are fundamental differences between the two. So much so that one might wonder if the conflation of them might not indicate “a typical case of ‘false recognition’ in the Freudian sense of the term” (Balibar 1978, 208). He also points out that Bachelard himself had hardly ever used the term. Indeed, even for Georges Canguilhem, the central Bachelardian category is “epistemological *obstacle*” (emphasis added, quoted in Balibar 1978), which he uses against the “myths of empiricism”, “cult of legends”, and a history mapped in “the memory of heroes” (Bachelard 1989, 192). Against this, Bachelard’s call is for a more nuanced history of (scientific) values. Few punches is being held back, one reads Bachelard stating his prescription quite clearly, his recommended history would be: “the history of sciences considered in the values of progress and in the resistances of epistemological obstacles”35 (Bachelard 1989, 192). As will be clear, this is far from the Althusserian version of the ‘break’. Balibar is of the same opinion:

> It seems to me that in reality it is instead an original concept which Althusser introduced between 1960 and 1965, a concept which, it is true, owes ‘something’ to Bachelard and which does indeed rest on certain

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35 It’s an open question if Bachelard is just re-inscribing progress albeit with breaks in the form of epistemological obstacles and the concept of value.
common philosophical presuppositions but which in fact has a quite other
object and opens a quite other field of investigation. [...] What are constantly
present in Bachelard are the idea and the word ‘breaking’ and ‘rupture’
alternating in a little regulated way with the idea and word ‘revolution’,
‘clean separation’, ‘mutation’, ‘deep discontinuity’, indeed ‘recasting of
knowledge’, and finally ‘division’ in the scientific mind. (Balibar 1978, 208)

But does Althusser himself not try to underline this difference? In “Elements of
Self-Criticism”, he recalls his debt to Bachelard:

Every recognized science not only has emerged from its own prehistory, but
continues endlessly to do so [...] by rejecting what it considers to be error,
according to the process which Bachelard called “the epistemological break
[rupture]”. (original French kept in translation by Grahame Lock, Althusser
1976, 114)

And then quickly goes on to distance his own use, “I owe this idea to him, but to
give it (to use a metaphor) the sharpest possible cutting-edge, I called it the
“epistemological break [coupure ]”” (Althusser 1976, 114). Note he uses a very
different word ‘coupure’ to distinctly mark his departure from Bachelard who uses
‘rupture’, even if both can be translated to English as: ‘break’. “To use a metaphor”,
writes Althusser, what irony. Althusser explains his spin on the Bachelardian
metaphor through yet another metaphor. He gives it a “cutting-edge”, and “sharpest
possible” too. But how is the concept-metaphor ‘cut’ [coupure]36 different from the
‘break’ [rupture]?

The (Bachelardian) metaphor of ‘break’ tells of a coming into being, of a
new beginning, breaking forth from the old, whereas the (Althusserian) ‘cut’
demarcates, separates. The work of the cut demands infinite vigilance. A labour
always given to the separation between what is correct (juste) and what is not. That
is the only separation it knows, even passing over, interestingly, the “bourgeoisie

36 I propose to use ‘Epistemological cut’ to point at the Althusserian metaphor henceforth.
antithesis between Person (Liberty = Free Will = Law) and Thing” (emphasis in original, Althusser 1976, 117). Althusser is not convinced by the concept of a certain point where one can locate a decisive break in its fullness. For him, the ‘break’ tends to a fullness but never *is* full. Precisely for that reason the break has a being *in time*, i.e. its being is contingent upon its always unfinished nature. Unfolding in time, the Althusserian ‘cut’ has a memory, it can be read in several registers. On the other hand, a full, decisive break limits one to a single register (in which the break stands valid). And yet, the ‘cut’ also prompts one, by its very overdetermined character, to chose, to decide, which is nothing less than the very essence of the philosophical, a matter of “taking sides” faced with an infinite number of determinations. The metaphor of the ‘cut’ also carries the other meaning of ‘opening a path’. A road leading not to an ‘outside’ but which as if touches barely the outside of the object (or the moment) left behind, never totally breaking free, never finitely disjuncted. Rather, it walks its own trail, stays with its own work, relentlessly trying to circumvent itself, making itself meditate on its own ‘past’, previous moments. The cut demarcates, but it does ‘bleed’ as well (to put our own spin on the Althusserian metaphor). This bleeding performs two things, not only that it never lets the cut vanish, be forgotten, keeping it as an open wound, but also overflows the cut, blurring the mark of the division itself. What remains fore-grounded, flowing over and above the two sides of the division, is the cut itself. It is nearly in this sense (but with a different argument) that Balibar tries to show Althusser’s ‘cut’ positing itself not in terms of “a before and an after”, but as an instant of “absolute present” (emphasis in original, Balibar 1978, 210). In the next section I flesh out the

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37 That would be a (bourgeois) legal separation for Althusser and therefore not an intervention of the correct/just. And it is in this sense that Marxism is said to have a “scientific core” (See, Althusser 1976, 117).

38 See “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (Althusser 1969, 87-128). For a short note on the crucial Althusserian concept of ‘Overdetermination’ see the entry “OVERDETERMINATION” included in the “Glossary” prepared by Ben Brewster in Althusser 1969, 252-3; also see Althusser’s comments in p. 257. It might be added that this note does not make clear the exact debt that this concept-metaphor owes to Freud. Althusser’s letter apparently overemphasizes this link.

39 Macherey 2009, 22.
Althusserian ‘cut’ in its Marxian inheritance, that is to say, in its ‘scientific’ or ‘theoretical’ specificity. But before going into that, I want to examine how Althusser comes to this crucial concept specifically in the context of the ‘Marxian moment’.

Materiality II: Authorial Signature, Necessity, Event

How does Karl Marx fit in to the historical givenness of his nineteenth century existence? In short, how does the Marxian break fit into the historical necessities into which Marx is born. One remembers the (in-)famous Foucauldian quip in *The Order of Things* that “Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else” (Foucault 1970, 262). But Foucault’s erstwhile teacher’s take is markedly dissimilar.

Already in his paradigmatic introduction to the collection of essays *For Marx* (1965), published in the year before the first French edition of *The Order of Things* (1966) came out, Althusser writes of an “unequivocal epistemological break in Marx’s work” and affirms that Marx “simultaneously” both broke from the existing philosophical web and “established” a “new philosophy” in the form of dialectical materialism (Althusser 1969, 33). In the ensuing argument, Althusser sets himself the task of reconstituting the multi-layered proper name that is ‘Marx’ as a textuality, as an object to be re-presented in order to be studied. He goes about his work with the double move of both studying Marx’s own method of setting up his object, and setting up the textuality of Marx through that very method. Surely, treating Marx as a totally unexpected ‘event’ without any attachment to the necessity of his time is not an option, but unlike Foucault, Althusser does not give in totally to the argument of historical necessity. But then, how to keep to both ends? Althusser first proposes to examine how a text stands generally apropos its time. He argues

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40 Foucault does note this difference and connects it to the idea of the epistemological break in an interview given at the very mix of that tumultuous time, in 1967. Talking about the “kinship” between his and Althusser’s work, he points out that, “there does remain an obvious difference”. Whereas Althusser “employs the phrase “epistemological break” in connection with Marx”, for Foucault, “Marx does not represent an epistemological break” (Foucault 1994, 281).
that a historically produced text works through a “motor principle” which may lie “outside” the governing ideological weave of the time, in the sense of being a part of it but not on the surface. This ‘outside’ therefore, interestingly is also that which “underlies” the text, “its author as a concrete individual and the actual history” (Althusser 1969, 63). Is Althusser talking about some kind of ‘real’, staying below the ideological-textual representations? I contend that the answer to this question cannot be given in a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The stress Althusser puts on words like “actuality” or “concreteness” should not deter us from recognizing that a certain ‘depth model’ is being proposed here. Because crucially, for Althusser, the ‘outside’ is not simply unrelated to a text-as-ideologically-produced, but this ‘outside’ actually stays beneath the text, subjects it to its law. This relationship has a specific character for Althusser in that it is not the “truth of” the process which underlies the text, but the “truth for” it (63). Palpably, we are quite far from a simple model of ideology, as well as from what Althusser himself has called, just a moment before, ‘concrete’ ‘actuality’ of history. The underlying principle is not simply a truer version of the phenomenon that shows itself, but instead it is that which authorises the phenomenon that one accesses at the surface, which validates the being of the text that is read. The question then comes of deciding how much of the ‘being’ (of the text of Marx) is before this ‘ground’ as law, in the sense of being subjected to its necessity and in the sense of being ‘prior’, being that event which places itself before any structural imperative. Or, to put it otherwise, how to account for the ‘event’ that is Marx, not ignoring the underlying historico-ideological structure that shapes it, produces it as an event? What is that surplus which is specific for Marx’s oeuvre, eluding its own ground? Althusser’s next move is scintillating, he does not only put the signature of the author under erasure, making it a tracing of the “presence” of his “published thoughts”, he also does the same to “concrete history”, putting full presence on trial at both ends of the spectrum, individual and structural:

As the author effaces himself in the presence of his published thoughts, reducing himself to their rigour, so concrete history effaces itself in the presence of its ideological themes, reducing itself to their system. This double absence will also have to be put to the test. (Emphasis added, Althusser 1969, 64)
What to make of this strange category ‘thought’, on which Althusser harps repeatedly in writing-over the presence of the “concrete individual” as author of texts? It is this thought that comes to the reader as “living”, instead of the living author himself, Althusser reminds, talking specifically about Marx but no doubt also making a general argument about the genesis of an authorial signature. These transmissions work through a “double absence”, not only of the “concrete individual”, but also of “concrete history” (Althusser, 63-64). To put this ‘double absence’ to test, Althusser replaces the ‘concrete individual’ with what he calls one “single thought” and likewise substitutes ‘concrete history’ with the “thematic system of an ideological field” (64). The problem now stands as the following: how does a single thought spring forth from a given field of ideology which otherwise re-produces the same? Everything “is in play”, Althusser writes, “between the rigour of a single thought and the thematic system of an ideological field” (64). By the expression ‘in play’ here, one may read him to mean everything is at stake, between these two absences, these two eternal oppositions, on the one hand a single thought (or one may say, an event) and on the other a system (or a given structure) from which it separates itself. In an apparently contradictory way Althusser is positing an interminable work that is also a certain genesis or beginning. A beginning that never ends. This is the impossible scene that he wants to propose in accounting for the coming of a new event (‘Marx’ the signature) out of the necessity of a structural given:

Their relation is this beginning and this beginning has no end. (Althusser 1969, 64)

Along with a continuity, this movement also presupposes a break, the possibility of the event coming prior to the laws of the structure, as I have mentioned above. In fact it might be argued that it is that very extra bit that propels its unending play, making history possible through change. How to think of that supplement? Althusser seems to delineate that possibility the following way. The signature of Marx separates itself, or marks its own difference from the given problematic of the ‘ideological field’ through a “decision as to its author's specific difference”, a decision which the “the ideological field allows” (Althusser 1969, 70). And in this decision “new meaning” emerges. We might add that what emerges is
also a signature, a newly graphed proper name which is capable of representing its
difference. This coming of the name as decision, Althusser stresses, is an extremely
complex process, always “haunted by real history” (70). We cannot afford to
mistake the adjective ‘real’ here for what is already put under erasure as ‘concrete’.
It is used in a very different sense by Althusser, and I am inclined to read it rather as
something akin to the ‘Lacanian real’ that can be said to haunt every proper name
that tries to separate itself as ‘event’, or tries to disentangle itself from the
patronymic.41

The ‘real’ of history remains inaccessible, but not its reconstituted presence.
Once the rigour of each ‘single thought’ is worked out and each nodal point re-
plotted, one gets access to the re-presented itinerary of a proper name, Marx. This is
the birth of the signature: Marx, as if reconstructed in the scientist’s laboratory. This
is rather a curious birth that Althusser provides Marx with, a Marx reborn ‘in
theory’, ‘concrete in thought’, to borrow from Marx’s own ‘Grundrisse’42. It is like
providing the signature of Marx with a life, or, to be more precise, injecting the
structure of necessity with the pure difference of a signature. Once the “reversals
and mutations” of this life is “scanned” (Althusser stresses the word, Althusser, 71)
at ‘nodal points’, “there is perhaps no greater joy than to be able to witness in an
emerging life [...] the birth of necessity” (71). This ‘emerging’ is delineated as a
pure process, since it has no myth of either origin or telos. This shows what I have
mentioned before, that the ‘emerging’ is not conceived by Althusser as an origin
fully present. Instead, much like the Nietzschean43 genealogy it is a beginning of

41 I will show below how Althusser himself conceived of his fiddling with the slippery term
‘real’, as a close brush with a certain positivism. An autocritique rare in the recent
‘postmodern’ use of the (chiefly Lacanian) concept ‘real’. I call this ‘Lacanian’ also in view
of the fact that Althusser himself was a close reader of Lacan and he was not shy of
borrowing concept-metaphors from psychoanalysis, often using them in a catechistic way.
42 See below.
43 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).
difference in continuum, which retains a thorough suspicion of any myth of the origin as well as deconstructs any teleology:\footnote{44}{I am intentionally stressing the proximity of Althusser’s thought to what is commonly known as post-modern interpretation of Nietzsche. See especially “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” by Michel Foucault in Foucault, Michel 1994, 369-91. It can also be compared with Derrida’s notion of ‘anamnesis’ or the invention of a memory (of beginning), see Derrida, Jacques, Monolingualism of the Other (Derrida 1998, especially 19, 29) among other texts.}

once the Gods of Origins and Goals have been dethroned, the birth of necessity. (Althusser 1969, 71)

This reads like a cryptic expression, a contradiction: ‘birth of necessity’. It is commonsensical to think of a ‘birth’ as contingent or a sudden coming into being. But what if ‘necessity’ itself is born. Contingency and necessity coincide in this scheme. A few critical points are to be noted here:

A. Here we have a definite critique of the Hegelian Aufhebung (sublation) by Althusser. He is proposing a rupture as a “radical discontinuity” (emphasis in original) and not as the Hegelian superseding of the previous term “the negation-which-contains-in-itself-the-term-negated” (Althusser 1969, 78n40). But then, how is the ‘break’ connected to its ‘past’ within this non-dialectic scheme? Like the Hegelian move, Althusser’s ‘break’ also contains a certain “understanding” of the former term in the very move away from it, but unlike Aufhebung it has no claim of retaining “its truth” (Althusser, 78n40). It can be contested that no attachment with the previous term can totally be free of the Hegelian hangover. Still this intentional distancing of Hegel made in a footnote is of immense importance if we consider that in the same breath Althusser reminds, “science can by no criteria be regarded as the truth of ideology in the Hegelian sense” (78n40)\footnote{45}{This confirms our earlier analysis of the concept-metaphors ‘science’ and ‘ideology’ as used by Althusser.}. We are upstream from a simple depth-model of ideology-critique here, or an easy base-superstructure model of social truth. This, I think, is the epistemological move per se, which only claims to know (understand), and not to find any truth. Althusser therefore performs a break
from Hegel’s \textit{Aufhebung} in a double gesture, not retaining it (its truth) and still retaining a claim of understanding it.

B. If one follows Althusser’s argument, especially in “On the Materialist Dialectic”, it becomes apparent that for Althusser the specific production of a theory is not simply its ‘conclusion’ or the end-product of a thought, but the ‘work of thinking’ itself. To be precise, the very practice of theory is its \textit{production}. Marx encountered his problematic, Althusser opines, in the form of a “difficulty signalled by Marxian practice”, and its “solution” at the same time is contained in that very practice (Althusser 1969, 165). The ‘moment’ of production as transformation is “neither the raw material nor the product”, but the practice itself “in the narrow sense” (166). Therefore the crucial ‘moment’ of transformative thought, is not an instant of presence, but a spacing, a duration of work: “the moment of the labour of transformation itself, which sets to work” (Althusser 1969, 24). This is why for Althusser ‘theory can become “a \textit{specific form of practice}” (emphasis in original, 167), belonging to social practices as a whole.

C. As I have already argued, Althusser critically sharpens the notion of the ‘break’ and problematizes the possibility of an ‘unequivocal’ break, a total and radical separation of science from ideology. Yet, he does not lose sight of the fact that his tinkering with the ‘real’ of history, or with ‘science’ as opposed to ideology takes him very close to a certain ‘positivism’. Especially his notion of a ‘retreat’ with which he replaces the metaphor of ‘inversion’ famously used by Engels in understanding Marx’s relationship to Hegel. Althusser introduces the concept in “‘On the Young Marx’: Theoretical Questions” published originally in 1961. Here he asserts that being born into a milieu charged with German idealism with Hegel in its fore, Marx makes a “retreat” to “touch real history” (76). This use of the term ‘retreat’ is self-confessedly “deliberate”, to move away from the Hegelian

\footnote{Thinking this moment of the labour as the moment of decision or of the subject would reduce the spacing involved in any work into the bare minimum of an event. I would propose that the crux of the matter would not contain in executing the (im-)possible decision involved in setting to work, or ceasing to work, but in thinking the spacing as the experience of calculation.}

\footnote{Included in \textit{For Marx} (Althusser 1969).}
Aufhebung, which Althusser thinks is “continuous” (77). Thus the Marxian “‘supersession’ of Hegel was not at all an ‘Aufhebung’ in the Hegelian sense, [...], it was a supersession of illusion towards its truth” (77). A few pages later, it is reduced to Marx’s search for an “origin”, the restoration of a “stolen reality” (79). Two years on, and already in “On the Materialist Dialectic” (1963) Althusser reviews his own position severely, again in a footnote, calling his own use of the term ‘retreat’, ideological:

In an article on the Young Marx in which I even used certain notions that remained ideological, [...] For example, the concept of a ‘retreat’ which acted as a reply to Hegel’s ‘supersession’ and was intended to illustrate Marx’s effort to get out of ideology [...] even used polemically, this concept of a ‘retreat’, by suggesting a return to the ‘real’, to the ‘concrete’ anterior to ideology, came within a handsbreadth of ‘positivism’. (Emphasis in original, Althusser 1969, 187)

Therefore, we can note in the parenthesis, that even if for Althusser the preferred mode of writing is ‘self-criticism’ he has some consistency about it, at least all through the sixties and beyond. The auto-critique does not start suddenly, as some seem to think, after the moment of 1968, but a very important moment in the constant review and revision is reached when Althusser publishes PSPS. The problem of thinking about the ‘cut’ of an event away from its necessary ideological situation however remains. In the next section I try find an answer through a reading of the second part of Reading Capital (“The Object of Capital”) and the essay “On the Materialist Dialectic”.

Materiality III: The Epistemological ‘Cut’

To single out an event, or in other words, to disentangle an instant from the world and give it a certain ‘eventuality’ is always a choice shot with arbitrariness. The least that can be said about this operation is that it can never produce a moment of essence. As Althusser puts it, this “amounts to saying that if we cannot make an ‘essential section’ in history” (Althusser 1970, 106), it only goes to show that each
instant can be plotted in an infinite number of registers. It is however only by assuming a propositional unity of the whole around a chosen, privileged notion of ‘time’ can one really write a narrative of the “so-called backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals and unevennesses of development” which in actuality, “co-exist in the structure of the real historical present: the present of the conjuncture” (emphasis in original, 106). Without resorting to an essentialised concept of “a single ideological base time” then, it is not possible to ‘measure’ (Althusser’s word) either ‘proper’ or ‘under’ development (105-106). A temporal node, plotted in this method, has only a specific claim, of being the “present of the conjuncture” (106). Precisely for this reason, Althusser is opposed to the structuralist synchronic section, for it mistakes the ‘present of the conjuncture’ for an essential section assuming as if a “‘spiritual’ unity” or cohesiveness in a social totality that can only be incalculably determined. This ‘spiritual’ totality assumes the reducibility of the whole to each of its constituent part and vice versa. The synchronic section presents one with a clean-cut, a totality where all elements constituting the ‘section’ are present:

it is clear that the synchrony/diachrony opposition is the site of a misconception, since to take it for a knowledge would be to remain in an epistemological vacuum, i.e. - ideology abhorring a vacuum - in an ideological fullness, precisely in the fullness of the ideological conception of a history whose time is continuous-homogeneous/self-contemporaneous. (Althusser 1970, 107)

But still this very operation of singling out and abstracting of a section of ‘time’ has a crucial use for Althusser. When one takes away the claim of essence from the

48 Althusser 1970, 94.
49 Althusser is attacking a Hegelian model here “It is clear that it is the specific structure of the social totality which allows this essential section for this section is only possible because of the peculiar nature of the unity of this totality, a ‘spiritual’ unity, if we can express in this way the type of unity possessed by an expressive totality, i.e., a totality all of whose parts are so many ‘total parts’, each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself” (Althusser 1970, 106).
synchronic cut, and along with it throws away the “ideological concept of history”, what “remains” is the very theoretical gesture of the ‘cut’ itself (105). Althusser throws away ideology, does the work of translation and gets the precipitation, the remainder of synchrony:

What the synchrony aims at […] concerns a different type of presence, and the presence of a different object: not the temporal presence of the concrete object, not the historical time of the historical presence of the historical object, but the presence (or the ‘time’) of the object of knowledge of the theoretical analysis itself, the presence of knowledge. (Emphasis in original, Althusser 1970, 107)

What exactly is this knowledge? Before asking this question, we might try to think what Althusser means here by “temporal presence of a concrete object”. An object gets its determinate unity from a successive and consistent coming into being along the axis of linear time. It lingers, it boasts of a memory of succession, so much so that this lingering, this ‘reappearing as the same’ takes the place of presence as such. Immanuel Kant\(^{50}\), one might recount, crucially proposed the “unity of a self as opposed to a mere sequence of representations”\(^{51}\) which led to his “transcendental unity of apperception”\(^{52}\). But if one takes one single instant, one unit or ‘point’ abstracted out of this ‘line’ along which the object leaves a trail, would that still be just a moment in the biography of that object, a ‘still’ of its indubitable ‘taking place’, or something else? To put it differently, if one gets to the measure (i.e. one single unit in abstraction) of an object along the line of its temporal presence, does one get something radically different from the unified ‘present’ object? What one

\(^{50}\) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

\(^{51}\) See Ewing 1938, 72.

\(^{52}\) Kant gives more than one proof of a “synthetic unity of a manifold” in time. For example he writes “When, to take another example, I perceive the freezing of water, I apprehend two states, fluidity and solidity, and these as standing to one another in a relation of time. But in time, which I place at the basis of the appearance [in so far] as [it is] inner intuition, I necessarily represent to myself synthetic unity of the manifold, without which that relation of time could not be given in an intuition as being determined in respect of time-sequence” (emphasis in original, See Kant 1918, 172).
encounters in this process, if we follow Althusser, is the presence of not the material object, but the ‘knowledge’ of the object. This ‘knowledge’ is also “the presence (or the ‘time’) of the object of knowledge of the theoretical analysis itself”, or “the presence of knowledge” (emphasis in original, 107). So the knowledge of the object, in its epistemological measure is also the measure of its presence (in time) or even a measure of the time of its being (time pregnant with being), time embodied.

The next step is more radical. Althusser proposes that this measure of the embodied time can also be taken as an unit of time as such, time with or without the burden of a lingering object, for (and one is to read carefully here) even if this singular ‘point’ of time is cut only from an ideological and limited notion of time, by the dint of being a point, stripped of its ideological claim of totality, it can now be (re-)plotted in any register of time, in infinite number of axes. For Althusser, the abstracted point, albeit a temporal section, retains just the act of abstraction, “precisely this epistemological operation itself, once it has been stripped of its ideological reference” (Althusser 1970, 107). The remainder in its turn is cut, as well.

But what might happen if one is to go back and reconstruct the diachronic axis by plotting these abstracted epistemological units, extracted from the real? The whole diachronic section might get re-formed, for Althusser has disturbed the very notion of presence itself, cutting it to size, extracting its unites stripped of their ideological burdens. The reconstruction of ‘matter’ would now depend on the choice of the one who reconstructs. One is consequently faced with the crucial question of ‘correctness’ (which I have proposed to use interchangeably with ‘justice’). The question can also be formulated thus: what kind of justice does a reconstituted matter/presence call for? This is a problematic that keeps on returning. Althusser writes:

Once synchrony has been correctly located, diachrony loses its ‘concrete’ sense and nothing is left of it either but its epistemological use, on condition that it undergoes a theoretical conversion and is considered in its true sense as a category not of the concrete but of knowing. Diachrony is then merely the false name for the process. (Althusser 1970, 109)
The second coming of the diachronic then, posits a different kind of matter/presence, or, to use the Althusserian parlance, a different ‘concrete’: “thought-concrete”\textsuperscript{53}. Thus far, we have followed three steps to reach the thought-concrete:

I. Separation and rejection of the ideological from the synchronic essential section to extract the remainder, that which is the very measure/unit of epistemological production.

II. The re-plotting of this ‘measure’ in re-constructing the diachronic, to get back to the real (re-)built with ‘correct’ epistemological building blocks.

III. Getting to the resultant of this operation, a new object of knowledge:

   it is precisely the effect of this transformation, which is the same thing as the history of knowledge, that it produces a new knowledge (a new object of knowledge) which still concerns the real object, knowledge of which is deepened precisely by this reorganization of the object of knowledge.

   (Althusser 1970, 156)

This is also exactly the operation that Althusser reads in the Marxian method. In the “1857 Introduction” (published as a part of the Grundrisse) Marx writes:

   The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. (Emphasis added, Marx 1973, 101)

The “concrete by the way of thought” or the ‘thought-concrete’ comes into being only by evaporating the “first path”. This evaporation leaves only an “abstract determination” in its trail (the Althusserian abstract remainder) which in turn

\textsuperscript{53} See below.
becomes the cobble-stone for the ‘second path’(thought-concrete). Things seem to fit. Still, just to be sure, one might now test this whole model against the related Althusserian notion of the ‘Generalities’\textsuperscript{54}. In that scheme, the Marxian ‘second path’ is understood as ‘Generalities III’ produced from ‘Generality I’ only through the crucial intervention of the Marxist philosophy (aka ‘theory’) at the level of theoretical production (Generality II), without which philosophy remains mere interpretation. Althusser is of the opinion that science “never works” on “pure immediacy and singularity”, but instead on existing concepts (Althusser 1969, 184).

Within the ‘Generalities’ model, science’s work and production consists in transforming ‘Generality I’ to ‘Generalities III’ (Althusser, 185). Note again that the work of the ‘theoretical’ (or of the ‘Marxist science’) is also a production in this scheme, and the productions go on at the level of ‘Generality II’. The ‘thought-concrete’ is only abstraction twice over (GI+GII) if one misses the intervention at the level of GII. This shifting of the focus from ‘representation’ to the ‘production’ of the materiality consisting in the step of re-presentation, according to Althusser, constitutes one of the salient features of the ‘Marxist epistemological cut’.

But in all these operations, as Althusser affirms with Marx\textsuperscript{55}, the real object (‘real-concrete’) stays always outside of any investigation or investigating consciousness, outside of the ‘head’ that is. The “Hegelian confusion” consists in taking thought to be the motor of the real-concrete, the latter as simply the congealment of the former. Marx, instead, underlines the very construed nature of the only variety of ‘concrete’ that one might work with (thought-concrete) radically different from and not reducible to the real-concrete.

This confusion, which in Hegel takes the form of an absolute idealism of history, is in principle simply a variant of the confusion which characterizes the problematic of empiricism. Against this confusion, Marx defends the distinction between the real object (the real-concrete the real totality, which ‘survives in its independence, after as before, outside the head (Kopf)’ [...] and the object of knowledge, a product of the thought which produces it in

\textsuperscript{54} See “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in Althusser 1969.

\textsuperscript{55} We revert back to Reading Capital (Althusser, 1970)
itself as a thought-concrete (*Gedankenkonkretum*) [...] absolutely distinct from the real-object, the real-concrete [...]. (Emphasis in original, Althusser 1970, 41)

Interestingly, in the German original Marx makes a terminological distinction to distance himself from Hegel. He calls the Hegelian real-concrete ‘*geistig Konkretes*’ (spirit-concrete⁵⁶) and his own reconstructed ‘second path’: ‘*Gedankenkonkretum*’ (thought-concrete), a differentiation lost in the standard English translation but which Althusser is careful to keep⁵⁷. As Althusser mentions, “Marx goes even further and shows that this distinction involves not only these two objects, but also their peculiar production processes” (41). We are confronted here with the following question: what exactly is the difference between an unreflective short circuit from ‘Generality I’ to ‘Generality III’, and a ‘correct/just’ reconstruction of ‘Generality III’ through the intervening stage of ‘Generality II’? Might that difference be read in the gap between the concept-metaphors ‘spirit (*Geist*)’ and ‘thought (*Denken*)’ as plotted in the Marxian text? This takes us to a terrain outside the scope of this chapter. But one can already see a clue to a possible answer. Marx only wants to work with materiality produced by the labour of ‘thought’, in its difference from the uncontrollable self-producing real-concrete which is outside the purview of ‘thought’ and therefore without any discernable organizing principle. Real-concrete is in effect a matter which is of the ‘spirit’, matter not controlled by and prior to the law of ‘thought’, in short, uncontrollable, dispersed matter which precedes any thought. Althusser also adheres to this distinction, and in his turn cuts one from the other in the name of a ‘Marxist science’. In the process he separates ‘science’ from its ghostly double, ‘ideology’. But the ‘cut’ does never cut clean. For as we have tried to show by gathering clues, the ‘cut’, like philosophy, tries to incessantly subject itself to a law of correctness (justness). But this law, at the very moment of

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⁵⁶ Ben Brewster, translator of Althusser translates it as ‘spiritual concrete’ (see Althusser 1970, 41).
⁵⁷ Martin Nicolaus, translator of Marx’s *Grundrisse* translates them as, ‘concrete in thought’ and ‘concrete in mind’ respectively (Marx 1973, 101).
its articulation, of its taking place, at the instant of its own justice, must again divide itself, being subjected to another ‘cut’, another law, and like this, to ad infinitum. Likewise, since science or the ‘theory of the theoretical practice’ may never be sure of the correctness of its focus, it must always stay with the ‘cut’. A path that is regular but is also haunted by excessive determination, by the incalculable, by the ‘spirit’ that never cease to haunt ‘thought’, and which whips it along, along the edge of the cut.

Conclusion: Althusser’s ‘Autocritique’ and the Persistence of the ‘Cut’

In the course of my argument, I have tried to show that the ‘specificity’ of science Althusser talks about is a specificity of the epistemological operation. He calls it by many names, but the (work of the) ‘cut’ (coupure), it seems, remains the most apt metaphor. It is radically opposed to the commonsensical notion of scientism as well as different from Bachelard’s epistemological break (rupture). The arguments in this chapter therefore, I hope, let us infer that it is very possible to think of the specificity of science without necessarily being scientistic. Indeed, the Althusserian model critiques any attempt that might lead to scientism. It is fundamentally opposed to any tracing of a master pattern coming out of a calculable ‘whole’ (be it science or law) or organized around a particular node, as we have endeavoured to show. The cut works at the margins, of science, of philosophy, and of the margin itself. I want to conclude this section with some remarks on Althusser’s changing position on the concept of a ‘science’ in its distinction from the concept-metaphor ‘ideology’.

One point that should be not lost track of is the fact that, in “Elements of Self-Criticism”, Althusser’s autocritique is limited to the “rationalist” reduction he thought to have made of the ‘epistemological break’ by equating it simply with a distinction of “truth and error” (Althusser 1976, 106). The revisions that he suggests does not involve introduction of new material, but a return to that same “departure point”, to “straighten things up” (106). This chiefly means a reformulation of his own notion of the epistemological ‘break’ as different from the Bachelardian formulation of it, and the notion of the ‘scientific’, which already existed in a
nuanced enough form in PSPS, is not revised at all in the “Elements”. It seems that the autocritique is not a point of radical change in the Althusserian oeuvre. Rather it can be called a strategic ‘retreat’, to use Althusser’s own word. Althusser does make a separation between the historical fact of the ‘cut’ and the theoretical fact of it, but then reminds his readers again that since the theoretical event itself exists in history, it is also “a fact of historical importance” (emphasis added, Althusser 1976, 110n6). As if ‘theory’ has an internal history which is inherent to it. This is rather a curious way of getting out of what he calls his previous error of ‘theoreticism’.

In explaining his specific notion of ‘science’, he again uses the same juxtaposition of the historical and the theoretical. Science can have many beginnings and breaks in history, but it must also have a separate theoretical emergence, an emergence that is always there, interminably valid. This other emergence is chalked out by Althusser with a more orthodox Marxist pen, and it is at this register that the ‘pre-history’ of science is called ‘ideology’. I have already tried to show how exactly the ‘cut’ works in separating science and ideology, and what are its relationships to a thought of the origin as event, or a signature as event as it emerges from the given. But it helps to have Althusser recapitulate this whole movement at his most poetic:

> It [science] emerges in the ordinary sense: this means that it is not born out of nothing, but out of a process of labour by which it is hatched, a complex and multiple process, sometimes brightened by a flash of lightning, but which normally operates blindly, in the dark, because “it” never knows where it is headed, nor, if ever it arrives, where it is going to surface. It is born out of the unpredictable, [the] incredibly complex and [the] paradoxical (Althusser 1976, 112)

But if the ‘cut’ of ‘science’ is a work that goes on, then its pre-history must also have a haunting presence which lingers along with it, this break cannot be decisively new in the sense of a complete forgetting of its past. It must never forget its work of

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58 For the notion of ‘retreat’ as a return to an older problematic to break it up in more basic analytical units, see above.

59 See the section on the emergence of the signature, ‘Marx’ above.
rejecting the “error”\textsuperscript{60}, and the error too would follow it as its “Alter Ego”\textsuperscript{61}. As we are told, “its prehistory remains always contemporary” (Althusser, 114). Ideology therefore, in this specific sense, is not only the other, but also ‘contemporary’ of ‘science’, it takes place each time science takes place, comes to being every time science emerges. As I have already discussed, ‘science’ here, can also be read as ‘Marxist philosophy’ or a theory of ‘correct’ (theoretical practice of ) intervention.

Althusser rejects the accusation that his formulation of science is positivist. Any positivist notion, according to him has two traits. Firstly, it typically has a ‘father’, or, in other words, it has a definite beginning and it is born out of necessity. The fatalist version goes like this, “The father [...] had to have this child” (113). But the ‘break’ which inaugurates the Marxist science is, on the contrary, ‘conceived’ as a “fatherless child”\textsuperscript{62}, and yet it is not without beginning. The Marxist science does not go beyond positivism by simply posing to be a science without a beginning, but instead it proposes many beginnings. It does not have a father, but fathers. The ‘many’ can also be articulated as many contemporaneous moments, re-production of many moments of transgression of the past or ideology as ‘alter ego’. It is about “rejecting the question of THE father” (emphasis in original, 113), which is why Lenin mentioned three sources of Marxism, Althusser opines. Secondly, a politics of intervention places Marxist science in the realm of ‘correctness’ and does not make it positivist just as an aesthetic of decision-making cannot simply be called positivist without knowing how exactly it ‘calculates’. And finally, positivism implies that a knowledge knows its objects fully, with assured certainty, which is not the case with the Althusserian notion of ‘science’ precisely because it depends on the work of the ‘cut’. The ‘cut’ never lets the structure stratify into a collection of finite, fully present objects.

I argue in the next chapter that Derrida seems to follow similar lines in thinking the ‘margins’ of ‘philosophy’. He points out in an interview that, “Philosophy is not a science related to a domain of determined objects” (Derrida

\textsuperscript{60} Emphasis in original, Althusser 1976, 114.
\textsuperscript{61} Emphasis in original, ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Althusser 1976, 149.
One can also read this statement as making the point that philosophy cannot be a science if science works within a domain where each object has full presence. The similarity with Althusser’s reading of Lenin’s position is striking. Derrida adds that since philosophy is not certain about its objects, it also does not “know” its “destination” and from “this point of view philosophy is a non-knowledge” (emphasis in original, 376). Althusser meant almost the same, when picking on Lenin, he commented, “philosophy strictly speaking has no object, in the sense that a science has an object” (emphasis in original, Althusser 2006, 34). He also points out, as we have indicated, that philosophy propounds ‘theses’ and does not produce knowledge. The similarity between Derrida and Althusser (at least on this point) emerges. In the same interview Derrida also says that, since philosophy has no determined object “philosophy is always called upon to transgress the border of the regions of research or knowledge and to ask itself about its own limits” (Derrida 1994, 376). In the next chapter I follow this limit-work of philosophy along with the Derridian signature

Ensuing chapters focus on the ‘ethical’ in greater detail trying to consider how the Althusserian ‘correctness’ can be thought along with a deconstructive notion of ‘work’. In thinking this ‘work’ I will read the Derridian insistence in following the supplementary metaphor that plays at the margins of the ‘philosophical text’. That ‘work’, as I seek to argue, has a similarity with the notion of the ‘cut’ as fleshed out in the present chapter. The Question of subjectivity also comes up as an important hinge in all these discussions. Even if that question is taken up only in the parenthesis of the present chapter, it is treated in much larger detail in the ones to follow. But still, at this point of our discussion, if I speculate on how the ‘subject’ can be thought from the Althusserian standpoint, i.e. within the thematic of the ‘self-iterating structure’ and the self-representation of philosophical language, it might take the following shapes.

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63 I read Althusser and Derrida into each other albeit with the proviso that it does not suffice to merely show the occasional similarities of statements between two sets of texts produced by two formidable thinkers. One still has to go to the specific arguments which might have led them to similar conclusions but through different trajectories.
In “Marxism and Humanism”, Althusser writes that humanist discourses take the concrete essence of each individual as a given, existing absolutely and fully, which he calls “empiricism of the subject” (emphasis in original, Althusser 1969, 228). This empiricism takes ‘essence’ as ideal and this overarches not only the theories of existence but the “pre-Marxist” “theory of knowledge” as well, both “materialist and idealist” (228). Marx, on the contrary, not only does away with this empiricism, he also rejects its “inverse”, namely the (Kantian) “transcendental subject”, in effect inaugurating a thorough “anti-humanism” (228-229). The transcendental subject is also the subject which remains the same and is not amenable to change, whereas all representations follow from and are organized around it. Therefore when Marx displaces the indispensability of such a persisting essence, the “Kantian ethical idea” (228) is also declined in effect. It nevertheless remains to be shown, what ‘subject’ and what ‘ethics’ might replace the free places in the reconstructed (Marxian) post-Kantian space.

Talking about three ‘Generalities’ (as we have shown: steps of a basic epistemological operation, which abstracts from the real to re-posit an object in thought, making it thought-concrete, setting it up for ‘science’), Althusser chalks out how the given is transformed into an object of knowledge. It is at the middle stage (‘Generalities II’) that this transformation takes place, which Althusser typically calls “work” (Althusser 1969, 184). And then he asks this enigmatic question:

But who or what is it that works? (Althusser 1969, 184)

What works at the level of ‘intervention’ (GII)? Does the (Marxist) science work, but then, what one is to understand by the expression “the science works” (184)? Althusser does not really give an answer, but it seems that the setting up of the question itself is crucial. If at all there is an answer in the Althusserian corpus, then it is this: there is a process which is necessarily abstracted from the work or intentionality of the (bourgeois) individual, which works on itself, ‘correcting’ itself ceaselessly, almost like a machine. And yet, it is not run by any calculative logic of the machine (what Althusser calls: ‘technocratic thought’). It is a self-perpetuation which repeats without reproducing the same. It would be capable of producing ‘events’, like the coming of the signature ‘Marx’, its breaking forth from the given
ideological field. In this way Althusser can be said to have staged a notion of a ‘work’ (of ‘production’ of new events) without any recourse to a definite intentionality or a ‘subject’ of intention (who works). Spivak connects this concept of a “theoretical production” to a larger tendency of a philosophical strand running through Nietzsche and Freud in critiquing the “idealistic” “subject predication”, Althusser’s being one of its “most controversial instance[s]” (see Spivak 1987, 154).

As I have tried to show, a close reading of Althusser, especially of the PSPS series of lectures, might give one a catachrestic view of (the term) ‘science’, one that is less optimistic of the (positivist) power of the ‘scientific’ in producing events. Subsequently, Althusser confirms that philosophy cannot have an object, it is rather self-referential, and ‘science’ would then be the ‘work’ of that very self-referentiality, working along the cut through which a thought of ‘correctness/justice’ intervenes. It is the trail of this elusive ‘correctness’ or of the work of the ‘cut’, that trembles at the threshold of a certain ethicality, labours at the edge of the intentional matrix, and yet, remains not mastered by any intentionality, that we follow in the next chapters.

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64 Derrida, I contend in the next chapter, is more attentive to these questions (of subjectivity, agency, machine). In his description of the work of the metaphorical at the margins of philosophy he both tries to think of the supplementary metaphor that always escapes the law of the ‘inside’ and he also deals with the difficulty of articulating that extra metaphor or of reducing it to any definite ontology.