

# Weaving the Space. The Deconstruction of the Metaphysic's Veil

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## Abstract

The article in its first part aims to give an account of the introduction of the term “deconstruction” in the field of fashion and studies dedicated to it. Since “deconstruction” has spread like a virus in North American culture since the 1980s, it is intended to verify the congruence of this spread that has reached the fashion world through the success of architectural deconstructivism. Beyond various generic and superficial references, a certain interest in the work of fashion designer Martin Margela has been recognized. Starting from this general framework, an attempt was made to show what themes and resources “deconstruction” can offer to fashion studies, in particular through the reading of a text by Derrida dedicated to the figure of the “veil” in the tradition of Western culture.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction; Metaphysics; Fabric; Weave; Veil.

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Apparently, the deconstruction virus has also penetrated the fashion world. Again, it would have come from the East. In fact the experts in the field agree on the first acclaimed manifestation of the term “deconstruction”: Bill Cunningham’s article appeared in *Details* in November 1989, dedicated to the description of the 1989–90 Fall/Winter collection by the Maison Martin Margiela fashion house.<sup>1</sup> But the same experts, starting from the characteristics that Cunningham attributes to the “term” — we’ll see which ones — recognize its latent presence already in the work of some Japanese designers — Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo, in particular — dating back to previous years. These designers, it seems, were able to establish themselves by infecting the West thanks to a more general trend — or an infection that was already sneakily spreading — that threatened the fashion world from within: the “anti-Fashion.” With “anti-Fashion” the experts define a movement of criticism and protest of the economic-social status and aesthetic-ideological conventions that govern the world of fashion, a movement born within this world thanks to some designers, among which the Japanese mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> Against the frivolous luxury that had characterized the eighties, these designers seem to interpret the needs that come from society, afflicted by the economic crisis, the first in the era of global capitalism (1987): values of sobriety, sustainability, recycling, reuse, in minimalist forms and less conspicuous colors, up to absolute black. Some commentators even speak of Franciscan Puritanism.<sup>3</sup> So, it would seem that deconstruction has infected the fashion world profiting from the weakness of its immune defenses, already put to the test by “anti-fashion.” Some experts would also have identified the agent that has favored the transmission of the virus, from the narrow territories of the Academy, and in particular of philosophy and theory of literature, the outbreak of the virus, to the wider and more influential of fashion world, at least in terms of media coverage and social behavior: the architecture.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the virus would have been transmitted thanks to the success of the exhibition “Deconstructivist Architecture,” held at the MoMa in New York in 1988, curated by Philip Johnson — the guru of the International Style — and Marc Wigley, young theorist, author of the first monograph devoted to Jacques Derrida and architecture.<sup>5</sup> In fact, if we talk about “viruses” of deconstruction, then we must follow the hypothesis that at the origin of the contagion there is the work of Jacques Derrida, French philosopher, of Jewish origins, born in Algeria. However, although it is essential for a serious epidemiological investigation to identify and isolate the genome of the virus, in the case of deconstruction the operation is complicated by a number of factors that must be taken into account. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish the deconstruction as it manifests itself in the work of Derrida, from other phenomena to which it has often been superficially associated, especially in the Anglo-Saxon environment where it is usually classified in the class “post-structuralism” or in the even more generic class of “French Theory,” where we find classified authors such as Foucault, Deleuze, Barthes, De Certeau, among others.<sup>6</sup> Authors very different from each other and often in controversy with each other. Secondly, the first spread of deconstruction in the United States, where the first contagion with the fashion world took place, took place within departments of literature and especially comparative literature. In these academic territories deconstruction was first of all perceived as a theory of literature, and in particular as an extension of the theory of literature to all processes of signification and such as to lead, according to some interpreters, to a reduction of philosophy to literary genre. From within these territories, Rodolphe Gasché was the first, in the same years of the contagion of architecture and fashion, to point out that it was an American distortion of the thought of the Franco-Algerian philosopher, whose dimension would instead be rigorously philo-

1. Bill Cunningham, “The Collections”, *Details*, (September 1987).

2. Cf. Alison Gill, “Deconstruction Fashion: The making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembling Clothes,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (1998): 25-49. Agata Zborowska, “Deconstruction in Contemporary Fashion Design,” *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Vol. 2, No 2 (2015): 185-201.

3. Cf. Angela Carter, “The Recession Style,” in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 132.

4. Cf. Gill, “Deconstruction Fashion: The making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembling Clothes,” 26.

5. Marc Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (London-Cambridge-Mass: MIT Press, 1993).

6. Cf. François Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

sophical.<sup>7</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon academic world a debate has arisen, still open, on the origin and status of deconstruction, on its presumed boundaries and the territory that would be its own, compared to other territories whose boundaries are presumed to be equally defined and immune to any contagion. Here we could describe this distortion, as a first mutation of the deconstruction virus, such as to allow it to spread in the North American academic world, which would be followed by the contagion of architecture and then fashion, suffering a mutation at every step, to the point of making it difficult to recognize, given the traits that are attributed to it through these transmissions by specialists in their respective fields. I have had the opportunity to notice this in my work on architecture and deconstruction, and above all, in addition to a change in the sense of deconstruction in its use by architects and theorists of architecture, I have noticed the phenomenon of rejection immediately following the contagion.<sup>8</sup> The same seems to happen in the fashion world, using the same critical arguments. In particular, I have noted the use, by one of the critics interested in defending the boundaries of architecture, of the epidemiological terminology from which I am taking advantage. This is Nikos Salingaros who defines deconstruction as a dangerous “virus” from which architecture must be defended.<sup>9</sup> This author is also quoted by those who want to defend fashion from the same virus, whose mutation at this point, however, is quite marked. In fact, if we look at the first appearance of the virus in the fashion world — namely Cunningham’s article — it is clear that we are dealing with a rather bland form that could easily be confused with other viral forms:

Martin Margiela, formerly a Gaultier assistant, in this, his second collection on his own, provided quite a different vision of fashion of the 1990s: a beatnik, Existentialist revival... The construction of the clothes suggests a deconstructivist movement, where the structure of the design appears to be under attack, displacing seams, tormenting the surface with incisions. All suggest a fashion of elegant decay.<sup>10</sup>

Cunningham evidently uses the term “deconstruction” in a generic sense, to describe the aesthetic-formal characteristics of a style, according to the criteria of art criticism. Too little to distinguish deconstruction, which in any case cannot be easily interpreted as an aesthetic-artistic style, from already known artistic experiences — for example Arte Povera or Fontana’s cuts — recalled by the same experts in the field about Margela. Above all, “attacking” structures is an operation that implies an intervention from the outside, while deconstruction, as we shall see, is limited to detecting, from inside the structure, its irreducible instability, an instability that must be concealed in order to make the foundation of the structure itself possible but which, in the end, makes its hold and consistency (theoretical — because, as we shall see, deconstruction is primarily concerned with the structures of philosophical-scientific discourse) irremediably precarious. The commentary on Cunningham’s article published more recently by Agata Zborowska in the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, offers us a few more elements, while remaining in the field of stylistic analysis:

In his commentary on Margiela’s designs, Cunningham refers to deconstruction in a way characteristic of most later descriptions. The basis for all designs here is mostly the construction of clothing, understood literally as a way of combining elements of clothing so that they create a certain whole. The most important construction elements are thus isolated fragments of fabric patterns joined by stitches (including darts), frequently supplemented with various stiffening elements in the form of pads, whalebones or gluing, protected with lining from the inside. By moving as well as unstitching seams, and consequently making visible what previously was, in a supposedly natural manner, hidden — as e.g. lining or shoulder pads — the garments received an unprecedented look.<sup>11</sup>

7. Cf. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror. Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge-Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1986).

8. Cf. Francesco Vitale, *The Last Fortress of metaphysics. Jacques Derrida and the Deconstruction of Architecture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018).

9. Cf. Nikos Salingaros, *Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction* (Solingen: Umbau Verlag, 2004).

10. Cf. Cunningham, “The Collections,” 246.

11. Cf. Zborowska, “Deconstruction in Contemporary Fashion Design,” 187.

To make evident in the construction of the totality the seams that hold the parts together and that conventions impose to hide, thus overturning the internal/external, hidden/visible relations, can be understood as a preparatory gesture to the deconstructive operation: the so-called relief of structure. The totality is not in itself given, in itself completed and autonomous but it is the result of a construction operation that in itself has nothing necessary but depends on historical conventions and can therefore be subjected to deconstruction. In fact, Margela's work seems much more stimulating than it may appear from Cunningham and Zborowska's descriptions of his work, which merely reveal aesthetic and stylistic traits. At least according to Granata's interesting analyses, which highlight the broader and deeper scope of his work: to the extent that the garments made by Margela make it possible to recognize and question the conventions of fashion, revealing its ideological matrix and historical dimension, the prejudices that have settled through these conventions and spread to society, culture (think, for example, to the role that fashion has played in the imposition of certain female models of behaviour), concealing alternative possibilities, then one can well say that in his work it is possible to observe something more than a faint aesthetic-formal analogy with deconstruction, and thus attest the presence of the "virus" in the world of fashion. In order to recognize the presence of the "virus" of deconstruction in the fashion world it is therefore necessary to indicate its specific features and dynamics, albeit in extreme synthesis. As we will see, and as we may have already guessed from what has already been said about the viral potential of deconstruction, its ability to cross borders and invade territories, to propagate and cause mutations, deconstruction is first and foremost the deconstruction of space, that is, of what our Western tradition has forced us to think in terms of space (as opposed to time): presence, origin, identity, place, limits, borders, territories... on the order of a supposed but unsustainable opposition outside of a metaphysical regime, that is in the sphere of finiteness that is proper to us: the internal/external opposition.

## The veiled space of metaphysical (denial).

Derrida interrogates the philosophical tradition in order to understand why and how it has been constituted and generally imposed as "metaphysics of presence" according to Heidegger's definition, that is, as a thinking that thinks the being of beings according to the model of mere presence, in turn derived from the determination of the temporal present isolated from the becoming that constitutes the irreducible element of our finite existence. Along this path opened up by Heidegger, Derrida operates a substantial detour introducing the neologism *differance* that allows him to focus on the dynamic character of difference as the irreducible condition of the possibility of presence and identity. The identity is not something *given* but is determined in relation to something else, differing from itself, and, as such, it is not a stable, autonomous and self-constituted presence. This differential relation is the condition of possibility of the oppositions that constitute the field of metaphysics but also what make impossible their full determination as autonomous terms each other independent. In particular, deconstruction allows us to understand that the oppositional determinations (being/becoming, infinite/finite, psyche/body, ideal/sensible, presence/absence, time/space, signified/sign, etc.) that constitute the field of the "metaphysics of presence" are not simply specular but hierarchically organized. A term (or a series of solidary terms) prevails over another term (or series), namely the opposite, in order to occult, repress, remove, elude their irreducible relationship and thus the very possibility of a different elaboration of the conceptual field, an elaboration that would have to take into account the relation to the other as the condition of possibility of what is present. *Differance* can be forgotten or removed but precisely for this reason (because it cannot be simply destroyed or sublated, as a condition of possibility) keeps on producing uncanny effects on the system that is organized on its removal.<sup>12</sup>

But the most important thing that deconstruction allows us to think is that at the foundations of the system of metaphysics there is a presupposed and untenable spatial opposition, the inside/outside opposition, necessary to think the opposition between conceptual, ideal terms, that are not spatial entity. It is untenable in the terms of the system exactly because, the system imposes us to think of space as

12. For an introduction to Derrida's work and an interpretation of deconstruction, its procedures and targets, see Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror. Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*; Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Derrida*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

the dimension of the sensible, of the ever-changing difference, of the empirical or bodily experience, of what is exterior and subordinated with respect to the ideal or transcendental domain, accessible to the psyche. Then, what is posed from the inside of the system as exterior, secondary and subordinated — the space — becomes the very conditions of possibility of what is supposed to be the inside, that would have to rule over its opposites; consequently, the inside has to be irreducibly opened — spaced out — to the exterior to constitute itself as inside, that means that it will never be fully determined in itself by itself, it will never be closed to the other, it will never be simply an inside opposite to outside:

In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of these opposition (the opposition between inside and outside) must be already accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must also stand as the very possibility of systematic or seriality in general.<sup>13</sup>

This formal contradiction, also called by Derrida “logic of supplementarity,” can destabilize all the system, calling for alternative reading of the field of our experience. In fact, the “metaphysics of presence,” with its hierarchical oppositions, is not a mere intellectual abstraction but the order of discourse that innervates the institutions governing our life and thus also fashion, that is, the hierarchical oppositions that rule its operative concepts and its practices, starting with the naked/dressed opposition with all that, as we shall see, cascading and radiating, far and wide in Western culture and beyond. It is precisely in this horizon, that the virus of deconstruction could produce interesting effects for the Fashion Studies. Derrida, in fact, has never dealt with fashion, but through the plotting of his texts we could even recognize that textiles [textile] as such, and in particular the making of certain garments, their use, whether practical or ideal, ritual or simply metaphorical, are closely intertwined with our metaphysical and onto-theological tradition, and constitute an essential articulation, offering a decisive metaphorical support, precisely in relation to the determination and hierarchical distribution of the space in which it is implemented. Precisely for this reason, to intervene in this space occupied by metaphysics, deconstruction must become textile work, and more precisely — as we shall see-knitting.

In the course of his work, Derrida has dealt on several occasions with a particular garment, a fundamental figure in Western culture and not only in philosophy, to the point of dedicating an extraordinary text to him, in which he returns to these passages, prolonging them and deepening them in a dizzying way: “A Silkworm of One’s Own” [“Un ver à soie”]<sup>14</sup>, second part of *Veils [Voiles]*, the first part, entitled “Savoir,” is by Hélène Cixous. In this text, which is already difficult for its composition and of which we will not be able to follow and unravel all the threads here, Derrida describes deconstruction as a certain way of knitting and his work as “penelopean.”<sup>15</sup> “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” published in 1998, is set up as a dialogue with two and perhaps more voices, a dialogue that the author seems to entertain with himself, with all the selves that make up the same. Inside the text, almost as if to mark the plot, there are six charcoal drawings by Ernest Pignon-Ernest depicting in detail the folds of clothes worn. In one of the drawings the drapery is worn as a veil or a scarf, covering the head, one can recognize the feminine features of a face. An art book, one would say, given the presence of the drawings and the literary tenor of the writing. A deconstructive text that weaves and sews drawings, sacred scriptures, literary, philosophical, autobiographical writing with effects that go beyond the presumed limits of these codified genres of expression, contaminating them irremediably:

Stop writing here, but instead from afar defy a weaving, yes, from afar, or rather see to its diminution. Childhood memory: raising their eyes from their woolen threads, but without stopping or even slowing the movement of their agile fingers, the women of my family used to say, sometimes, I think, that they had to diminish. Not undo, I guess, but diminish, i.e.,

13. Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson, (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 103.

14. Jacques Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own”, in Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, *Veils*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford-California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 17-108.

15. Derrida, 99.

though I had no idea what the word meant then but I was all the more intrigued by it, even in love with it, that they needed to diminish the stitches or reduce the knit of what they were working on. And for this diminution, needles and hands had to work with two loops at once, or at least play with more than one.<sup>16</sup>

In order to challenge the weave of the metaphysical fabric it is necessary to intervene in it, with its own tools, to knit it as it is knitted, proceeding by “diminishing,” that is to say reducing the meshes that compose it, weaving them, from time to time, two by two, until reducing their extension. It is not therefore a question of unraveling the meshes of metaphysics, to gain access to an immanence as pure as it is illusory; metaphysics in fact, as we have seen, structures our way of thinking, we cannot simply unravel it:

— Which has nothing to do, if I understand aright, with the mastery of a Royal Weaver or with Penelope's ruse, with the metis of weaving-unweaving... Whereas in diminution, if I understand aright, the work is not undone ... — No, nothing is undone, on the contrary, but I would also like, in my own way, to name the shroud, and the voyage, but a voyage without return, without a circle or journey round the world in any case, or, if you prefer, a return to life that's not a resurrection, neither the first nor the second, with and without the grand masters of discourse about the Resurrection, Saint Paul or Saint Augustine... —My God, so that's all your new work is, is it, neither an *Odyssey* nor a *Testament*.<sup>17</sup>

We begin to glimpse which meshes of our tradition: according to Derrida it is necessary to “diminish”, to delimit the weft of metaphysics without undoing it, but to come to terms with the essential role or function that the “veil” plays in it, or at least to try to weave it differently by testing other functions in other traditions: the weave of the *Old Testament* tradition, Hebrew-Christian-Muslim, through the warp of the Greek one, which is the interweaving of our philosophical tradition:

Ah, how tired we are, how I would like finally to touch “veil,” the word and the thing thus named, the thing itself and the vocable! I would like not only to see them, see in them, toward them or through them, the word and the thing, but maintain a discourse about them that would, finally, touch, in short a “relevant” discourse that would say them properly, even if it no longer gives anything to be seen. — We'll have to give up touching as much as seeing, and even saying. Interminable diminution. For you must know right now: to touch “that” which one calls “veil” is to touch everything. You'll leave nothing intact, safe and sound, neither in your culture, nor in your memory, nor in your language, as soon as you take on the word “veil.” As soon as you let yourself be caught up in it, in the word, first of all the French word, to say nothing yet about the thing, nothing will remain, nothing will remain anymore. — We'll soon see how to undo or rather diminish. Diminish the infinite, diminish ad infinitum, why not? That's the task or the temptation, the dream, and always has been.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the veil, or rather its figure, its “metaphor,” structures and spatializes our relationship to truth, the very definition of truth in our religious and philosophical, onto-theological tradition: it requires us to think of truth as something hidden from empirical experience, from the changing sensible vision; accessible only to an ideal, transcendent, metaphysical gaze, capable of lifting or tearing the sensible veil, and looking beyond, beyond the sensible, the truth as such, pure, eternal and immutable:

— Truth, if we need it and if you still care, still seems to wait. In sericulture before the verdict, another figure... — Sericulture, you mean the culture of silk? — Patience, yes, the culture of the silkworm, and the quite incomparable patience it demands from a magnanier, the sericultivator. Where we're going, before the verdict falls, then, at the end of this time that is like no other, nor even like the end of time, another figure perhaps upsets the whole of history from top to bottom, and upsets even the meaning of the word “history”: neither

16. Derrida, 21.

17. Derrida, 22.

18. Derrida, 23.



a history of a veil, a veil to be lifted or torn, nor the Thing, nor the Phallus nor Death, of course, that would suddenly show itself at the last coup de theatre, at the instant of a revelation or an unveiling, nor a theorem wrapped up in shroud or in modesty, neither *aletheia*, nor *homiosis*, nor *adequatio*, nor *Entbillung*, nor *Unverborgenheit*, nor *Erschlossenheit*, nor *Entdecktheit*, nor *Übereinstimmung*, nor modesty, halt or reticence of *Verhaltentheit*, but another unfigurable figure, beyond any holy shroud, the secret of a face that is no longer even a face if face tells of vision and a story of the eye. Wait without horizon, then, and someone else one knows too well, me for example, why not, but come back from so far, from so low, quick or dead, wait for the other who comes, who comes to strike dumb the order of knowledge: neither known nor unknown, too well known but a stranger from head to foot, yet to be born. It will be the end of history in this sense. Verdict: end of the end of history, everything is going to start again, and with no shroud we would know what to do with. More or less than-diminished. Enough heritage, dream your caravel, unless a heritage is still looming and expected at this instant, at this point of verdict.<sup>19</sup>

In order to diminish the figure, the “metaphor,” of the “veil” and more generally the chain of oppositions that it allows to sustain, up to the one implicit in the very idea of metaphor (truth/appearance, ideal/sensitive, signifier/meaning, proper sense/ figurative sense...), fundamental in our tradition, it is therefore necessary to weave its plot differently, according to another experience of “figuration,” which neutralizes the horizon of vision, necessarily involved in this metaphysical structure (*theoria*). In view of another experience of weaving and another experience of the veil, we must first of all identify the metaphorical hotbed in the Old Testament tradition, latent in our philosophical tradition. Derrida identifies it in *Exodus XXVI, 31* in the veil (curtain, drape, according to the various translations) which guards the Ark of the testimony or of the covenant, in which the tables of the law are kept and, according to some traditions, the rod of Aaron, the veil which will be torn or divided at the moment of Christ's death. The veil that separates the sensitive space of sensitive experience from the space of absolute truth constitutes the matrix of all separations:

At the moment of his death, the Temple veil is supposed to have torn... —Shall we say that in tearing thus the veil revealed at last what it ought to hide, shelter, protect? Must we understand that it tore, simply, as if the tearing finally signed the end of the veil or of veiling, a sort of truth laid bare? Or rather that it was torn in two, as Matthew and Mark say, down the middle says Luke, which maybe gives two equal veils at the moment that, as the sun goes black, everything becomes invisible? Now this veil, remember, was one of the two veils of Exodus, no doubt the first, made of blue and purple and scarlet, a veil made of “fine-twined” or “twisted” linen. Inside it was prescribed to install the ark of the testimony. This veil will be for you, says Yahweh to Moses, the separation between the holy and the most holy, between the tabernacle and the tabernacle of tabernacles. The veil tearing down the middle, is that the end of such a separation, of that isolation, that unbelievable solitude of belief? —I know of no other separation in the world, or that would be commensurable with that one, analogous, comparable to that one which allows us to think nonetheless every other separation, and first of all the separation that separates from the wholly other.<sup>20</sup>

According to Derrida, at the origin of this figure of the veil, or of its metaphorical figuration and therefore of the functions that it performs in the metaphysical tradition, helping a conception of the truth, of the thing itself, as something hidden, secret, separate, beyond the space of experience, there would be the same denial of sexuality that, in the same Old Testament tradition, is at the origin of humanity in its distinguishing itself from the animal and from nature: modesty, origin of dressing:

But you have to *know*, too, and first, that the thing itself is always announced as what can stand *behind* the transparent, translucent, or opaque veil: the thing itself behind the veil or the thing itself the phantasm of which is itself an effect of the veil, as much as to say enveiled

19. Derrida, 31.

20. Derrida, 28.

*thing as veiled cause*—of nudity, of modesty, of shame, of reticence (*Verhaltenheit*), of the law, of everything that hides and shows the sex, of the origin of culture and so-called humanity in general, in short of what links evil, radical evil, to *knowledge*, and knowledge to avowal, knowing-how-to avow [*Je savoir-avouer*] to knowledge avowed [*le savoir avoué*].<sup>21</sup>

Within the limits of space and time that are imposed on us here, we will not follow Derrida in his attempt to escape from the logic of the veil by referring to the Jewish tradition of the tallith, a shawl, which one does not wear, which is not valid for what it hides or covers, but as a sign of election and hereditary transmission with which one receives both the singularity and the law, its singularity as the Law. At this point, however, we should at least have grasped how much deconstruction is decisive to understand the weave that weaves together the weave of the religious and metaphysical tradition with those of clothing and weaving in general, and at the same time how much the separations, the boundaries between practices and disciplines, depend on a conception of space based on a denial that the veil, its figure, allows to establish. All this suggests that, by penetrating deeper into the fabrics of fashion, the virus of deconstruction could produce effects that go beyond the critical-specialist discourse, allowing us to interpret our philosophical tradition under other guises.

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21. Derrida, 98.



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