

Review of Catherine Malabou *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction and Deconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

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Listen to me as one listens to the rain,
not attentive, not distracted,
light footsteps, thin drizzle,
water that is air, air that is time,
the day is still leaving,
the night has yet to arrive,
figurations of mist
at the turn of the corner,
figurations of time
at the bend in this pause...

listen to me as one listens to the rain,
the years go by, the moments return,
do you hear the footsteps in the next room?
not here, not there: you hear them
in another time that is now,
listen to the footsteps of time,
inventor of places with no weight, nowhere,
listen to the rain running over the terrace,
the night is now more night in the grove,
lightning has nestled among the leaves,
a restless garden adrift-go in,
your shadow covers this page.

“As One Listens to the Rain”
Octavio Paz

1. Paz evokes a time during which the day is leaving, while night approaches. It is not one or the other, but is becoming of both. It is a time that moves restlessly; it is adrift, it is a time marked by both termination and beginning. It is a time of dusk. Paz's poem conveys the figural-textual metamorphosis that Catherine Malabou's philosophical work accomplishes in relation to three different critical philosophical traditions which she calls motor schema: dialectics, destruction and deconstruction. Plasticity, which bears more than a passing resemblance to dusk, as a concept, triangulates these three schemes, borrowing different properties from each and giving back something entirely new in form (p.61). This emergent form is one aspect of a new materialism that Malabou maps in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, through an autobiographical summation of her philosophical investigations into the work of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida that have occupied much of the past decade.

Anticipating the novelty of Malabou's work for many readers, we use this review to describe the concept of plasticity in some depth, and discuss what it means to activate plasticity as a motor schema. We examine this book's claim for a new materialism that emerges out of plasticity by focusing on the notion of form that emerges from plastic practices and upon which they rely. We are particularly interested in the potential of Malabou's new materialism for imagining new and transformative political theory.

Plasticity: a motor schema

2. Malabou has elaborated on plasticity (*plasticité*) in many of her previous works,¹ drawing, forming and annealing this idea from its annunciation in Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*² where it signifies both the presence of a concept and the historical and contingent form illuminating and undermining it. In this book, Malabou looks back at her own travels with plasticity, tracing both the return to herself that is essential to Hegelian ideas of subjectivity—a presence—while disrupting that presence, the now in which she writes, exploring the gaps between metaphysics and its other. Plasticity is a “smuggler” (p. 8) in Malabou's exposition, alive as both concept and its persistent, transformative movement that gives and receives form, that annihilates itself, and that spontaneously (re)organizes its fragments. Plasticity draws dialectical reason into a perpetual dusk where Minerva's owl cannot rest, but it also appears within and among other philosophical registers, particularly in Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction where it “metabolizes” and articulates these philosophies, vitalizing their concepts of space, time, and writing. Plasticity simultaneously negotiates the destruction of these philosophies, traveling among them, leaving a trace of its origin, graphing itself and reading itself anew, opening itself always to another plasticity.
3. Plasticity flourishes in the excesses of philosophical reason, but what kind of spaces are these, and how politically malleable? Although it hearkens to an aesthetic experience, a sculpture or a poem for example, plasticity breaks with the artistic field (p. 54), remaining immune to an ideological aesthetic critique as it confers visibility without presence. Rather than the distant or transcendental spaces of the sublime or beautiful, Malabou locates plasticity alongside Lyotard's idea of the “eye of discourse,”³ a concept that lends perspective from inside discourse by generating a “relief” in language from which the graphical and the figural are folded: an exteriority lacking

¹ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005); *Le Change Heidegger: Du Fantastique En Philosophie, Non & non* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2004); *Plasticité* (Paris, France: Editions Léo Scheer, 2000); *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); *Ontologie de l'accident : Essai sur la plasticité destructrice* (Editions Léo Scheer, 2009).

² Para 64: “There is a difficulty which should be avoided, which consists in the commingling of the practices followed by speculation and those of merely clever argumentation, namely, when what is said of the subject at one time means its concept and then at another time means its predicate or its accident. – Each of those modes interferes with the other, and it is only the kind of philosophical exposition which rigorously excludes the ordinary relations among the parts of a proposition which would be able to achieve the goal of plasticity.”

³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (University Of Minnesota Press, 2010); See, also, Catherine Malabou, “An Eye at the Edge of Discourse*”, *Communication Theory* 17, no. 1 (2007): 16–25.

signification, a pure energy that makes the plastic arts even possible. This energy is not the gap opened up within difference, nor is it a metaphysical gap, but it works between and among these other spaces, as the form of writing (p. 56). The figural-textual depth that it signals opens itself to a reading. But its location within discourse makes its emergence vulnerable to ideological misreadings that extend dominant capitalist notions, such as neoliberal ideas of labor flexibility,⁴ devoid of plasticity's transformative potentials. "We are entirely ignorant of plasticity but not at all of flexibility. In this sense, plasticity appears as the coming consciousness of flexibility."⁵

4. Readings that bring plasticity to consciousness are therefore intrinsic to the concept's motility and utility. Plastic reading, an engagement with the articulation of the graphical trace and the figural form, is not an effort to philosophically or politically define a paradigm in Malabou's perspective; the way a text lives its deconstruction is a matter of its reading that is never naïve, that recognizes that we cannot read philosophy anew, and that our approach to Hegelian dialectics, Heideggerian destruction and Derridean deconstruction will forever bring these multiple perspectives into our efforts to put any singular one into play. Malabou's emphasis on plastic reading ensures, therefore, that there is another Hegel, another Heidegger, another Derrida—"a childhood to come in the text" (p. 54)—that lives on through the processes of self-regulation, self-engenderment and, sometimes, exogenous or spontaneous annihilation, made palpable in the terms of these philosophical traditions but always in the spaces of their intercalation. The temporal understanding of structure in Hegel, for example, opens to a plastic reading which Malabou sees to be

constituted by the temporal deployment of subjectivity. Because of its plasticity...subjectivity self-regulates (it bears its accidents without dissolving) and self-engenders (it actually produces the accidents it receives). This overarching structure involves several levels of organization: anthropological, theological, and philosophical. We move from one level to the next through differentiated sublation, through different types and levels of transformation. This formal and differential structure is neither the form "in itself" of the Hegelian system—the "integrity" that is supposed to precede its destruction or its deconstruction—nor is it the result of its destruction and deconstruction. The structure refers to the form of the system without its presence, the form of the dialectic without its metaphysical understanding. But this form is not a mere remainder. It relaunches itself beyond destruction and deconstruction. It puts into play or sets off again that of which it is the form. (p. 52)

5. This initiation of play is sensuous activity, an event instantiated by plastic reading. All thought requires a scheme, Malabou argues, and as historical concept and style, plasticity has become an "energy sensor and rhythmic source of a new era" (p. 15), a rational motive "enabling it to force open the

⁴ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 2001), 289 and ff.; Charles Sabel, "Flexible Specialization and the Re-emergence of Regional Economies," in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. Ash Amin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 101–156; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12.

door to an epoch and open up exegetical perspectives suited to it” (p. 13). In these productive ways, plasticity is a motor scheme, as significant today as writing, dialectics and deconstruction were before it. Plasticity’s dual sense as both the postmetaphysical real and tool to read this reality discloses the twilight of writing which has been the prior motor scheme. Derrida argued for the “semantic enlargement of the concept of writing” (p. 59) revealed in the form of program, information, and code and in the reading of genetic information, cybernetics, and all linguistic-graphic inscription. Yet plasticity emerges “where DNA no longer writes” (p. 60). Neuroscience has been one exemplary site for reinventing reading in a plastic manner, demonstrating that the significance of the synaptic gap is its inherent plasticity: its ability to modify its effectiveness through active linkages, spontaneous activities, and external events no longer tied to a reading of genetic code. Graphic metaphors inadequately capture the architecture constituted by the incessant activity of structural reorganization of neural pathways. Only a language both spatial and political—assemblies, forms, populations—will be adequate to “momentarily characterize the material organization of thought and being” (p. 61) and see its future. Plastic reading can reveal the political-material potential that lies beyond writing.

6. A plastic mode of reading invites the reader to cognise her own subjectivity as plastic. As Malabou writes in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*: “[w]e are living at the hour of neuronal liberation, and we do not know it. An agency within us gives sense to the code, and we do not know it... Humans make their own brain, but they do not know they are doing so.” (p. 8) Malabou’s persistent concern with the capacity for radical change that plasticity furnishes to every human individual is an invitation, of sorts, to engage a new materialism. This new materialism provokes a consideration of form, which, essential to its realisation, is conceptual (yet not ideal), and variously tangible, embodied, figural and mobile.

New Materialism and the plastic subject

7. Malabou’s materialism conjoins elements, practices, traits, habits and other machinations from three different philosophical traditions (dialectics, destruction, and deconstruction). The ‘time’ (or temporality) of this materialism engenders a space for transformation, for political agency, and for recognition of the circulation between forms of thought that are often assumed (or posited) to exist in opposing philosophical schema. For instance, in staging a confrontation between Heidegger and Hegel, Malabou deploys plasticity to re-articulate Heidegger’s concepts of migration and metamorphosis (in relation to the transformation of metaphysics) and Hegel’s fantastical “dimension of the absolute” (p. 34), the image of history that arrives with its putative fulfillment. By subjecting both Heidegger and Hegel to a plastic reading, she identifies points of suture and rupture at the interface between the motor schema of these two philosophers:

How then are we to transform ourselves now that history is over? This question... is actually liberated by the history of an image. The migratory and the metamorphic are entirely directed toward the description of the production and superceding of this image, a superceding that opens

up new schematic possibilities. Thus, it is at the point of this question—history and the pure image of history—that Hegel and Heidegger, if you like, hold hands... (p. 34)

8. In stepping back from each of the motor schema she interrogates in order to delineate their plastic qualities, Malabou opens space for a materialism that is engaged with the individual's desire to transform herself and to transform what is around her. The concept of plasticity operates in distinctly embodied material forms. In drawing on concepts of neuronal plasticity, Malabou engages precisely with the capacity of the individual to become otherwise, sometimes through self-direction, other times through accident. Malabou's new materialism therefore has spatial and temporal qualities that are ultimately characterised by mobility and reflexivity. As form traverses different philosophical schema and opens each one to inflect on the other, it transforms itself.
9. This new materialism has spatial and temporal dimensions that take shape through different rhythms. To return to Paz, this is a time of weightlessness; it is as though only through recombining elements from the spatial and temporal, at least figurally and textually to begin with, that we can break old habits that have confined us to metaphysically bounded understandings of form or have led us to embrace concepts such as the trace or the supplement as a means of escaping the metaphysics of presence. Thus we return to the time of dusk as a means of thinking about the temporal and spatial locations of this materialism, which are mobile and momentary; in motion. Dusk is a time and place of instability, uncertainty. It is a time of mourning, it is a time of many dusks, many interconnected sides of transformational masks—the artifact that Malabou borrows from Levi-Strauss to describe the multifaceted nature of plasticity. For Paz, time is also the inventor of places. Where is this weightless time? Perhaps it is a time that designates a place that is not bounded or territorialised yet is grounded in a time that is 'now', evocative of Benjamin's revolutionary call to seize images of the past in order to shatter the weak messianism endowed by a non-revolutionary, teleological historicism.⁶ The plastic subject seems furnished with the capacity to explode a continuum of history and its concomitant modes of thought that refuse to traverse a philosophical and material terrain, seeing the object of philosophy "in a radically new manner: as an imaginary object. This imaginary 'object' is Being itself, the powerfully hallucinatory effects of its phenomena" (p. 39). The subject at the heart of Malabou's new materialism is a plastic subject. The plasticity of her (neuronal) habits enables an extension of herself beyond a present that is at once (over-)determined by the past and at the same time, seeks to dwell in a present that remains open to a future time that is not messianic. The plastic subject is a subject who moves; "while one movement is initial, the other is terminal" (p. 34).

Form

I do not believe in the absence of form or in a possible beyond of form any more than I believe in transcendence

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", 1940, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

or the absence of negativity. Form is the metamorphizable but immovable barrier of thought. Writing will never abolish form. The trace will never pierce the figure. (p. 49)

10. Form is indispensable to engage this new materialism—but what characterises this form? To speak of form that emerges in this temporal and spatial context is to enunciate a concept of form freed of the baggage of a metaphysics of presence, and indeed from a critique of the metaphysics of presence that would have us linger for too long in a logic of supplementarity and the trace. Malabou argues for an understanding of form that crosses the line of metaphysics, thereby opening up the conceptual and material space of an alterity for metaphysics (p. 50). She draws our attention not to the “other of form” but to “the other form”(p. 50). Plastic thinking in a very fundamental way explodes binaristic thinking and moves on to supercede deconstructive thought that would go so far as to understand the traditional concept of form as contaminated by its other (or constituted in part by its lack) but might not tread much further. Malabou maps a route of thinking about the “other form”, which essentially means thinking about the way that form metamorphosises. She goes further than this, asserting that “the metamorphosis of the traditional concept of form is perhaps the exegetic resource not only of destruction but also of the deconstruction of tradition itself.” (p. 50)
11. In order to explore some of the political implications of this new materialism, we can ask how this notion of form may help us think differently about post-colonial theory (an area of critical thought that she has not yet addressed in her oeuvre). Malabou’s insistence on the crucial importance of form in contemporary philosophy is an attempt to stop the dematerialisation (and demonetisation) of contemporary thought (p. 45). The insistence on the necessity to think about form, in conjunction with the neuronal, temporal, mobile and spatial dimensions of being rather than at the expense of these things, sets her far apart from contemporary thought that draws on concepts such as liminality (to take one example) to describe the post-colonial condition.
12. The concept of liminality tells us little about the material and onto-epistemic conditions that shape and structure ongoing colonial and capitalist violence. The deployment of liminality, as one aspect of some post-colonial theories that are beholden to a *mélange* of anti-colonial and post-structurally inspired critiques of colonial formations, reflects a philosophical position that turns its gaze away from the subtle modes of circulation that characterise the relation between material, ontological and aesthetic registers of being. Rather, concepts such as liminality are used to describe states of being that are ‘in-between’ two different cultural, racialised or ethno-national communities, even in light of repeated disavowals of racial or cultural essences. Liminality is also posited as a space that exists between two onto-epistemological states of being; black and white polarities are to be avoided because of their very indeterminacy as categories of identification.⁷ However, dwelling in a liminal space does little to metamorphosise these categories; either in terms of going beyond an acknowledgment of their co-constitutiveness, or in regards to

⁷ On the deployment of the concept of liminality as a means of theorising the post-colonial see for instance, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) p3–13.

transforming them into something else entirely. The spatial and temporal metaphor of the interstitial that liminality evokes seems sanitised of any appreciation of form, as embodiment as a mode of being, that goes beyond merely graphic, figural or literary representation. Such thinking further reinforces a vision of modernity that simply re-narrativises history as a way of making sense of violence in post-colonial contexts. We end up with a de-materialised, non-dialectical and partial rendering of the ongoing effects of colonialism and their particular imbrication with capitalism.

13. While anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist political struggles are lauded and liberally cited, Fanon customarily invoked (but somehow stripped of his revolutionary Marxist politics), the brand of post-colonial theory that dwells in the spaces of the liminal and unhomely remain largely unconcerned with a materialism that could potentially address itself to the violence of capitalist relations of dispossession and alienation. For instance, the miners' strike of the mid 1980's is rendered by Bhabha in terms of a "war of positions" and a "struggle of identifications",⁸ which for Bhabha, requires a politics that could embrace a "negotiated hybridity". Transforming the political, and political subjectivities, in a manner that accounts for the multiple and contradictory relations that colonial formations and capitalist relations throw up perhaps requires more (of us) than an interrogatory style.
14. Malabou too speaks of a type of negotiation; but a negotiation that involves a metamorphosis of form, and a form that metamorphosises. The change that leads to the exceeding of metaphysics must be thought and this change necessarily occurs through a negotiation between form and form, through a metamorphic negotiation. The gap, the rupture, the piercing, and the mobility of the trace do not have any power to de-clausturate or transgress by and in themselves. A trans-formation, in the literal sense, must take place, opening the depth of a new referentiality or another body in both the structure and in its dislocation. (p. 50) This negotiation is thus not merely an acknowledgment of states of being that are contaminated by one another, hybrid, liminal or otherwise, but is an agentive mode of negotiation that purposefully utilises its mobility to disrupt existing ways of being and existing modes of understanding being. Malabou's concept of form and its metamorphic negotiations present us with different avenues for thinking the spatial and temporal dimensions of the post-colonial. Rather than attempting to escape the closure inevitably programmed into concepts of national territoriality and sovereignty (to take one example), she suggests this is, rather, "a matter of how to escape within closure itself" (p. 65). In many ways, Malabou's theorisation of form, as something that traverses the body, the neuronal, and philosophical discourse (understood as signaling thick, aesthetic, visible forms of writing (seen in painting, fiction, music, poetry, (p. 56), and we would add sculpture, film, dance and other art forms) surpasses deconstructive renderings of the relation between immanence and transcendence, or form and substance, by insisting on the mobility and near-inevitability of metamorphic transformation of form itself. The refusal to accept form as an ethical and political reality capable of its own transformation (a position argued by Levinas and Derrida who insisted on the ethical trace of the radically other) is, for

⁸ Bhabha, p26-27

Malabou, a Marxist fetish threatening to collapse the cosmopolitan project with hypercapitalism (p. 77).

15. If we can politically engage our own future as Malabou's conscious echo of Marx in *The 18th Brumaire* makes clear, in what way is plasticity less a vehicle for ideology, less transparent to capitalist imperative? As plasticity continues to insert itself as the dominant motor scheme of our age, as it increasingly characterizes form, how can it be grasped? The problem that Malabou grapples with is that plasticity as a new materialism is necessarily naturalizing, seemingly weightless: "it is in fact so familiar to us that we do not even see it...it has become the form of our world."⁹ This paradox is, Malabou insists, merely apparent, easily exploded. The critique of neuronal ideology shows us that thinking is not program, is not written, leaves no trace, requires no space. Translated into the critique of political economy, this is a way of reconceptualizing the circulation of values, to see that this circulation is not itself a trace, but rather a form. And like all forms, neuronal and capitalistic, it is a form that is open to explosion, to another form, to another future.
16. The philosophical, scientific and political commitment to the possibility of another form is a commitment to remain open and attentive to sexual, biological and political self-fashioning, to the plasticity of all identity, to new ideas and experiences of difference. It is a commitment to listen metaphorically to the rain in the many evocative ways that Paz poetically captures. And it is a means for reimagining the work of philosophy on the self in the powerful ways that Malabou takes up her intellectual autobiography in this short but shattering book. Malabou has provided a tantalizing glimpse of the ways in which philosophy at the dusk of writing must increasingly become our own way to recognize our potentials in an era of plasticity. As a portal to her vast and powerful oeuvre, this book invites a first encounter with plastic reading.

⁹ Ibid, 9.