

Mirroring application or plastic reformulation of plasticity?

Katja Čičigoj

Abstract:

Philosopher Catherine Malabou's elaboration of plasticity has taken several forms: from her materialist synthesis of dialectics and deconstruction, through reading neurosciences via a critique of the limits of psychoanalysis, to her engagement with Heidegger, Marx, Levinas, Nietzsche, or her take on feminism and sexual difference, as well as her critique of biopolitics. *Plastic Materialities* contributes to this formative process by bringing together three previously unpublished essays as well as the extension and critique of her work by scholars in the fields of law, political theory, psychoanalysis, biology, art, and literature.

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Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (Hg.): *Plastic Materialities. Politics, Legality and Metamorphosis in the work of Catherine Malabou*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 352 S., broschiert, 26,95 US-Dollar. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5857-2

At the risk of embarking on preposterous generalisations, I wish to open this review by sketching the academic and intellectual context of Catherine Malabou's specific return to ontology through the concept of plasticity. This is taken up and worked upon in *Plastic Materialities* by several authors and Malabou herself. After a specific reception of poststructuralism and deconstruction as essentially proposing a permanent proliferation of differences without permanence, resistance and negativity, several contemporary returns to ontology (e.g. in the form of 'new materialisms' or 'speculative realisms' and 'object oriented ontologies') seem to indicate a need for rethinking the materiality of the world beyond the stagnated and stagnating divides of matter/vs discourse, the real/vs the symbolic, the universal/vs the historic, event/vs structure; or to think these oppositions anew in their dynamic interplay.

Somehow outside this whole fashionable theoretical constellation, French philosopher Catherine Malabou exhibits her very own, particular kind of return to ontology: instead of resorting to a post-subjective, post-humanist non-correlationist form of direct realism, she remains on the terrain of continental (post-Kantian) philosophy, reworking and reinvigorating it through her engagement with natural science (particularly neuroscience and biology). She returns to Hegel via deconstruction, to make one of his marginal concepts central to her own work: plasticity becomes the principle for thinking about the dialectic between matter and form, that is the becoming of being as matter's own historical process of immanent self-formation and deformation (as well as destruction). On the other hand, plasticity is in-formed by a dialectical take on deconstruction, which presents deconstruction as an immanently material process of being's plastic self-forming and deforming; furthermore it pursues such a materialist notion of deconstruction as "the work of the negative", the symbolic void within matter itself, deconstruction as matter and thought's permanent self-contradiction. The becoming of being is rendered by Malabou as proceeding through a series of destructive and formative accidents, in a dialectic of giving form, resisting new forms, and destroying old ones. Plasticity as rendered by Malabou thus becomes not only an ontological principle pushing us further from the structuralism/poststructuralism/deconstruction alternatives (as exhibited i.e. also in her plastic reading of Althusser's "aleatory materialism", Darwin and social selection in one of her

essays in the present publication); but - with its complex reformulation of necessity and contingency, freedom and determinism, autonomy and dependence, the given and its transformability - plasticity enables us also to rethink the political stakes of contemporary philosophy.

Plastic Materialities presents a due recognition of the historic importance of the work of Catherine Malabou with its ramifying implications for ontology, political philosophy, ethics, psychoanalysis, law, art and perhaps more. Apart from three unpublished essays, the book contains an interview with the philosopher, which nicely reflects upon others' contributions, yet somehow leaves the reader wanting for a more extensive and perhaps conclusive reflection. Nevertheless, while Malabou's lucid and at times surprising elaboration of her own concept will hardly disappoint her readers, other scholars' contributions oscillate between fruitful critique, which opens the way for further elaborating the concept of plasticity (i.e. Toscano's raising of a Marxist materialist critique of Hegelian idealism or Moten's insistence on the danger of turning plasticity into Western sovereignty over the unthought-of rigidity of the colonial non-subjects). On the other hand, several other contributions work as mere applications of plasticity to different fields (plastic arts, literature, law, entomology) with little innovation, apart from some odd theoretical syncretism reading plasticity together with Bakhtin or Deleuze; some even provide a reactive reaffirmation of theories whose limits Malabou's work aims at overcoming (psychoanalysis, deconstruction). Instead of questioning what function their critique plays in Malabou's work, how they enable her to think further, they remain tied to a much less interesting assessment of how far her critique actually applies to these theories.

However, Plastic Materialities remains a welcome publication, one which brings recognition to one of the most prolific and surprisingly innovative approaches in contemporary continental philosophy. The edited volume offers grounds for the formative work of plasticity to be broadened, elucidated and pursued further. In the end – it also offers readers the chance to entertain plasticity's several reconceptualizations while awaiting Malabou's own next elaboration of the concept.