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## IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 01: BODIES AND MEDIA

# Plasticity, the Genetics of Difference, and the Repair of Utopia

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In this article, I propose theorizing imaginaries of futurity—rather than 'imaginaries of the future'—in terms of what the French philosopher Catherine Malabou calls plasticity. Since her earliest work on Hegel, Heidegger and plasticity, Malabou has continued to develop concepts of 'positive plasticity' (the giving of form) and 'negative plasticity' (the receiving of form) that adhere, she claims, to the generativity of Life itself. In contrast to Fredric Jameson, Malabou's present is vital, with the potential at any and every moment for 'breaking free' from pre-conceived onto-epistemological constructs. Her work on plasticity locates the vitality of history in the 'strange critical entity, at once philosophical, scientific, and political, that would be a consciousness of the brain' (2008: 2). This statement grounds a new concept of utopia as plasticity. In defining the contribution of Malabou's investigation to identifying a utopian imaginary as plasticity, I revisit Darko Suvin's well-known notion of the novum, which he develops from the work of Ernst Bloch. The novum names a figuration of radical difference, and Suvin maintains its role as the 'breaking-free' that structures difference in, and as, utopia.

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## Article

*'History has not ended with the post-industrial society: as Bloch said,  
Judgment Day is also Genesis, and Genesis is every day'.*

—Darko Suvin

'Imaginarities of the future' are not images, but something far more complex, multidimensional, and conceptual. In his groundbreaking *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor defines the social imaginary as 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence ... and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor, 2004: 23). Taylor locates the current blind devotion to 'modern individualism' in its linkage 'with societies of unprecedented power in human history, [such that] it seems impossible and mad to try to resist. But we must not commit the anachronism of thinking that this was always the case' (2004: 92). Utopian theorist Fredric Jameson extends this to wonder why (echoing H. Bruce Franklin) it is 'easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism ... I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems ... but a monotonous repetition of what is already here' (Jameson, 2004: 76). The crux, he adds, is how to disrupt that repetition: '[t]he problem' is 'locating radical difference' that would move us past late the universalisms of late capitalism, and 'is insoluble as long as one deems oneself in a windless present.' (Jameson, 2003: 76). As he writes, there appears to be no motive for the disruption of History under capitalism; certainly, the very possibility of utopia is enervated.

These thinkers expose contemporary culture's near-inability to either think or imagine ourselves existing otherwise than as a 'producer'—even though we ourselves are 'the product' of the neo-liberal imaginary. Rendered entirely 'flexible' to its myths of agency and power, we become, as Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (2015: 9) put it, mere 'facilitators of the capitalist mode of production'. While Jameson's mechanistic metaphors of the 'jumpstart' and the 'transmission' propose the introduction of a 'spark' to jumpstart a return to a history 'made by human beings,' the calculative technologies of capitalism operate otherwise. To 'break out' is to break down. In this essay, therefore, I propose theorizing imaginaries of *futurity*—rather

than 'imaginaries of the future'—in terms of what the French philosopher Catherine Malabou calls *plasticity*.

Since her earliest work on Hegel, Heidegger and plasticity, Malabou (2000, 2005) has continued to develop concepts of 'positive plasticity' (the giving of form) and 'negative plasticity' (the receiving of form) that adhere, she claims, to the generativity of Life itself. In contrast to Jameson's 'windless present', Malabou's present is vital and restless, even curious; at any and every moment dwells a germ of potentiality to 'break free' from pre-conceived onto-epistemological constructs. The historicity of Malabou's years-long project clarifies the nature and source of plasticity's resistance to the systemic universalisms of capitalist socio-economic theory. Displacing the historical materialism of Marxist thought, Malabou locates radical difference in the vitality of a *biological* materialism, repudiating the deeply rooted notion that History and Nature are absolutely separate from one another. Instead, she posits, there is an 'organic tension' at work that should fundamentally alter our very sense of history and how we 'make sense' of 'all this' (Jameson, 2004: 76). Malabou's work on plasticity locates the vitality of history in the 'strange critical entity, at once philosophical, scientific, and political, that would be a *consciousness of the brain*' (Malabou, 2008: 2).

Central to her argument is the force of metaphor. The widespread use of technological metaphors (see Doutet 2013) to refer to the brain are the source of the Jamesonian 'problem' (Malabou, 2003: 76). In repairing the relationship between history and nature, a question 'posed ceaseless by twentieth century philosophy' (Malabou, 2016: 144), metaphors of the brain and rationality as calculative technologies prove to be 'the problem' all along. History is shaped by a notion of 'objective temporality' that moves in a linear fashion, and thus far has not been able to account for the *possibility* of 'the wholly other' (Ibid.). For Malabou, addressing this means rethinking the 'base structure of thought' altogether, starting with our relationship with the brain: '[t]he work proper to the brain that engages with history and individual experience has a name: plasticity' (Malabou, 2008: 4). Developing an 'epigenetic paradigm' to release us from this trap, Malabou considers the implications of an 'epigenetic temporality' (Malabou, 2016: 144) that can account for radical change, and allow for 'the arrival' of alterity. Plasticity, at the core of epigenetic temporality,

can answer the persistently unanswered question, 'After so many disappointing announcements, can the wholly other finally come to pass?' (Ibid.). Another way to put the question is, 'can utopia finally appear?' Can we imagine such a relationship 'with our own brain, *as the image of a world to come*' (2008: 82, emphasis added)?

To understand the connection of plasticity to utopia, I begin with a philosophical predecessor—not Jacques Derrida, with whom Malabou's work is almost always in dialogue—but Roland Barthes. His remarkable essay 'Plastic' (in his 1957 *Mythologies* collection), sees in the manufactured proliferation of plastic objects an uncanny representation of the Soul of Man under Capitalism, to echo Oscar Wilde, whose 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' is one of the more evocative justifications for the existence of Utopia (Wilde, 1891). Barthes' disquiet in seeing the 'ubiquity' of plastic as a replacement material for Nature itself presages an imaginary of the future populated by citizens *unconscious* of their conformity to regulatory ideological formations. Malabou's correction stems from her insistence on the historicity of consciousness itself: a temporal gap is a critical site. Acknowledging the prescience of Barthes' critique, Malabou redirects attention from the hard object made from the man-made material—plastic—and toward 'the plastic subject(ivity)'. Her investigations of contemporary neuro-plasticity reveal an image of consciousness that is something more than a metaphor: plasticity is an embodied principle of biological life. Both the yielding to form of 'negative plasticity' and the giving of form of 'positive plasticity' allow biological life to be altered by external pressures: to adapt, to be resilient. Whereas replication, as both Jameson and Barthes observe, is a form of the death-drive, reproduction that generates *difference* is Life.

In defining the contribution of Malabou's investigation to the identification of a utopian imaginary *as plasticity*, I revisit Darko Suvin's well-known notion of the *novum*, which he develops from the work of Ernst Bloch (1986). The *novum* names a figuration of radical difference, and Suvin maintains its role as the 'breaking-free' that structures difference in, and as, utopia. Suvin describes a transformational ontology that would invest the *novum* with the vitality of what Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller call 'the restless form that survives philosophical critique' (2015: 1). But there remains Jameson's problem: 'how to locate radical difference;

how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia' (Jameson, 2003: 76). Malabou supersedes Suvin and Jameson alike, I argue, by locating radical difference in an unexpected place: not in the historical, but in the biological. She locates radical difference in 'the originary mutability of being' (Malabou, 2010: 11). As for history: Malabou asserts that 'plasticity, far from producing a mirror of the world, *is the form of another possible world*' (Malabou, 2008: 80, emphasis added). Malabou offers a philosophy of consciousness as plasticity, based in a 'metamorphic structuralism' (Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller, 2015: 1). Such a model of thought, Malabou proposes, constitutes a philosophy of futurity and/as change.

### **History 'in the Making'**

Roland Barthes was inspired to write 'Plastic' after attending an exhibition in Paris celebrating the virtue of this 'miracle' material. The exhibition was a sort of mini-World's Fair event, one of many launched from the 1930s to the 1950s in Europe and the United States. As Folke Kihlstedt notes, 'these kinds of events in the post-Depression United States delivered to the large cross-section of American society ... a buoyant, optimistic message extolling the positive consequences of science and technology for life in the future' (Kihlstedt, 1986: 100; Corn, 1986). Since the 1930s plastic has projected a visionary landscape of economic and material plenty as well as a future of open possibility for the modern consumer, as several recent studies have articulated (Fenichell, 1996; Meikle, 1995; Freinkel, 2011). The consumer is the target at the Paris exhibit, indeed at all such product fairs, as the cheap manufactured products plastic makes possible promise a consumer utopia such as the world had not seen. Historians agree, whether they are pro or con the dawning of the so-called 'Plasticene Age' (Reed, 2015), that in a real sense plastic made possible the democratizing of modern consumerism.

Jeffrey Meikle, one such historian of the plastics industry, adds that as long as plastics were seen as *the* cutting-edge industry for the future, plastics were extravagantly praised as the material 'from which [Americans] would shape the precise contours of a desired future ... leading America and the world into a "brighter and cleaner future" ... During the war, journalists and advertisers built up so many

utopian predictions about plastics in the postwar world' (Meikle, 1995: 79) that by the 1950s 'the older utopian vision of the white-coated laboratory chemist' joins with 'the newer vision of a postwar plastic cornucopia' to configure the image of 'molecule engineers' who could 'almost draw blueprints of the kind of new molecules that they need for a given purpose' (Meikle, 1995: 91–92). These engineers would streamline the United States and its Western allies smoothly into a modern age of unprecedented abundance. Furthermore, Meikle observes, as the ubiquity of plastic products made them seem commonplace and cheap, manufacturers redoubled marketing efforts to reclaim plastic's reputation as a material embodiment of history in the making, 'an approaching technological utopia' (Meikle, 1995: 88). The future was already being imagined as a manufactured one.

Barthes' essay appears within this general historical context of manufacturing ingenuity and stoked-up consumerism, investigating plastic as what he presciently recognizes as the visible form of the modern death drive. As its inclusion in *Mythologies* implies, the topic of 'Plastic' is not simply the nature of plastic and its place in modern society, but its function as a 'mythical' substance. Barthes describes the production of plastic as 'alchemical' and 'secret': '[a]t the entrance to the stall, the public waits in a long line to see accomplished the magical operation par excellence: the conversion of substance' (Barthes, 2011: 193). This story, as much as the substance itself, is Barthes' subject: the *myth* of plastic. It is at once an origin myth and a cultural myth. But like many robust myths, the symbolic story hides a barer reality. Obscured by the symbolic economy of a plasticized consumer world celebrating innovation, convenience, and a mastery of the elements, Barthes sees a toxic underside: a world of users with an instrumentalist attitude toward nature, toward other human beings, toward life itself. 'Plastic' narrates the myth of plastic as science fiction plot, presenting a possible world, not far off, with plasticized human replicants. Barthes suggests that plastic and plasticity are material and conceptual figurations comprising a narrative regarding freedom and unfreedom in modern mass culture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, he says nothing of plastic's place in history of military technological development, which prepared the ground for a cultural takeover.

While Barthes clearly dislikes things made of plastic as cheap, lifeless copies of things once made of natural material, at stake for him is 'negative plasticity,' as Malabou will call it. Plastic is a 'molding technology' in more ways than one; it is both a substance and a processing of individual and social identities in the thrall of post-war capitalism. Plastic's very plasticity is its genius. 'More than a substance,' Barthes writes, 'plastic is the *very idea of its infinite transformation*' and as such, 'almost fails to exist as a substance' (Barthes, 2011: 193, emphasis added). It stands as quite literally an unprecedented human achievement: the invention of a material developed for the sole purpose of its usability, thanks to its versatility for manufactured forms. Its inherent formlessness allows for infinite replication, for imitation of any other form. At the same time, the actual uses of plastic are anything but 'transcendent', being 'historically bourgeois in origin' (Barthes, 2011: 193). Barthes locates plastic's greatest value (or rather, its 'virtue') in its ability to create a false front in the appearances of wealth. This pretention manifests itself in a 'fashion for plastic'; elevating its worth as a marketable product, even as it 'declines' into a 'household material' (Barthes, 2011: 194–5). In an odd turn of phrase, plastic is said to be a material that 'like the common man, *consents* to be prosaic' (Barthes, 2011: 195, emphasis added). Flexible like plastic, this 'consent' is merely an acceptance of a social identity being impressed upon the common man.

Paradoxically, Barthes observes, plastic both *is* and *is not* substantial: it is an idea of 'fecund[ity]' (Barthes, 2011: 195), troped peculiarly in terms of (artificial) insemination and reproduction. The essay's opening description of the Paris display limns a peculiarly gendered account of technological (pro)creation:

An ideally shaped machine, tabulated and oblong (the right shape to manifest the secret of an itinerary), effortless draws from a heap of greenish crystals a series of gleaming fluted pin trays. At one end the raw telluric substance, and at the other the perfect human object; and between these two extremes, nothing but a trajectory, scarcely watched over by a helmeted employee, half god, half robot. (Barthes, 2011: 193)



Just as the imagery of alchemy flashes from time to time in the essay's vision of 'magical' conversion, Barthes' plastic birth parody involves scarcely any visible labor. The reproductive process takes place without the exhausting intellectual and physical effort of maternal labor—nor even with the intellectual labor put in by Mary Shelley's legendary scientist in order to 'birth' his unnatural creature. The extrusion machine at the center of the scene stands in place of a maternal body, 'ideally shaped' in order 'to manifest the secret of an itinerary' (Barthes, 2011: 193). Indeed, the machine sublimates entirely the natural course of reproduction. Its productive labor is easeful, quiet, and with a little oil labor can continue indefinitely. The value of maternal labor thus evacuated of agony, the admiration of the observer focuses not on a baby, but directly on the smooth, 'effortless' operation of the labor involved in mechanical reproduction; we are to admire the '*very spectacle of the end products*' (Barthes, 2011: 193, emphasis added).

Barthes does not mention—probably did not know—that preproduction plastic is called 'virgin plastic.' The echoes of maternity and labor (including midwifery) in this language of insemination and pregnancy point toward a science-fiction spectacle of a false and hectic generativity. The 'spectacle' lies not simply in the crowning of individual products as they leave the machine's orifice, but also in the display of the variety and proliferation of plastic. Think of the display cases and shelving that make up the very architecture of the modern supermarket: the showcasing of plastic at this exhibit is an instantiation of the ubiquity of plastic. This is a moment of technological sublime; the 'perpetual astonishment' (Ibid.: 194) before plastic is at its proliferating forms, perfectly replicated. As the trace of the 'very idea of its infinite transformation' (Ibid.: 193), plastic stands as uniquely of the present and of the future: the power of ideology shaping the form of history. The spectacle tells its story through the conscious staging of ideology's plastic and plasticizing capacities, performing, to anticipate Barthes's overall theme in *Mythologies*, the contemporary *myth* of plastic. The trope of sexual reproduction belies the superseding of embodied feminine creativity by the superior potency of masculine invention. The *secret*, the *miracle*, the *manifestation*, the *ubiquity made visible*: these are godly attributes belonging to

'the mind' that 'impregnates'; hence the '*perpetual* astonishment, the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferations of substance, detecting the connections (*liaisons*) between the singular of its origin and the plural of its effects' (Barthes, 2011: 194, emphasis added).

This 'singular of its origin' is nothing less than an *idea* of self-generativity: the 'plural of its effects' is the display of plastic objects that realize 'the scope of transformations [by] which man measures its power' (Ibid.). This strange scene represents a modern version of a familiar science-fiction trope: the violation of nature 'with profane fingers' (Shelley, 2018: 42) by mankind's [sic] technical and creative ambitions. In achieving through human inventiveness and technology 'a second nature' that purports to perfect the first, plastic claims priority: '[t]he hierarchy of substances is forthwith abolished, a single one will replace them all: the whole world, even life itself, *can* be plasticized since, we are told, plastic aortas are beginning to be manufactured' (Barthes, 2011: 195). Is this the update of Dr. Frankenstein's 'new species [of human being]' of which he himself would be—in a curious distinction—*both* 'creator and source' (Shelley, 2018: 42).

Plastic does more than just replace nature, in other words. It stands for something, as a symbol, and stands *in* for something, like an alibi. Myths are alibis, notes Barthes—they are stories concealing their ideological content (Barthes, 2011: 233). What plastic stands (in) for becomes clearer in another essay in *Mythologies*, entitled 'Toys'. In this chapter, Barthes explores the relationship of natural and artificial materials in children's toys, pointing more directly to the entangled relationship of material shaping with ideological shaping, production, and reproduction. He excavates the cultural myth underlying the production of children's toys in contemporary France with a critique not simply of 'toy aesthetics' but, relatedly in his view, the deadening effects of that material takeover on children themselves:

The fact that French toys literally prefigure the universe of adult functions can only prepare the child to accept them all, constituting for him even before he can think about it the alibi of a Nature which has created for all time soldiers, postmen, and Vespas. ... [T]he child cannot constitute himself

as anything but an owner, a user, never as a creator; he does not invent the world, he utilizes it[.] (Barthes, 2011: 60)

Barthes' words are carefully chosen. These plastic playthings do more than simply anticipate adult life, its habits of living; they 'prefigure the universe' defining, 'before he can think about it,' a way of being. A false ontology is under construction, and the child may *never*, even as an adult, gain an awareness of the ideological 'prefiguring' that shapes and defines its universe.

Who might these children be or become, then—if they *become* at all—when the plastic material from which their toys are molded become the *terra synthetica* for what Barthes regards as the 'posthumous life' of toy and child alike? Life is 'posthumous' because the 'elaborate' compounds 'look both crude and hygienic, they eliminate the pleasure, the gentleness, the humanity of touch' (Barthes, 2011: 60). Touch is the heart of aesthetics, its root-word referring not to the physical sense so much as the sensorium through which we are continuously touched, by each one of our senses, by objects around us, by other people. Barthes suggests, though he does not put it this way, that the effect of plastic is an-aesthetic. A plasticized world, then, might be a kind of death-in-life.

This is Barthes' science-fiction version of history in the making: replication vs. reproduction, sameness vs. difference, users vs. creators. The problem for Barthes is located in a tautological epistemology while, as Catherine Malabou (following Derrida) will put it fifty years later, the late capitalist project 'can obviously neither produce nor understand the theory of its own replacement' (Malabou, 2009: 57). This form of modernity disguises the rejection of difference; and a creative sclerosis is uncannily manifest in the proliferations, replications, and implications of a world that 'can be plasticized' (Barthes, 2001: 195) and to a frightening extent, already has been.

### **A 'Genetics of the Formation of a Schema': An Epigenetic Paradigm**

Catherine Malabou rarely speaks of plastic products per se, with the exception of plastic explosive. But in a 2013 unpublished talk, 'The Living Room: Plasticity and Hospitality' she does point toward the 'range of meanings' the words *plasticity* and

*plastic* can embrace—including ‘all the various forms of “plastic” in our world (from the “plastic arts” to plastic wood, plastic money; plastic explosives)’. She also notes, as she had not in previous writing, that she is anticipated to some degree, by Barthes’ ‘Plastic’:

Roland Barthes alone has devoted to [plastic] a short chapter of *Mythologies* [in which he warns] that plastic’s ability to become anything at all may reduce anything to nothing by dissolving all differences. ... Because plastic never presents itself without form, plastic is always thought as a factor of identification, standardisation, globalisation, and never as a possible welcome of the other (Malabou, 2013: n.pag.).

Barthes anticipates Malabou in apprehending a link between concepts of plastic/ity, creativity, hospitality, and a politics of freedom in a capitalist context. His uncanny vision of a plasticized literally becomes our present. That is, while separated by at least one generation, Barthes and Malabou tilt at a common enemy: a late-capitalist universalism that lives through replication (sameness, standardization) rather than reproduction (difference). Furthermore, Barthes’ perception that ideological formations are impressed upon us ‘before [we] can think about it’—before we can become conscious of ourselves as molded by/in those forms—constitutes the ‘alibi’ that Malabou’s work deconstructs.

With her grounding in Hegel and the dialectic, and in the work of her mentor Jacques Derrida, Malabou articulates a concept of plasticity that incorporates but extends past Barthes’ investigation of the myth of plastic—and indeed past Derrida’s grammatological project. Unable to imagine a world beyond the one we currently inhabit, to recall Jameson, we remain foreign to the historicity of the human brain itself: ‘we are still foreign to ourselves, at the threshold of this “new world”, which we fail to realize makes up our very intimacy itself’ (2008: 2–3). We are unconscious, she argues, of the ‘historicity of the brain’, as well as the metaphorical relationality of cognition itself with that historicity. On this point, Malabou will explicitly take on Derrida (1976), whose ‘grammatological project is [threatened from within] by the impossibility of thinking the end of writing as privileged schema’ (Malabou, 2011: 57).

Derrida theorizes a 'substitution structure [that] can still be assimilated within the work of writing' (Ibid.: 56), and for that reason can 'neither produce nor understand the theory of its own replacement' (Ibid.: 57). How do we think past the metaphors of mind that inform our cognitive schema? Derrida would need to countenance, Malabou proposes, that such a grammatology includes 'the potentially non-graphic nature of its becoming'—in short, not a grammatology at all, but a 'genetics of the formation of a schema' (Ibid.: 57).

This emergent structuralization of forms is what Malabou calls 'positive plasticity': the capacity of our brains to resist, or de-form, hardened synaptic formation. Positive plasticity preserves resiliency, and requires 'a kind of contradictory constitution, a synthesis of memory and forgetting, of constitution and effacement of forms' (Malabou, 2008: 77). By self-consciously re-presenting this capacity for re-form, one avoids 'producing a mirror image of the world', and produces instead 'the form of another possible world' (Ibid.: 80). What we should do with our brains, Malabou argues, is 'what the *brain* wants', both in the sense of desiring, and in the sense of lacking. '*Creating resistance to neuronal ideology is what our brain wants, and what we want for it*', Malabou concludes (Ibid.: 77, emphasis in original). But she also attunes us to a notion of plasticity and/as difference, revealing an insistent and persistent attention to breaking the limits of form, even as form emerges. Such action is the 'unfurling' of plasticity (Ibid.: 57). This plasticity, a co-constitution of agency and passivity, keeps vital an opening toward difference and creates the capacity for the persistence of emergent formations. Moreover, this process leaves open the possibility that the historically predominant 'concept of consciousness', so long compared to technologies of calculation, may be reconceptualized in terms of vitality, and the generativity of life.

Malabou's discussion of stem cells of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008) is characteristic of her effort to provide a material basis for a vitalist, creative evolution constituted in difference. She sees 'transformation' brought about by stem cells as 'bring[ing] together the origin, as their name indicates, and the future, the capacity for self re-form'. These cells stand therefore as 'the best possible definition

of plasticity ... this transformation or this transition—which cannot simply be the result of observation or of objective description' (2008: 80). Because the concept of plasticity embraces the work of making meaning (in the process of taking form) and of resisting meaning (in the potentiality for deforming, reforming), Malabou theorizes being itself—Life—in terms of contemporary 'plastic' virtues: that is, in terms of creativity and resilience. She pursues the vitality of human identity as an intra-agential process, an entanglement of traditional body/mind and space/time categories that lie in a dialogic, rather than dialectical relationship.

This relationality is so central to her work that Malabou throws down 'the plastic challenge': 'between the upsurge and the explosion of form', knowledge producers (scientists, philosophers, we ourselves) are asked *'to do what they undoubtedly have never done: construct and entertain a relation with their brain as the image of a world to come'* (2008: 82). The transformative capacity of brain plasticity lies not simply in a substitution of a metaphor of the mind for another one, but rather, in its capacity to *entertain* (literally, to hold-between) the relationality of old and new metaphors of consciousness, such that we do gain the awareness of the historicity of the brain. The new image of a 'world to come' is not a simple substitution, but rather an imaging of the emergence of one form from another. This evolving template is the essence of plasticity, maintaining its force of becoming rather forming (as a fixing of shape). Malabou's proposition of 'the new ontological transformability' (Malabou, 2011: 38–9) foregrounds potentiality rather than perfection or completion; and presencing and futurity rather than the achievement of a static present mirroring the image of what is past. Her notion of a 'positive plasticity' preserves resiliency, and requires 'a kind of contradictory constitution, a synthesis of memory and forgetting, of constitution and effacement of forms' (Malabou, 2008: 77). By self-consciously re-presenting this capacity for reform, one avoids the tautology of 'producing a mirror image of the world', and produces instead 'the form of another possible world' (2008: 80). The plastic moment is a disruptive a moment—an event or even an 'accident' (Malabou)—yet it remains open, and locates itself between negative (yielding and flexible) and positive (resistant and potentially transforming) plasticity. This is the resiliency of life.

Radical difference, Malabou suggests, is accommodated by life's capacity for 'resiliency': losing and then regaining form that is no longer identical, but adapted, evolved. The recognition of this capacity *in ourselves* amounts to what Malabou calls a 'consciousness of consciousness' (Ibid.: 66). In achieving a state of self-consciousness, we are finally in a position to see ourselves 'otherwise'; a capacity which constitutes the living heart of utopian desire. Utopia is not a time or place or an ideology: it is the *capacity* for radical change. Its plastic nature makes utopia not just resilient but possibly even reparative. This notion of repair is also anticipated by Barthes, who closed *Mythologies* with an essay entitled 'Myth Today' to explain his impatience with 'confusions' of Nature and History: 'in the description of our reality ... I wanted to expose in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying the ideological abuse I believed was hidden there' (Barthes, 2011: xi).

These 'confusions' are the workings of myth under late capitalism, and they call for cultural remediation. How? Through resistance, he argues: '[i]n actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must fully stress this *open character* of the concept' (Barthes, 2011: 220). This openness, in fact, makes possible 'a certain liberation of the signifier' (Ibid.: ix): there is the possibility at least of the breaking of forms. With the integration of science that Barthes did not have and might have appreciated, Malabou elucidates Barthes' ironical presentation of the 'alchemical' (thus magical, mystical, mythical) essence of plastic/ity as the idea of infinite transformation. Barthes' language of magic and myth metaphorizes what Malabou would make as literal as possible: the paradox of plasticity as at once informing and deforming, as well as *reforming* and *transforming*.<sup>2</sup> With clear implications for the notion of History, the germ of this transformability holds open the possibility for change – 'a certain liberation' in the de-forming of forms.

The impact of Malabou's mentor Jacques Derrida is evident in her explication of plasticity and difference. I concur however with Jean-Paul Martinon's claim that it is a mistake to see Malabou as simply a 'follower of the late Derrida' (Martinon, 2007:

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<sup>2</sup> Consider in this context 'worlding' as a 'possibility in waiting' (Trend, 2013: 87), a suspension of closure.

24). Regardless of her invocation of the *trace* as both a 'surplus' and as a structural feature of a transformative image of possible worlds, Malabou insists that while Derrida takes us so far, it is not far enough. He defines *différance* as 'the non-full, non-simple "origin"; it is the structured and differing origin of differences' (Derrida, 1973: 141). Temporality is inherent to what is an ongoing process: '[t]he trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace'. This is the deconstructive moment, whereby '[t]he trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin' (Ibid.: 156). The trace becomes in this model another origin, co-constituted 'reciprocally' in the event (or in the *accident*) of an encounter with difference; the trace never *is*, because the deconstructive urge requires that such a structure be ruptured.

Thus while the trace 'does not exist, [and is] never a being-present outside of all plenitude', its possibility is 'by rights anterior to all that one calls a sign, ... concept or operation' (Derrida, 1974: 63). The trace thereby 'indicate[s] a way out of the closure imposed by the system' (Wood & Bernasconi, 1988: 2); and it retains its indeterminate nature as a kind of plasticity: '[d]ifference is therefore the formation of form. But it is on the other hand the being-imprinted of the imprint' (Derrida, 1977: 63). Thus, there exists a creative becoming that is 'always already' in-formed by memory. If 'the (pure) trace is difference', then, Derrida argues, it is also 'repeatable' as nonidentical to itself. All that can be *anticipated* of the trace is its repeatability, or the simultaneity of protention (in anticipation) and retention (the 'irreducibility of the always-already-there').<sup>3</sup> This trace is essential to a deconstructive notion of utopia: as I have shown elsewhere, it is also utopia's narratological catalyst (Wagner-

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<sup>3</sup> According to Leonard Lawlor, this 'at the same time' is the crux of the matter for Derrida. 'The memory and the anticipation consist in repeatability. Because what I experience now can be immediately recalled, it is repeatable and that repeatability therefore motivates me to anticipate the same thing happening again. ... At the same time, the present experience is an event and it is not an event because it is repeatable' (Lawlor, 2016: n.pag.).



Lawlor, 2017). In the ‘thickness’ of the present (in which past, present, and future are fully entangled) is generated a new story. Derrida’s own description of the structure of the trace, as a component of this ‘thick’ present references one of the central tropes of utopian theorizing, the horizon—which he understands to signify the same ‘*dialectic of protention and retention that one would install in the heart of the present instead of surrounding it with it*’ (Derrida, 1977: 67, emphasis added).

The dialectical nature of the trace is precisely the paradox Malabou zeroes in on. Malabou prefers to think in terms of the dialectics of an *entre-deux*. This is a dialogic rather than dialectical model of how ‘the nature of thought contradicts itself’ (Malabou, 2009: 81); it is even a performative act of resistance. Imagining itself to be something other than nature, that is, *other than* a ‘biological entity’, the brain’s ‘mental entity’ comes up against ‘its own difference from itself ... The brain is not the natural ideal of globalized economic, political and social organization, it is the locus of an *organic tension that is the basis of our history and our critical activity*’ (Ibid.: 81, emphasis added). The process of this struggle is the performance of ‘the plastic challenge’ discussed above: that scientists and knowledge producers re-cognize that what they are ‘looking at’ is itself an image of a cultural formation. A positivist ideology cannot entertain an other world. Recall here Barthes’ discussion of the ‘limits’ of the scientist—as well as the writer. In either case, an uncritical assessment of the shape of things, or what Barthes calls ‘what-is-taken-for-granted’ (Barthes, 2011: xi), must be disrupted. According to Malabou, to do this we must become conscious of the historicity of our consciousness. This is the ‘work’ we should do on our brain (Malabou, 2008: 10).

Theorists of utopia have long since concluded that the realization of any one utopia is not the goal, but in fact an outcome to be avoided: the blueprint model is rejected as exclusionary and perhaps, therefore, too open to violence. Hence the dystopias of our centuries. What takes the place of the static-state utopia is a model far more plastic, to the degree that some theorists have asked if there is in fact anything we can say any more about the nature of utopia (Levitas, 1990). What constitutes the nature of utopia, I argue, is precisely its plasticity. A static-state utopia is relevant only to an ‘end-stop’ world (Winterson, 1995) without the possibility of difference and change; as such, utopia describes a ‘perfect’, but historically moribund, state.

A process utopia requires possibility, awaiting. The refusal of finality (the blueprint model) marks the correspondence of a process-utopia model to critical praxis; it is a process (and a politics) of 'unactualized potential' (Colebrook, 2008: 52) that requires difference and deferral. It is, finally, essentially virtual (Diodato, 2012)—that is, always becoming, and thus essentially plastic, generative, and not concrete. This is the 'agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model' (Malabou, 2008: 6): an undoing of myth that illuminates the nature of myth itself, as the stories we tell to ourselves and about ourselves. In her recent *Before Tomorrow* (2016), Malabou calls the contemporary moment "'historic," if we stop taking history for the absolute other of nature, and meaning for the result of their difference' (Malabou, 2016: 186). Rather, a 'new state of history' consists in an organic tension that constitutes what she calls the epigenetic paradigm. This paradigm 'announces a deep displacement of the relation between the symbolic and the biological, which [relationship] is ... [now] one of exchange' (Ibid.). Putting this another way, Malabou identifies this new relation as a form of 'repair'—putting back together what should not be separated. As it does so, she concludes, the nature of history itself is transformed, 'to the point where perhaps we can no longer understand what, for so long, kept [Nature and History] apart' (Ibid.).

### **Generating Imaginaries of the Future: The *Novum*, Revisited**

Malabou's ontology of transformation is intuited by Barthes, entertained by Derrida, but positively radicalized by her investigation of plasticity. This philosophical development provides a new context for reviewing and reviving Darko Suvin's notion of the *novum*. The term is fallen out of use, but should be revived because it illuminates the importance of understanding utopia not as a political pursuit for any final solution or perfect static state, but as a politically radical process of ongoing critique. Suvin's framework for talking about this narrative mechanism is neo-Marxian and so inherently historical. The *novum* marks more than something that is 'new', surprising, innovative: these are the descriptors of a 'capitalist practice' that 'eventually [perfects] an image of time rigidified into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable "things"' (Suvin, 1979: 84), such that time is converted to 'the equivalent of money and thus of all things' (1979: 73). What

Suvin seeks is a transformative kernel with the function of 'de-alienating human history' (1979: 84) from the mystifications derived from these false equivalencies. And yet, he admits that 'the simple fact to start from remains that [utopia] is not hypostasis of the Holy Ghost, the *Zeitgeist*, or what-not, but a literary genre induced from a set of man-made books within a man-made history' (1979: 62).

Malabou locates 'the problem' in our relationship to our own consciousness: we cannot recognize the self-mystification we participate in, having yielded—and continuing to yield—to the structures of Western capitalism. Anticipating her, Suvin posits that the *novum* is not a matter of simple surprise, but of wonder: the *novum* does not represent a new development in our history, but rather partakes of 'what Bloch called the "front-line of historical process" ... broken free of market imperatives'. This is not a superficial change but 'true novelty ... so qualitatively different' (1979: 82). In an articulation Barthes would understand, Suvin regards many changes in the world as expressions of a 'pseudo-*novum*': the 'new and improved' is a mere replication with only cosmetic changes. The true *novum*, on the other hand, represents 'a really radical novelty such as a social revolution and change of scientific paradigm' (1979: 81).

Foreshadowing Malabou on destructive plasticity, Suvin observes that 'the pseudo-*novum* will not have the vitality of a tree, an animal species, or a belief but, to quote Bergson, the explosive, spurting élan of a howitzer shell exploding into successively smaller fragments'; only the true *novum* owns that 'vitality' that generates the 'possibility of something [truly] new' (1979: 81–2). Furthermore, quoting Ernst Bloch directly, Suvin argues that the only consistent novelty is one that constitutes an open-ended system 'which possesses its *novum* continually both in itself and before itself as befits the unfinished state of the world, nowhere determined by any transcendental supraworldly formula'; and thus 'eschew[ing] any final solutions' (quoted in Suvin, 2010: 88).

To adopt Malabou's terms, the function of the *novum* might be compared to the function of the immature stem cell in a living body: it is not simply a figuration of difference but of an open-ended and generative *structuralization* of difference.<sup>4</sup> Its generativity is based not in 'any transcendental supraworldly formula' (Suvin,

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<sup>4</sup> Note the difference between the words *structure* and *structuralization*, the former referring to a completed, hardened form, and the latter to the *process* of becoming a structure.

1979: 82) but in the open-ended deferral of final form. The conceptual plasticity of the *novum* embraces its contradictory nature, as described by Suvin: the only transcendental aspect of the *novum* is its essential plasticity, with all of the resonances, contradictions and accretions held within this persistent philosophical concept. The achievement of the *novum* is, as Miguel Abensour says, its non-achievement: '[utopia's] non-coincidence between what was projected and what has come about throws us back into a new struggle for alterity ...The persistence of utopia, we see, is due not so much to the repeated pursuit of a determinate content as to the *ever-reborn* movement toward something indeterminate' (Abensour, 2008: 407). For this reason only, utopia can anticipate another possibility, 'a possibility of waiting' for 'the expectation of the arrival of another way of being' (Malabou, 2008: 87).

In his invention of the *novum*, Suvin creates a figuration of radical difference and ontological disruption, or what Malabou calls an *accident* (Malabou, 2012: 30). What I am arguing here is that Malabou both narrows and broadens (always the contradiction) the definition of the *novum* for utopian theory. The *novum* is a figure of 'the genetics of a formation' of alterity (Malabou, 2011: 57)—and of the schema we call utopia. Central to the resilience of this idea is the centrality of the biological, rather than strictly historical, change. Conceived as a stem cell of alterity, the *novum* is about generativity. Derrida speaks of the origin of the origin—this is the 'problem of location' Jameson presents to us. Malabou's correction, as I read her, is to locate 'the singularity of the origin' in what Barthes so interestingly calls 'the plural of the effects' that plastic is capable of. That is, the singularity of the origin *is* the plural of the effects. Like Barthes, Malabou's work wants to 'clear up' the confusions around Nature and History: this project in 'hyper-deconstruction' (Martinon, 2007: 24) keeps alive an imperative to challenge such confusions. The notion of plasticity itself, she notes, must be challenged before it becomes an orthodoxy. What *must* be avoided is any yielding to 'what goes without saying' (Barthes, 2011: xi), as Barthes puts it, as if Jameson's 'problem' were located and solved.<sup>5</sup> For Barthes, Suvin and Malabou alike, the concept of utopia, understood as ontologically *plastic*, contains the possibility of a world to come: the repair of utopia.

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<sup>5</sup> Barthes would concur with Suvin's assertion that 'myth is reenactment, eternal return, and the opposite of a creative human freedom' (1979: 83).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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