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Plastic/ity

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In an essay entitled "Plastic," appearing in his seminal collection, *Mythologies* (1957), cultural philosopher Roland Barthes takes a hard look at what he presciently recognizes as the visible form of the modern death drive: plastic. This bold claim might seem incommensurate with both the brevity of his essay (barely four pages) and with its celebratory, even triumphalist tone. But irony lies just below the rhetorical surface. Barthes's essay is at once a celebration and a condemnation of this artificial material, invented a century before, but suitable for use as a consumer product material only after World War II. By the mid-1950s the petroleum, chemical, and manufacturing industries, foreseeing unprecedented profits, promoted plastic as the signature material of modernity, and enlisted the genius of the bourgeoning advertising industry to tell the story of this remarkably versatile, durable, "miraculous" substance (Barthes 1957, 193).

This story, as much as the substance itself, is Barthes's subject: the myth, in short, of plastic. It is at once an origin myth of a consumer imperium, and a cultural myth of manifest destiny. The philosopher's interest in "mythologies" resides, however, in the way such narratives disguise a barer reality. Obscured by the symbolic economy of a "plasticized" (195) world of consumers, buoyed by innovation and so-called convenience, Barthes sees a

toxic underside: a world of users with an instrumentalist attitude toward other human beings, toward nature, toward life itself. It is not just the aesthetics of plastic that Barthes rejects. While he clearly does dislike things made of plastic – cheap, lifeless, fake copies of things once made with natural material – at stake is clearly something more abstract: the "conceptual matter" of plastic, which is to say the plasticity, of the individual and the social mind, in the post-war, modern age. Barthes apprehends that plastic and plasticity can reveal a great deal about freedom and unfreedom in a modern mass culture. Intending, as he says, to "live to the full the contradiction of my time" (xii), Barthes's examination of plastic as at once miraculous and utterly banal is exemplary of "myth today," which will always, upon scrutiny, "give the lie" to ideological rhetoric. Acknowledging there is no complete escape from ideology, Barthes can at least hold out his project as a kind of embodied critique.

Fifty years on, philosopher Catherine Malabou is producing a series of studies concerning plasticity grounded in her earliest work on Hegel. Her research into neuroplasticity is laid out in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2004) and its sequel, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (2009). Malabou rarely speaks of plastic products per se, with the exception of the explosive *plastique*, as a counter-figure to plastic's flexibility. In her essay "The Living Room: Plasticity and Hospitality" (2013), though, 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]" (n.p.). She acknowledges Barthes's warning 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" (n.p.).

Both philosophers see in the unique materiality of plastic a visual metaphor for the ontological paradox of plasticity. While of

different generations in French philosophical thought, Barthes and Malabou face a common enemy: late-capitalist universalism. This universalism realizes itself through replication of the same, rather than through (re)production of the same with-a-difference (in Kantian terms, the difference between a reproductive and productive imagination). Malabou also follows Barthes in associating plastic's economic and political dimensions to a certain form of corporatized aesthetic, expressed in the "goods" of the market, and in the market's drive for "more and better" (Atwood 2003, 296). More and better stuff engendering more and better consumers is the contemporary dream of a consumer utopia – its microcosm materialized in each and every supermarket (the bigger and cheaper, the better). All this Barthes discerns already in his essay's closing remarks, which posit that "the world" of nonhuman things, including the domain of nature, "*can* be plasticized" (Barthes 2011, 195); speaking of more and better, "even life itself" (195), with the invention, in the 1950s, of plastic aortas. A world with a hard plastic heart.

Barthes's description of plastic's mythic vitality and "quick-change talent" (194) heralds Jane Bennett's characterization of "the enchantment of modern life" (Bennett 2010, xi–xii). Barthes would have understood Bennett's emphasis on the power of such "enchantment" to turn us in two directions: "The first toward the humans who *feel* enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened" (Bennett, xii). Think of the powerful pull of "pride of ownership" among owners of luxury products (even plastic ones). Luxury consumers or not, the urge for owning the latest model, the valuing of novelty and replacement is part of the magic. Here is Barthes:

> Thus, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation.... Plastic remains *completely impregnated by this astonishment*: it is less an object than the trace of a movement. And since this movement is here virtually infinite ... plastic is, ultimately, a spectacle to be deciphered. (1957, 193)

The "idea of [plastic's] infinite transformation" (193) is our enchantment with ourselves, astonished by our capacity to transform, as if alchemically, the natural into the manmade. Barthes illuminates, over fifty years before Bennett, the entanglement of what Bennett calls "fantasies of a human uniqueness … of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature" with a "philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends" (Bennett, ix). The second direction Bennett indicates is "toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies" (xii). The overall pessimism of "Plastic" and one or two related *Mythologies* pieces may derive from Barthes's underdeveloped notion of *material agency*, which both Malabou and Bennett strive to provide. Without a notion of material agency, where can Barthes look for hope that our culture would get past the specter of modernity's instrumentalized usage of the earth, its universal dis-**regard** of the nonhuman? Wherein would lie an elemental force of critique, beyond mere words?

Malabou theorizes being itself – life – as plastic. This may sound metaphorical but it is not. Malabou's philosophical project materializes the vital agency of "gray matter" in its resistance to negative plasticity – that is, of hardened forms. Neuroscience reveals the brain's positive plasticity in its capacity for repair and resiliency. Neuroplasticity *means*, Malabou can claim without irony, that plasticity *is life*. Brain plasticity and the faculty of imagination must be co-constitutive; hospitality, the welcoming of the other, depends upon both. With the advantage of science that Barthes did not have, Malabou elucidates his ironical presentation of the "alchemical" (thus magical, mystical, mythical) essence of plastic/ity as the idea of transformation. 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 locates firmer ground for critique. Plasticity does not motivate but does allow for, make space for, criticality.

Barthes's 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 *re*forming and transforming. Recognizing the social dimension of this analysis of plasticity, Malabou can address cultural remediation quite specifically, throwing down "the plastic challenge" (2004, 82) in contemporary terms. Her work thus extends Barthes' sublimated perceptions of a plastic future that is not a capitalist caricature of utopia, or any other vision of a perfect(ed) and thus permanent ideological hegemony. This is not what our brain wants. "Between the upsurge and the explosion of form, subjectivity issues the plastic challenge," Malabou says, *"to do what they undoubtedly have never done: construct and entertain a relation with their brain as the image of a world to come"* (82, emphasis added). Nor is it, Bennett proposes, what "the world" wants. "The world" – or matter – has agency as well, a vitalism that resists humanity's "earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (2010, ix), which is so blatantly figured in our toxic love affair with plastic (Freinkel 2011).

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