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Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, eds., *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. 333 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8223-5845-9; \$26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-5857-2.

Review by Jean-Paul Martinon, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Catherine Malabou is widely recognized in the field of western and more specifically continental philosophy as one of the most important French philosophers working today. She is currently professor of Philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University, UK. Ever since obtaining her Ph.D. under the supervision of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in 1994, her rise to prominence has been dazzling in its speed and scope. In less than twenty years, she has published over fourteen books, nearly all of them translated into English, thus achieving a very rare feat amongst French scholars, conquering the English-speaking world before reaching the age of sixty. Her work is widely discussed in a number of international blogs and online forums not only in its own right, but also, more widely, in the field of New Realism or New Materialism, a denomination loosely grouping a number of contemporary philosophers (such as Bernard Stiegler, Quentin Meillassoux, and François Laruelle, for example [1]) interested in the non-transcendental status of form, reality and objects in general.

Malabou's stellar career has mainly focused on the intersection between neuroscience, psychoanalysis, French and German philosophy and political theory with a special emphasis on the work of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida. Malabou's "signature concept" (p. 1), plasticity, aims to replace previous organizing concepts such as writing and trace in philosophy and genetic code, for example, in science. These old concepts allowed philosophers and scientists to articulate the relation between the same and the other, but were useless to make sense of the permanence of discontinuity, such as malleability, mutability, and transformation, for example. In contrast to these old static terms, plasticity denotes at once the capacity to take form (as in the plasticity of clay), give form (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery), and/or implode form (as in plastic explosives). This multifaceted and protean paradigm, symptomatic of today's world, provides a way of thinking the modification and resistances of the trace and codes, emphasizing their ever-changing temporal character.

Although Malabou's work has already been widely discussed in a number of journals, Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller's new collection of essays is the first one entirely dedicated to a thorough analysis of her work to date. The collection is composed of nine essays by English-speaking scholars mainly from the fields of sociology, political science and law. The bulk of the essays originate in British and North American universities. In addition to these essays, this publication also includes three new essays by Catherine Malabou herself and an interview surveying some of the topics explored in Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller's book. Following the research interests of the editors, the main focus of this new publication is on the whole geared towards issues of legality, neurobiology, and politics. However, even with such a clear remit, Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller's new collection of essays manages to present a

comprehensive picture of Malabou's work and constitutes, as such, a welcome addition to the growing scholarship of this celebrated philosopher.

One of the most fascinating and revealing topics explored in this collection of newly commissioned essays is that of the origins/ends of Malabou's key concept of plasticity. This topic comes across most saliently in an essay by Alberto Toscano. In a typical philosophical posturing that reinforces who's right and who's wrong, Toscano delivers a blistering critique of Malabou's idea at the end of her book, *The Heidegger Change* that, ontologically, plasticity needs to be understood as absolutely prior to any other form of change and exchange taking place in the social and therefore in the ontic sciences.<sup>[2]</sup> He argues: "If we wish to test philosophy's political valence, its potential to dislocate present impasses of thought and action, we will not do this by presenting philosophy's work on itself as the *prelude* to the creation (or reform) of concepts for other disciplines and practices" (p. 98). In saying this, Toscano locates the origins/ends of plasticity not in ontology or philosophy, but in the social and therefore in the ontic sciences, as he says, in the "scandal that abstractions are in the social *before* they are in the mind" (p. 98).

In the interview that concludes the book, Malabou replies to Toscano insisting that she never meant a priority of the ontological mutability of plasticity over other ontic plasticities. There is instead, for example, "a coincidence between capitalism and ontology. Coincidence at the same time between critique of capital and destruction of traditional ontology" (p. 288). In insisting on this coincidence, Malabou reasserts that ultimately it is impossible to determine an origin/end to plasticity in ontology, the social or the ontic sciences, thus reinforcing the view that there is nothing outside of plasticity, that it permeates everything as the most singular "mode of coming" (p. 290) that exists. In imposing such an all-pervasive mode of happenstance, Malabou thus rejects the very possibility of any exteriority to her signature concept, plasticity. There is nothing that sits outside of the economy of plasticity; there is nothing off side, "*hors jeu*."<sup>[3]</sup> Everything takes place through and as plasticity, mutability and metamorphosis. In this way, nothing comes before or after plasticity. It cannot be transgressed or disrupted precisely because it is transgression and disruption itself.

It's difficult not to feel slightly scared here by this omnipotent "mode of coming" between being and itself that knows no origin or end, that nothing can radically break, alter, or disrupt. There is no doubt that Malabou continues in the lineage of Derrida's work and specifically, his view that there is no outside of text [*hors text*], that is, there is no outside of significant phenomena.<sup>[4]</sup> The world and the universe have no *causa-dei* or any other form of transcendence. But there is something that Malabou deliberately ignores in Derrida's work, something that would allow her (paradoxically) to be a little more flexible about her key concept: the idea that when it comes to origins and ends, it is never possible to be so predictive and so absolute about the way plasticity actually operates.

This lack of flexibility is evident when Malabou addresses issues of time. For example, she repeats three times, in *The Heidegger Change*: "I call time the incision of the other in being, but also the incision of being in time," thus indicating that there is indeed nothing outside of the play of plasticity.<sup>[5]</sup> Plasticity structures time and thereby the happenstance of all origins and ends. Derrida, by contrast, is a little less uncompromising. On this topic, he would highlight the importance of an alterity that cannot be anticipated, of "a surprising *arrivant* from whom and from which one will not ask anything in return."<sup>[6]</sup> In other words, Derrida would align against the all-pervasive and omnipotent play of plasticity (and thereby against the autism or auto-affection of Greek thought) what can never be conceived, what oddly queers all forms of metamorphosis and mutability, a "something" radically unknown that would break plasticity itself.<sup>[7]</sup> In doing so, he would give time (and therefore the other of Greek thought) its due: the fact that nothing can be stronger than time or stronger than all heterogeneity of contents.

This immutability of what is utterly mutable is where Malabou perhaps marks herself out in relation to some of her elders and peers. Elders such as Heidegger himself who, in his later writings, would insist on the impossibility of thinking any single "mode of coming," metamorphosis, mutability or plasticity as an

all-encompassing signifying economy, and the possibility of exploding this mode into a fourfold scheme with a plurality of in-finite radicalities (mortals/gods) that prevent the very possibility of thinking, in one go, the “given” of the future, the “knowing-awareness” of possibilities.[8] Elders also like Jean-Luc Nancy who, in a vein similar to Malabou’s, would argue for a radical concretism for which there is no off-world (“*hors-monde*”)[9], but who would also insist on the impossibility of ascribing a single coherent “mode of coming,” preferring instead to ascribe the origins/ends of plasticity to the coming to presence (*surgissement*) of being-singular-plurals, thus emphasizing like Toscano that the origins/ends are effectively in the scandal of the social. Peers finally, like Quentin Meillassoux who famously attempts to rationalize what he calls the ex-nihilo surge of time, an absolute contingency that would undermine all axioms, concepts, and laws, including plasticity itself.[10]

Notwithstanding the uncompromising aspect of Malabou’s interpretation of her key concept of plasticity and its relationship to time, origins and ends, Bhandar and Goldberg-Hiller’s timely collection of essays will significantly contribute to the current debate on the non-transcendental reading of reality and matter in today’s world. Whether we accept or not that materialism, in general, affirms the radical absence of any outside to the mode of coming, the idea put forward overall by the book, that matter is self or selves in formation, remains a thought-provoking one that will no doubt generate further research especially in the intersecting fields of neuroscience and philosophy, intersection that clearly marks Malabou out as one of the most courageous scholars attempting to bridge the gap between science and the humanities. It is a credit to the editors to have brought together a wide-ranging set of views on Malabou’s work, thus giving the reader, expert and non-experts, the possibility of apprehending one of the most distinctive voices in philosophy today.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, “Introduction”

Catherine Malabou, “Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?”

Catherine Malabou, “Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin”

Catherine Malabou, “From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?”

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Jairus Grove, “Something Darkly This Way Comes: The Horror of Plasticity in an Age of Control”

Fred Moten, “The Touring Machine (Flesh Thought Inside Out)”

## Interview with Catherine Malabou

## NOTES

[1] For a comprehensive analysis of this movement, see, for example, in French, Alexander R. Galloway, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes: Catherine Malabou, Bernard Stiegler, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Quentin Meillassoux et François Laruelle* (Paris: Editions Léo Scheer, 2012). In English, see, for example, Leon Niemoczynski, “21<sup>st</sup> Century Speculative Philosophy: Reflections on the ‘New Metaphysics’ and its Realism and Materialism” in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2013): 13-31.

[2] Catherine Malabou, *The Heidegger Change*, translated by Peter Skafish (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 284.

[3] Malabou, *The Heidegger Change*, p. 240.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

[5] Malabou, *The Heidegger Change*, p. 136. See also, p. 140, and p. 184.

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx, The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 65.

[7] An alterity, which revealingly Malabou ends up dismissing, for example: “The announcement of the other (ex)change has nothing to do with the aneconomic coming of god knows what nonpromising promise or nongiving gift” (p. 289).

[8] Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 203-5.

[9] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. B. Bergo, G. Malenfant, and M. B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 39.

[10] Quentin Meillassoux, “Temps et Surgissement Ex-nihilo,” lecture, 24th April, 2006, at *Les lundis de la philosophie*, organised by Francis Wolff, Ecole Nationale Supérieure, Paris.  
[http://archives.diffusion.ens.fr/diffusion/audio/2006\\_04\\_24\\_meillassoux.mp3](http://archives.diffusion.ens.fr/diffusion/audio/2006_04_24_meillassoux.mp3)

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