

Lives
and Forms
of an
Aesthetic
Concept

edited by Alice Iacobone

plasticity

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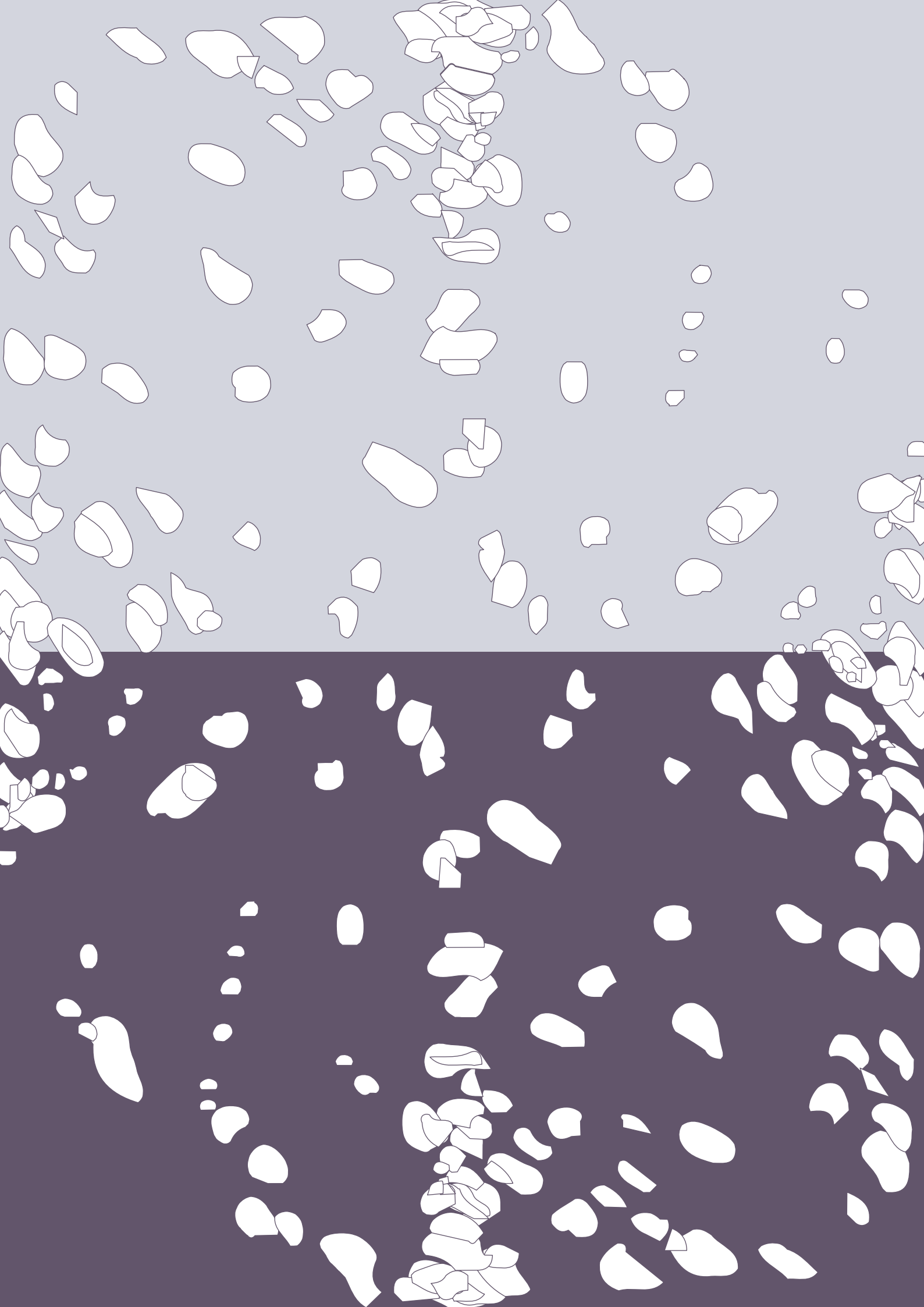
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Se *Philosophy Kitchen* dedica un numero al concetto di plasticità, ciò non è solo cifra del desiderio di dare voce a importanti momenti della riflessione contemporanea sull'arte e sulla produzione artistica. Parlare di plasticità significa, più in profondità, interrogare il modo in cui si intrecciano l'autopoiesi del vivente e l'autopoiesi del pensiero. Significa, ancora, ridare voce alla filosofia come opera aperta, come impresa barocca che costringe il soggetto a porsi di fronte a un mondo sempre in movimento, per generare poi continui atti d'invenzione che siano mimesi di tale movimento. In tale prospettiva, pensare si configura quale esercizio di ridefinizione della soggettività, quale prassi trasformativa volta a riconoscere non tanto la necessaria commistione tra la purezza del pensiero e la materialità di ciò da cui il soggetto pensante proviene, quanto soprattutto la non adeguatezza di una qualsivoglia separazione tra pensiero e materia vivente.

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Plasticity.

Lives and Forms of an Aesthetic Concept

Alice Iacobone

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Today, the term “plasticity” is increasingly popular and is being adopted in a great number of scholarly fields, where it circulates with different and sometimes not sufficiently defined meanings. More usually deployed in neurosciences (as brain plasticity) and biology (as phenotypic plasticity), the term also finds application in domains as different as physics and materials science, psychology, sociology, economics. “Plasticity” thus becomes more and more of a buzzword, a trendy catch-all term unable to fully rise to the role of concept.

This is where philosophy comes into play: thanks, above all, to Catherine Malabou’s research, philosophy has attempted to turn plasticity into a full-fledged concept, endowing it with definition and theoretical depth. As a philosophical concept, plasticity brings together form and matter, morphology and materialism. It also combines activity and passivity, referring simultaneously to the donation and to the reception of form (e.g., Malabou 1996, 20-21): it denotes both what is *gestaltend* and what is *gestaltet*, both *Bildung* and *Bildbarkeit*. Finally, plasticity reconciles formative dynamics with destruction and traumatic deflagration (Malabou 2007; 2009), thereby destabilizing any possible dichotomous view that would classify it as exclusively positive or negative. [1]

Within this framework, the intimate connections between plasticity, aesthetics, and artistic practices have always been acknowledged, but seldom have they been thoroughly and specifically investigated. By closely considering a number of specific encounters between plasticity,

[1] It is important to notice, however, that Malabou’s theorization of plasticity is decidedly focused on the human being and biological life. As she sums up: «I have been developing my theory of plasticity over the last twenty years on four main lines of thought: first as an extension of Hegelian dialectics; second, according to the

aesthetics, and the arts, the 22nd issue of *Philosophy Kitchen* offers a polyphonic contribution to this field of research.

Art history and art theory have indeed resorted to the notion of plasticity in recent years. In the early 2000s, French art historian and theorist Georges Didi-Huberman touched on the topic of plasticity by connecting it to materiality (Didi-Huberman 2000) and to anachronistic temporality (Didi-Huberman 2002); in 2012, German art historian Dietmar Rübel turned plasticity into a category for the investigation of 20th-century sculpture and its metamorphic materiality and processuality, understanding the notion in terms of formlessness (Rübel 2012). In the context of art history and exhibitions, plasticity is also increasingly serving as a useful notion for examining artworks made of plastics – a family of materials that endow the concept with yet different meanings (e.g., Davis 2023; Matter & Kittler 2024; but already Rübel 2012, 120-182). And yet, these important discourses do not necessarily encounter the concept of plasticity in all its philosophical and theoretical richness.

Philosophy, in turn, has not yet fully taken into account the fruitful connections between plasticity and the arts, and to these days there is no such thing as an “aesthetics of plasticity”. [2] Nonetheless, the concept of plasticity can be regarded as an actual aesthetic *Grundbegriff*, with a rich tradition in the history of philosophical aesthetics (see Dongowski 2002; for aesthetic accounts of plasticity see also Chateau 1999; Saint-Girons 2000). It therefore seems that the encounter between philosophical plasticity, aesthetics, and the arts still requires careful consideration and promises yet new challenges for both thought and practice.

Framing plasticity within the aesthetic discourse, here, follows three fundamental and often intertwining directions. Firstly, it puts plasticity into fruitful contact with other aesthetic concepts and categories – such as those of imagination, mimesis, or aesthesia – as well as with lines of thought that much have to do with aesthetics (as, for instance, the morphological tradition). [3] Secondly, recalling the etymological and historical roots of aesthetics allows to consider the ways in which plasticity has to do with sensation and perception, thus opening up to discourses on sensoriality, sensibility, and affects. Thirdly, aesthetics is also programmatically intended in the sense of a philosophy of art. This provides the opportunity of thinking plasticity in the close proximity of specific artworks, rather than with relation to an abstract concept of “art”. The essays comprised in this journal issue abound in case studies that should thus not be understood as mere examples, being rather the concrete phenomena from which new theoretical declensions of plasticity can stem.

The volume is organized in four sections. The first one gathers contributions that explore the connections between plasticity and specific *artistic genres or styles*. The volume opens with Ranjan Ghosh’s essay on *Plastic Baroque*, in which the notion of Baroque abandons its historical

Freudian view of the psyche; third, based on the neurological notion of the plasticity of the brain; and fourth, as a vision of ecological plasticity, centered on how an organism relates to its surroundings» (Malabou & Majewska 2019, 146).

[2] On the structural reasons why Malabou has not outlined «any “theory” of art», see Malabou 2022, esp. 643-645. On Malabou, art, and aesthetics, Hannes Opelz has recently made very instructive considerations: «When Malabou ventures (which is rather rare) to speak of art as such [...] it is not [...] to have it say what philosophy is powerless to express, but rather to free it from its aesthetic anchoring» (2022, 629; my trans., my emphasis). His analyses are also very useful to pinpoint «this tendency Malabou has to source [approvisionner] aesthetic concepts in order to tackle the major questions that concern her (subjectivity, ontology, intelligence)» (2022, 623; my trans.).

[3] On plasticity in morphology, see Maggiore 2020.

specificity and transforms into a category that allows thought to address contemporary plastic artworks with distinctive critical sharpness. Pietro Conte's essay on *Cineplastia* turns the attention to the connections between plasticity and (post-)cinema. His exploration does not concern the plasticity of the figures that appear on the screen: with an original gesture, Conte turns to plasticity as concerning cinematic immersivity and emer-sivity instead. Nikola Zmijarević's essay, titled *From Discourse to Figure*, focuses on contemporary painting. By analyzing the works of exponents of Disrupted Realism, Zmijarević confronts plasticity with other classical aesthetic concepts such as mimesis and representation, metamorphizing them in the interaction. Finally, Salvatore Tedesco's *Plasticità e patosofia* explores Scandinavian literature through the combination of Malabou's destructive plasticity and Viktor von Weizsäcker's pathosophy around the fascinating topic of dislocation of the narrative identity.

The essays in the second section consider the ways in which plasticity is intertwined with *senses and affects*, as well as with *perception and sensibility*. My essay, titled *Plastic Imprints*, turns to sculpture, molding, and casting in order to outline a material aesthetics that challenges the hylomorphic residues implicit in the concept of plasticity while paving the way to a consideration of the "sensations" of singular materials. In their essay titled *Ecological Plasticity*, Emanuele Capozziello and Sofia Livi focus on the ways in which the bodies are always affectively entangled in complex ecological systems. By considering olfactory perception specifically, they elaborate on the plastic and affective interplay between an agent and their smellscape. In her contribution titled *Plasticità in arte ed estesia*, Stefania Caliandro adopts a semiotic lens to analyse the role of plasticity for sensitive apprehension. By considering the artworks of Margaret Watts Hughes – who, at the end of the 19th century, invented a method for painting with her voice – Caliandro explores the possibility of framing plasticity as semiotic instability occurring in the dynamic processes of both formation of forms and their reception.

The third section presents contributions that work out the complex interplays between plasticity, aesthetics, arts, and *politics*. Recurrent topics are the temporal and material negotiations of collective memory and personal identity. Kristupas Sabolius' essay on *Revenge, Plasticity and Imagination* brings these three concepts into a fruitful contact and enhances their political meaning with particularly timely considerations. Such political meaning and potential are brought forth by means of close-up analysis of specific artistic projects: Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* and Sabolius' own sound work *Puota*. With their co-authored essay titled "*Be My Plasticity for Me*", Michelle Ussher and David Stent mirror and redouble Malabou and Judith Butler's co-authored essay *You Be My Body for Me*, challenging the concept of plasticity and its limits. By considering the work of American contemporary artist Nicole Eisenman in its inherent queerness, their essay critically expands the material imaginary of plasticity and ties it to new concepts such as slipperiness and gloopiness. Ursula Ströbele's *Memory Activism* explores the possibility of the digital to turn into a space for political resistance. By extending the concept of plasticity to encompass digital phenomena and processes, Ströbele works out the political meanings of the concept by adopting a speculative and feminist lens through which specific case studies (in

particular, Juan Covelli's *Speculative Treasures*) take on timely relevance.

The fourth and last section concludes the volume with three first-hand accounts. Renowned art historian Horst Bredekamp offers his perspective on plasticity by bringing together the plasticity of the brain with the plasticity of the arts. Juxtaposing neurosurgical operations, on the one hand, and drawing and sculpting on the other, Bredekamp traces an account of plasticity that revolves around a common aspect: the activity of matter. The text was originally presented in English in the context of a symposium organized by Professor Patricia Ribault and Professor Olaf Avenati [4] and here appears in German and Italian. Bredekamp's contribution is followed by an interview to multidisciplinary architect Niccolò Casas.

[4] [For more information on the event, see Editorial note.]

Focusing in particular, but not exclusively, on his engagement with plastic debris in the realization of *Plasticity* (presented at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture in Venice), the dialogue with Casas shows the relevance of the concept not only for theorization but also for actual formative practices. Finally, the volume is wrapped up by a dialogue between Nidesh Lawtoo and Catherine Malabou. These pages brilliantly bring together plasticity and mimesis through the concept of metamorphosis, and are based on an exchange occurred at the end of an international conference organized by Professor Lawtoo and his team. The dialogue confronts plasticity and mimesis also with the troubling dimension of gendered bodies, thanks to an Intermezzo with Isabelle Dahms and Giulia Rignano. The contribution appears in the original English version as well as in the Italian translation.

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plasticity

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This essay introduces the concept of *Plastic Baroque*. Baroque, both as a concept and as performance, revised its manifestations, limits and socio-cultural capital as it came to find a place in twentieth-century aesthetics. These re-appropriative ways where Baroque is ornate, overwhelming, bizarre, heterodox, fluid, make for its introduction into the compelling domain of the plastic arts, intended as the domain of artworks made of plastics. Baroque's exemplarity is its plasticity. It exceeds the historical specificity, the periodic signature and the designative stamp into an expression that through an experimental and appropriative course marks its transition from the Neo-Baroque to what I call the Plastic Baroque. It is about bringing into play the idea of the Baroque in its plasticity – the fluidity of borders, the dynamicity of representation and the transgressions of traditions – and the extent to which contemporary plastic art, in turn, can be qualified as Baroque.

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Baroque's plasticity beyond historicity

Baroque, I claim, is a plastic term: it refuses to set itself within a certain period and historical context; it is ambiguous and calls for a variety of interpretations – loaded, ambiguous, and probative. The Cuban poet and critic Severo Sarduy points to an ambiguity and semantic diffusion in the word. Baroque, Sarduy notes, «was the thick irregular pearl – in Spanish *barrueco* or *berrueco*, in Portuguese *barrocco* – the rocky, the knotted, the agglutinated density of the stone – *barrueco* or *berrueco* or perhaps the excrescence, the cyst, something that proliferates, at once free and lithic, tumorous, warty» (Sarduy 2010, 270). For me this holds both as an orientation and attitude in art and life-view, an «uncontrolled proliferation of signifiers» and «dexeterous transmission of thought» (270). However, historically speaking, «the term “Baroque” initially had, in the seventeenth century, a pejorative connotation. In late nineteenth-century German art history, “Baroque” became a neutral adjective referring to the art of the Late Roman Empire and the post-Renaissance, and was subsequently used, coupled with the word “classic”, in various attempts to construct a *Kunstwissenschaft*, a general and trans-historical aesthetics» (Mignot 2014, 77). Baroque, both as a concept and as performance, revised its manifestations, limits and socio-cultural capital as it came to find a place in twentieth-century aesthetics. And

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during the last two decades of the twentieth century, “Baroque” tended to become, like “Romanesque” or “Gothic”, a simple chronological adjective designating the seventeenth century, dislodging the term “classic” in French culture. A floating signifier, a portmanteau word, “Baroque” is thus – depending on the context, the domain, the period, or even the speaker – an antonym or a synonym of “classic”, just as it can contain or succeed “mannerism” or “rococo”. (Mignot 2014, 77)

These re-appropriative ways where Baroque is ornate, overwhelming, bizarre, heterodox, fluid, make for its introduction into the compelling domain of the plastic arts, intended as the domain of artworks made of plastic material.

Baroque is plastic for it presents itself, observes Sarduy, «as a network of connections, of successive filigrees whose graphic expression would not be linear, two-dimensional, flat, but instead voluminous, spatial, and dynamic» (Sarduy 2010, 280-281). The plasticity of its usage and status over the years inspire me to see it appropriated beyond its conventional and well agreed-upon understanding of extravagance and ornateness, its restrictive stylistic orientation that claims a particular aesthetic tradition (High Baroque) and classification within the traditions of art history. The plasticity of Baroque makes it push its own frontiers of meaning and understanding. It is potentially, as Greg Lambert argues, an «empty category» playing «havoc with the empirical assumptions as the basis of historical narration» (Lambert 2004, 7). Lambert finds that «the term “Baroque” has gradually come to designate, rather than a particular historical period in European art history, an effect that results from the composition of specific traits around the adjectival terms *baroque*, *barroco* and *neo-barroco*. In other words, it designates less a particular historical duration than a manner or style of composition» (9). He connects his

observations with Gerard Genette's emphasis on how the genius of the Baroque «is syncretism, its order is its very openness, its signature is its very anonymity and pushes to an absurd degree its characteristic traits which are, erratically, found in all places and in all times» (9). Baroque's exemplarity is its plasticity. It exceeds the historical specificity, the periodic signature and the designative stamp into an expression that through an experimental and appropriative course marks its transition from the Neo-Baroque to what I call the Plastic Baroque.

The Baroque – visible and resonant – in modernist art and modernist movements owes to seventeenth century not merely as a continuation but with a generous scopic interest. Ernest C. Hassold observes that «by 1945 this twofold sense of the word Baroque was widely established: 1) as an historic concept, to designate the period or stage in Western culture following the Renaissance roughly equivalent to the seventeenth century; 2) as an abstract psychological concept, to designate a type of expression that may occur in any historic culture and may recur at various stages of development» (Hassold 1946, 5). But how does a form of thought and thinking gets exhumed into an understanding of a tradition and performance – plastic art – three hundred years hence? What can be the character of such affinities? Nietzsche identifies a connection between deficiency and expression in art where the tensional dialectic between the two produces a style called the Baroque. Since Baroque, he believes, arises with the decline of great art, it declares possessing «unique compensatory skills of expression and narration» (2010, 44). Compensation can have unique forms of manifestation; a response to decline can inspire new forms of thought and ideas. There is a power, a tension, an overflow – a distinct plasticity that goes into the expression of Baroque. Nietzsche writes:

The Baroque comprises, first, the choice of material and subjects of the greatest dramatic tension, which make the heart tremble even without art, because heaven and hell are too close to the emotions. Then, the oratory of strong passions and gestures, of the ugly-and-sublime, of great masses, of sheer quantity [...]; the lights of dusk, transfiguration, or conflagration playing on these strongly molded forms; ever new risks in instruments and intentions, strongly accented by artists for artists, while the layperson must fancy that he witnesses a constant and unconscious overflowing of primitive nature – art's horns of plenty. (44)

Nietzsche's plastic understanding of the Baroque – the tremble at the heart of art – does not lose its relevance with Plastic Baroque. This conceptualizes periodic compartments as porous and entropic to a point where Baroque connects with Expressionism, Impressionism and Surrealism to evolve as Neo-Baroque. The overlaps and (in)fusions, I claim, sequels further into what I term the Plastic Baroque.

René Wellek (1946) writes that Baroque has provided an aesthetic term which has helped us to understand the literature of the time and which will help us to break the dependence of most literary history from periodizations derived from political and social history. Whatever the defects of the term "Baroque" may be, it is certainly an expression which prepares for synthesis, draws our minds away from the mere accumulation of observations and facts, and paves the way for a future history of literature as a fine art. There is something that I prefer to call mystique

about the Baroque (Denis Diderot, in his *Encyclopédie*, has called it “bizarre”) – the struggle to determine its historical and cultural periodization and niche, an overflow of thoughts and traditions, of experiments and indulgences. There is a lack of finish in Baroque, a sense of indeterminacy in figure and thought. Baroque representation *speaks* and *suggests* at the same time; they figure, formalize and foreground in various overlaps of understanding. My introduction of the idea of Plastic Baroque is not about exploring the historical-religious tradition of the Baroque, not trying to see Baroque as a stylistic term (as Henrich Wölfflin did in his *Renaissance and Baroque*, first published in 1888), nor to retrace its complicated history, the neglect, the reinstatement, the trajectory and the evolution of the Neo-Baroque. It is about bringing into play the idea of the Baroque in its plasticity – the fluidity of borders, the dynamicity of representation and the transgressions of traditions – and the extent to which contemporary plastic art, in turn, can be qualified as Baroque.

William Egginton observes that «a problem of thought is a problem that affects or unsettles an entire culture in the largest possible sense, that permeates its very foundations and finds expression in its plastic art, in its stories and performances, in its philosophy as well as in its social organization and politics» (2010, 1). Is Baroque peculiar to seventeenth century only? Or is it a recurrent emergence that through its correspondence with the time and the contexts of cultures keeps the problem of representation, truth, manifestations alive? Baroque, I would like to argue, is a response to a crisis of thought, a rethinking in the negotiations between representation and truth (as has been the character of thinking in every generic understanding of cultural contexts). The problem of thought in our times is our complicated and seriously vexed relationship with Earth and the eco-milieu that we share with the nonhumans, both biotic and non-biotic. The crisis with the material is the crisis of thought today as much as the crisis of representation: the dramatic, figurative and transformative material of plastic. The understanding of Plastic Baroque does not discount the context, time and historicity of the emergence of Baroque art and culture. Drawing on Baroque’s ideational and paradigmatic divergences does not mean that we disclaim the historic period and other religious-political specificities that the seventeenth century brought and introduced. For me, unlike for all the thinkers in this field, Plastic Baroque is both historical and metahistorical. In contrast to Eugene D’Ors’ understanding of Baroque as a historical constant, an eon, a profound reality (D’Ors 1990), it is difficult to ignore history and impossible to see the explosion of Baroque aesthetic in artistic expressions beyond the specificity of age. Contemporary plastic art lives in the liminality of such contradictions and overlaps. But to think Plastic Baroque as a simple throwback to the origin and emergence of the Baroque tradition might not be the right path to take, for the expression I introduce here combines both art through material plastic and the plasticity of baroqueism in an artistic representation. Helen Hills is right to note that there is a risk in «seeing the past only in relation to a certain conception of the present’s concern with the present, not as an opening afforded within that present, but as simply leading in a more teleological sense to its own conventional representation of itself to itself» (Farago *et al.* 2015, n.p.). The Baroque potencies, in their transtemporal impact, in their questioning of historical-contextual

rigidity, recognize such plastic art as aesthetic disruptors; Baroque, as Hills argues, «brings discrepancy and rupture, not simply harmony» and «is always already contemporary» (Farago *et al.* 2015, n.p.). Plastic art is Baroque in that sense; and, Baroque or Neo-baroque are plastic by the same logic. Here the Plastic Baroque disorients us and is itself produced in a unity amidst visual and spatial disorientation.

Plastic Baroque then is «open work», which follows on Umberto Eco's seeing Baroque form as dynamic:

it tends to an indeterminacy of effect (in its play of solid and void, light and darkness, with its curvature, its broken surfaces, its widely diversified angles of inclination); it conveys the idea of space being progressively dilated. Its search for kinetic excitement and illusory effect leads to a situation where the plastic mass in the Baroque work of art never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view; rather, it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation. (Eco 1989, 7)

This plasticity carries over from the Baroque as conflated with the classical in the seventeenth-century to late twentieth-century artworks with the plastic material in what I claim is through a kind of underlying processual unity and force. The plastic force inheres deeply in «the poetic treatises concerning “*maraviglia*”, “*wit*”, “*agudezas*”», and goes beyond «their apparently Byzantine appearance, [seeking] to establish the new man's inventive role» (7). Plasticity in the open work reformulates how we see the rhythm and shadow of Baroque in our times.

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Plastic art

José Antonio Maravall, in his *La cultura del Barroco* (1975), observes that the Baroque culture emerged from the historical situation and sees its epicenter in the seventeenth century, identifying a host of reasons – social, economic, religious – that contributed to its emergence and prevalence. Baroque constructed a particular “*mentalité*”, which, although kept serving the times and context of its prosperity and dissemination, did not get into a historical hole, a narcotic ending. Interweaving narratives lead us to a separate block of meaning, but the *mentalité* made room for a long Baroque and for reverberations that sounded like revisions into our corridors of contemporary understanding of art and style. Issac Joslin makes us see that «the specific divergences, discords, and dissonances that brought about the breakdown of classical reason and the subsequent Baroque conglomerate consist of an ensemble of economic, political, theological, and epistemological shifts, which engendered the precarious condition of uncertainty or “undecidability” that is hallmark state of the “Baroque human being”» (2020, 43). In this regard, Joslin continues to observe that «the Baroque mind is a reflection of the overall instability and temporality of Baroque being. Thus, the Baroque is only a “transition” or a temporary state in the non-linear sense that, whether for a long or short historical time span, is constantly unfolding and folding under the implicit and contrary notion of a classical stabilizing repression» (2020, 43).

I see late Baroque – transitory, non-linear and disruptive folds – in plastic art. Plastic Baroque speaks about the amazing transformation that an insignificant and unprepossessing material like discarded plastic bags or debris washed ashore on the sea beach can undergo when they come together, or, rather, when they “fold in”. Art here is multi-sensorial, dialecticizing the optic and the haptic, the imaginative and the analytic and the aesthetic and the didactic. The Romantic Gothic in plastic accumulation through uncanny shapes and forms and the discarded plastic through representational art bring the “negative” in heightened intensity, the negative as discharged through anxiety, horror, and the terrible. The aesthetic pleasure is weak in force as plastic arts impact on our psyche with an excitation that makes us see beyond the immediate image. The sublimation achieved therefore holds us in the sway of the negative. Going from the ocean to the gallery involves a “travel”, a separate sense of multi-sensorial rhythm and a transfiguration of the debased, deceased, discarded, decrepit, and downgraded line of objects. It builds its own figuration and rationale of taste. Plastic evolves through art with another vein of fascination, as a dazzling product of Baroque imagination, but not without its settlement in a moral and psychological torpor – it fuses interest, drive, excitement, and enjoyment.

Plastic artist Pamela Longobardi’s 2017 installation *Anchor (Our Albatross)* [FIG. 1] is made of recovered ocean plastic, survival rescue blankets, life vest straps, and steel – a material intertextuality, as it were. Again, Longobardi’s *Plastic Looking Back* [FIG. 2] comprises of «hundreds of objects from remote locations in Panama, Alaska, Indonesia and Greece, including microplastic from Hawaii» (Scarborough 2020, n.p.). She observes:

plastic objects are the cultural archaeology of our time. These objects I see as a portrait of global late-capitalist consumer society, mirroring our desires, wishes, hubris and ingenuity. These are objects with unintended consequences that become transformed as they leave the quotidian world and collide with nature to be transformed, transported, and regurgitated out of the shifting oceans. (qtd. in Scarborough 2020, n.p.)

Artists Judith Selby and Richard Lang realize *For here or to go* [FIG. 3], a shockingly beautiful and overpowering work of art where steam tables are filled with white plastic and white ceramic plates are filled with white beach plastic. As Selby-Lang explain, our throw-away ethos has resulted in a plastic existence:

Besides the blight of plastic itself, a mad scientist’s brew of toxic chemicals is leaching into our bodies. We have learned that every human being has traces of plastic polymers in their bloodstream. That’s the bad news we live with these days. There really is no choice when asked for here or to go? It’s all here, and there is nowhere for it to go. Simply, there is no away. [1]

[1] From a text on the artists’ website:
<https://www.beachplastic.com/for-here-or-to-go>.

Plastic art exists as a mode of representation and manifests differently in a deconstructive moment of self-explosion. Plastic Baroque finds the plastic moments in Baroque art and manifestation and is itself annihilative in moments of outstanding revelations. Plastic Baroque in its performance and ontology estranges us



[FIG. 1] Pamela Longobardi, *Anchor (Our Albatross) and Hope Floats* (2017). Longobardi studio / Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the artist.

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[FIG. 2] Pamela Longobardi, *Plastic Looking Back* (2014). Longobardi studio / Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the artist.





[FIG. 3] Judith Selby & Richard Lang,
For here or to go, (2022). Courtesy of
the artist.

from the fixity and formidability of meaning – an estrangement in language that comes from the Baroque being and, as Joslin observes by following Marshall Brown’s remarks, «the spectrum of affective response from the grotesque to the sublime, an art that expresses the entire gamut of highs and lows of human being» (Joslin 2020, 44; see also Brown 1997). The Baroque «usurps the classical, rational form in its “becoming”, and infuses it with living energy, renders its existence somehow other, corrupted, less than perfect, even insane, but perhaps more closely human» (44). This is not just a chaotic excess, «the monstrous phantasms of the imagination and unreason, but rather the appearance of deformity or disorder that follows its own internal rules based on the convergence of perspectives» (46). Plastic Baroque with its “(dé)reglement” is no different from that.

Plastic art is true to its representation, has its limitation of the material and optics, but thrives on an excess that corresponds well with Baroque art that knew its ways of representations, techniques of expressions, but was never out of aberrative exits and seductive excesses. Plasticity of the Baroque and Plastic Baroque then speak of “eroticism”, which is a space of excess and surplus. This is what determines «the Baroque as *play*, in contrast to the determination of the classical work as a labor» (Sarduy 2010, 288). Plastic Baroque in its depth and display exhibits, in the words of Sarduy, much «squandering», «the pageantry, the immoderation, the pleasure» – «in eroticism, artificiality, the cultural, is manifested in the game with the lost object, a game whose objective is within itself and whose intention is not to convey a message – in this case, reproduction – but of their waste as a function of pleasure» (288). There is a failure of representation in the art: a loss of object, an emptiness that holds a lot of possibilities of signifiers. And Plastic Baroque cannot fall out of features that mark the Baroque style in that both Selby-Lang and Longobardi’s art exhibit a movement through ornamentation, a folding of visual and aesthetic spaces impacting on the gaze of the viewers, a stunning use of color, monumentality, unexpected nonlinearity of stylistic innovation and a parallax in spectatorhood. In short, an eroticism. True to Baroque art, we see diffusion of surfaces as much as complexity of the fold in the interior and exterior of every plastic art installation. The pronounced visibility and often a garish spread of colors and forms address the thresholds between Neo-Baroque and Plastic Baroque. Longobardi’s *Plastic Looking Back* and *Anchor (Our Albatross)* are instances of a spatial fluidity that disrupts all unilateral understanding of being and the image of thought. The gaudiness and visually overwhelming aspects of the images are meant to challenge the limits of thinking and throw us into the face of a negativity that is productive and exploratory: what this means is that there is an abnormality and unconventionality and unreality about the artwork, which indirectly throws open the missing links with the exigencies and contingencies of our existence, the over-plasticization of our lives and living. Here, representation constructs its own challenges and Plastic Baroque puts its faith in supplement – an expressivity that leaves many signs in play.

A plastic bleeding of borders

William Egginton writes that

what appear to be holes are in fact folds, a case of invagination in a plane that for some point of view may appear to be a hole. The passage from inside to outside is further inhibited by the fact that, for Deleuze – and for the thinker who is the focus of Deleuze’s study, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – there is no absolute distinction between interior and exterior space, but only one relative to point of view. (2010, 19)

Plastic art has a façade to itself that separates the interior from the exterior without making the distinction very stark and non-negotiable. This initiates plasticization, which punctures holes in the idea of separate wholes, leaving us to question whether a pure inside and pure outside can exist at all. Through an investigation of several Baroque paintings, Egginton argues that «the common problem at the heart of the play of the Baroque involves a bleeding of borders, an invitation to the spectator to step into another reality» (18). Plastic art enacts and plays out this inside-outside syndrome, the “bleeding of borders”. This is not monadic, since the inside is “without an outside”. Deleuze writes that «it has as its correlative the independence of the façade, an outside without an inside. Now the façade can have doors and windows – it is riddled with holes – although there may be no void, a fold being only the site of a more rarified matter» (1993, 28). The holes are the passages that leave open a communication amidst an apparent aporia between the exterior and the interior. The seeming incompatibility among walls of seeing, material assemblage and aesthetic specialities create a Baroque fluidity and an eventful enfoldment in thought, affect and perception. Baroque art is spatialized and visualized in folds – “fold over fold” – and Plastic Baroque is recreative in alternative rationality and aesthetic; in fact, discard art is Baroque by its disruption of conventional ideas of architecture and other established forms of artistic installations. I would like to see this as Deleuze’s «splendid moment», where «an excess of principles, a hubris of principles» (68) are at work. Plastic Baroque (the images demonstrate) fills a vacuum of thought – a vacuum that comes to thinking how an unavoidable material and its rapacious and reckless use is setting up insurmountable planetary crisis. The experimental excess comes from the horror of the vacuum in thought that cripples us to imagine what is yet to come: the unborn nature and an erratic Earth.

Plastic Baroque introduces an abundance in thinking, a series of unique moments in material experimentation, that easily challenges the classical space of stratified form. Deleuze notes that «classical reason toppled under the force of divergences, impossibilities, discords, dissonances. But the Baroque represents the ultimate attempt to reconstitute a classical reason by dividing divergences into as many worlds as possible, and by making from impossibilities as many possible borders between worlds» (81). True to the Baroque aesthetic, Plastic Baroque responds to the existential and contextual question of the present through the creation of parallel worlds and the intermeshing possibilities of understanding and knowledge. Arguing through Leibniz, Deleuze reaches at an interesting point when he observes:

For with Leibniz the question surges forth that will continue to haunt Whitehead and Bergson [two twentieth-century philosophers of “emergence”]: not how to attain eternity, but in what conditions does the objective world allow for a subjective production of novelty, that is, of creation? [...] The best of all worlds is not the one that reproduces the eternal, but the one in which new creations are produced, the one endowed with a capacity for innovation or creativity. (79)

The installations have their power of transfiguration, deficiency and incompleteness in art – a tension that speaks of art, the overflow of emotions, the power of the present and instant, a seduction that challenges border mappings in art’s manifestation and form-making. This is the shock and the affect produced by the Neo-Baroque. I say Plastic Baroque.

What a close reading of the Neo-Baroque brings to us in its Latin American and Caribbean contexts is the open spaces left alluringly for re-appropriation and experimentation beyond the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment. Omar Calabrese sees Neo-Baroque as «simply a “spirit of the age” that pervades many of today’s cultural phenomena in all fields of knowledge, making them familiar to each other and, simultaneously, distinguishing them from other cultural phenomena in a more or less recent past» (1992, xii). This dissipative and diffusive energy of the baroque brings «a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change» (xii). Baroque has its past and pastness as much as a presentness where the past speaks in its unannounced revelations. The seventeenth and eighteenth century, in a kind of plastic explosion, establish an art form that declares discontinuous instants in its continuity. Baroque reinvents itself. In a 1975 essay entitled *The Baroque and the marvelous real*, the Cuban novelist-critic Alejo Carpentier sees Baroque as symbiosis and *mestizaje*; he sees «the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a Baroque spirit» (1995, 100). By having a profound re-turn value, Baroque is deeply plastic in its philosophy and existence. Carpentier’s deep investment in art historical specialism does not conceal his advocacy for the potencies of “worlding” in Baroque aesthetics. He does not see just a classical mimesis at work; rather, he attributes a plastic mimesis that brings *forth* different identities and modes of representation keeping the explosive possibility of artistic expressions alive and in play. This produces a new logic of sense, a separate vein of articulation that connects the representation with our being in the world, the contexts of our existence, the institutional embeddings and other existential questions. The plasticity in Baroque reason tells us how it is less a product and more a process – Carpentier knew and believed in it, and Deleuze could not have considered it outside the folds as an image of thought. Nadir Lahiji notes that, for Deleuze, the Baroque is more like a living machine for the production of “plastic forces” and relationships: «Plastic forces are thus more machinelike than they are mechanical, and they allow for the definition of Baroque machine» (Deleuze qtd. in Lahiji 2016, 63). There is the aesthetics of becoming in Baroque reason; Plastic Baroque is profoundly anchored in the becoming, in the metamorphosis, in differentiations, in the rebelliousness. The plasticity of Baroque is in the transcultural appropriations that Baroque tradition had undergone. Neo-Baroque is deeply transgressive in its manifestations.

Baroque reason, unlike classical reason, encourages contradiction as much as a crisis in representation and revelation, thus challenging the limits of how we think a tradition in its circumambient context and also in its proleptic force to unsettle the existent critique; this makes for a revisionary understanding that makes a work of art and expression build its own plasticity. Plastic art is informed by the refigurative force of Baroque reason.

Heterochronic temporality

Within the dynamic and performative of Plastic Baroque the images announce how plastic materials washed up and tossed about in delirious abandon have their own voices – materially intoned and scripted – that connect chiasmatically with the voices of the artists. This is the point of a physical, figural, conceptual and aesthetic intertwining. I see in this negotiation a connection and a separation – a syncopic formulation where the contact with plastic forms its own revulsion and retraction. Seeing and feeling plastic is experiencing and discoursing the anguish that the “degenerate” plastics produce. Here is a joy in art which comes close on the heels of an agony. We rethink history here – our historicalities, our slippages in understanding of the subject and the object, the deception and truth of representation, the incompleteness and failing in all projects of totality. Anthropocenic future is not lived but imagined in the present: it is a history that we live in the present, in moments of presentism. Plastic Baroque does that, and in such enfoldment time, period, style, emotion, expectation, representations are plasticized. Baroque deconstructs itself in ways that do not leave it deracinated from its periodic niche; it connects with the plastic motor (or what Catherine Malabou calls the “motor schemes”, see Malabou 2010) to lay it out with different angularities and expectations. If a movement and style do not claim their own suffocation, make their own shouts of release, induce their own trans-moments, they were never a movement: movement is mobility, it is non-totalizable – and Baroque is no less.

Plastic arts have a resonant or intrinsic time that comes from its organization, contemplation and aesthetic unity. Étienne Souriau argues that «the time of the work radiates, so to speak, around the prerogative moment represented. The latter makes a structural center from which the mind moves backward to the past and forward to the future in a more and more vague fashion until the moment when the image fades gradually into space» (1949, 295). Time trembles; the moment glows through a plastic rhythm; art *presences*. Plastic Baroque works on heterochrony (Bal 2011): this signals a swing between the tenses where the present, past and the future are caught in an oscillation that we can call heterochronic. To contemplate Baroque time is to find beauty in imperfection in the assessment, measurement, and representation of time. How then does time take the shape of an asymmetrical pearl? Baroque time is multilayered, rife with contradictions, alternately exact and inexact, and highly particular in its cultural manifestations. Caught in a time tunnel, Plastic Baroque makes for the existence in the time-present, in presentness, the immediate thought about an inevitable past and a “coming to”. Heterochronic temporality produces a new experience of the “contemporary” – the movement between frames of

time and thought that is always tensional and productive through conflicts. Artworks shock; temporal ruptures are forceful encounters with a future that we imagine to live in the present and that is also what an inevitable past generates. The signs of the artwork enforce thought and thinking in a way where our acts of viewing are very different from how we conventionally look at an object of art. I call this the moment of violence where a serious disruption in viewing is initiated, resulting in a break with the object and rupture from the homely conventions of aesthetic experience.

Plastic Baroque art is conceived in shock and rupture, in breaks and non-linearity, rather than in straight lines. Anthony Cascardi notes:

Baroque art and architecture demonstrate both an aversion to the straight line and an affinity for curved lines and surfaces. This has consequences for the way we understand Baroque “figures of form”, but it also matters for questions of force. It is, first, one example of an interest in blurring the lines between the static object-world and dynamic nature, between the animate and the inanimate. (Cascardi 2019, 455)

In its aversion and avoidance of straight lines, Plastic Baroque is Deleuzean in a productive way. Plastic art appropriates Baroque not as an essence, but rather as an operative function, a trait. It endlessly produces folds. The folds that plastic art generates transform our expectations, viewpoints and experiences as they create and change spatialities and expose us to a variety of revelations and affordances. Plastic Baroque produces unexpected turns and leads to unpredictable encounters diffusing boundaries of experience and imagination, thought and knowledge. Folds can irrationalize; the sense of the inside and the outside, the relationship between totality and the fragment, the material and the materialization, the surface and ground are re-viewed and introduced to a fresh line of thought. Baroque has the ability to disrupt, dislocate an experience of linearity, and can often fuse and fold into different artistic or architectural positions, borders of construction and aesthetic-material experiences. Longobardi’s art and Selby-Lang’s installations produce trans-spatiality, inter-objectivity, the reality-affect and affective reality, and within the Baroque spirit they play up deception with reality. There is a close match between deception and the real.

Vision and Gaze

Lisa Beaven and Angela Ndalianis note:

One of the most prominent traits of the Baroque is its contingency, always in the process of being formed and relying on its audience to re-create it, over and over again. That perceived “flaw” in Baroque culture, its instability and mutability, becomes one of its essential characteristics. To enact this performance of completion it demands a spatial context, imagined or real, and solicits the senses, requesting a response. Baroque spaces – works of art, buildings, and even literature – are in this sense performative, designed to involve the participant in a reciprocal process of sensory immersion. (2018, 6)

The very instability at the heart of the Baroque is its plasticity. It becomes a category that invites revisitations for the uncertainty of its understanding and the continuous fixing and unfixing of its return to its contexts and conditions of emergence. It is the emotive and spectator-consciousness that mark Baroque art as much as Plastic Baroque. The art form and art experience invite the spectator to experience the cultural-material aspects as well as, in the case of Plastic Baroque, the eco-social ones, thus dissolving the separating line between awareness and represented content. The plasticity of Baroque encourages such art-spectator-spectacle melding where one starts to inhabit the art form into an experience that connects them to the present in a different valence and temper. Beaven and Ndalians look at Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* for its expansiveness which, they think, invites the beholders in and makes a demand on them to complete the understanding of the picture and «in the process [transforms] the beholder into a participant» (6). This bears a clear correspondence with the beholder-participation dialectic in plastic installation art that questions and stretches our expectations: we are expected to complete the picture with the artist and get undermined by spaces and emotions that the picture represents. The diffusive potential of art relives the Baroque to an extent where the art, the artist, the observer and the critic are on intermediate planes of expression and experience, which results in the interpenetration of aesthetic and visual spaces. The plasticity of Baroque ensures that the spectator is incorporated into the work of art with a variety of aesthetic senses and transtemporal frames of understanding. Here, we encounter a bi-focal understanding of both plastic and Baroque time.

Every picture or piece of plastic art *stages* an interpretation, building a pattern of listening to the art-object. There is a new reality of seeing – the plasticity of seeing – that creates separate aesthetic affordances and epistemological understandings. The materiality of the plastic art forms its own lines of correspondence with the viewer, with the line and ethics of sight; the gaze of art and the gaze of the viewer meet at several points of spatial and sensory understanding, creating room for changing forms of emotion and expression. The materiality and mentality of the work develop productive points of intersections and detour. It is the gaze – the seeing, seeing through and sight – that makes Baroque produce plasticity. Plastic art is invested in the gaze too.

By identifying Longobardi and Selby-Lang's work in line with Plastic Baroque, we find how they circumstantialize and build the *milieu* to produce a connector between the context, the past, and the urgency and intensity of the present. This builds a conjunction between the plasticity of Baroque and the Plastic Baroque involving vision and gaze. Christine Buci-Glucksmann sees the Baroque in the gaze and the gaze as contributing to the Baroque. Here, form and formlessness co-exist as spaces which merge and separate in an intriguing logic and optics. Quoting Jean Starobinski, Buci-Glucksmann notes that «Vision becomes Gaze (*Regard*), in the etymological sense of the term, to guard, to place in safekeeping: "*Regarder* [to look at, to gaze upon] is a movement that aims to recapture, *repren-dre sous garde* [to place in safekeeping once again]. The gaze does not exhaust itself immediately. It involves perseverance, doggedness, as if animated by the hope of adding to its discovery"» (2013, 5). In their work, the

force of the gaze and the discoveries that it makes within the capture of the artistic moments are the vision; in turn, the vision in its energy, perspectival diversity and the “invention of an aesthetic” speaks of plasticity. Buci-Glucksmann’s observations of the Baroque as a «revolution in the ways of seeing» (8) relates to Plastic Baroque in inventive ways – striking representations with the material and affective materiality. Like Baroque, plastic art builds a speculative perspective and curiosity – a mix of wonder, charm, anxiety and intrigue. There is a loss in watching, something that goes amiss, a scarcity of understanding that destabilizes the aesthetic and politics of the artwork, leading to a transposition of views and projections. Longobardi and Selby-Lang draw us with a seduction and aura, but also disrupt the experience as our gaze breaks through the apparent aesthetic and lead to an experience that is not merely the present; shaken by the future and what the present has to offer in an oblique relationship with the past and future. The Plastic Baroque, here, invites the eye that does not simply see but breaks through the geometry of things and settlement into a zone that undoes the subject: the subject exhausts the mere visuality of the art and destroys it into a new experience – an experience that comes from the shifting gaze and fluidity of positions. The fluidity of Plastic Baroque is both from the art – its form, material, arrangement, mask, physicality – and inhabitation generated through the imagination and gaze – the transfiguration, the disguise, the apparent completion, the instability. It is relevant, here, to recall that Buci-Glucksmann sees form as exhibiting «itself in its *Darstellung*: it appears, transforms itself, disappears, returns changed by its retreat, by its movement, in a way that speaks to the polysemy of the Greek term *katastrophe*. Its literal meaning: to reverse, overturn, knock down, die, reach its end, its conclusion, to master» (11). Plastic Baroque imbibes this amazing pack of vectors that make art telic and yet incomplete and yet self-transcending and yet self-annihilative and yet discursive. The trajectory from Baroque to Plastic Baroque plays and invests in forms in that there is «metamorphosis to anamorphosis, from a form beyond form that rejects the static self to a form that reclaims its own visual prehistory, its catastrophist dynamism, an emergence of emergences» (11). Plastic Baroque produces an amazing consonance in view and understanding, but the dissonance is deep seated. Art can often overwhelm by its color, texture, materiality, imagination, and concept. Baroque essentially has this virtue to overwhelm and to leave us with a sense of unfulfillment. This is not because of the skill, technicality and craft that went into the making; it is because the inside and the outside fold into each other, intensifying the passion of experience and a sense of transubstantiation that exceeds the materiality of art. It is in the unique ability to transcend itself that Baroque connects with Plastic Baroque.

As an aesthetic expression, as an aesthetic of taste and style, of form and concept, Baroque transgresses time and culture zones; it is not an exclusive preserve of European art lasting for two or three centuries only. Henri Focillon points out that:

in the life of forms, Baroque is indeed but a moment, but it is certainly the freest and the most emancipated one. Baroque forms have either abandoned or denatured that principle of intimate propriety, an essential aspect of which is a careful

respect for the limits of the frame, especially in architecture. They live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own; they proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities. (1992, 58)

Baroque's trans-spatialities make it plastic; the experiments, argues Focillon, are swept into «by some hidden force that constantly overshoot the mark» (58). The plasticity in the life of the Baroque makes form and content, intention and expression, play up their own game of representation and experience. Forms do not rigidify; rather, Baroque urges a fluidity in appropriation, in a kind of nostalgia that makes the present seek its own branches with antiquity, with models that look apparently incommensurable. There is a delight, a *jouissance*, a curious intrusion and inversion. The emergence of the Baroque and its dissemination and journey across cultures and epistemic boundaries owe to the concept of form as process: this process, as Maiorino (1990) observes by considering cases that range from Michelangelo to Giordano Bruno, brought about an incompleteness and openness. There, forms were not merely bound and stated, they were rather embedded in poetics of abundance with flow and plasticity.

Neo-Baroque and Plastic Baroque revel in excess, a kind of abundance that challenges us optically but is also deeply meaningful semiotically and symbolically. The expansion and energy in the plasticity of the Baroque and in Plastic Baroque draw us to a zone of wonder, agony, exuberance and frustration. Djelal Kadir calls it the «surfeit of eccentric fragmentation» (1986, 86). There is a kind of incompleteness, of «supplementary alterities» (86), a plenitude in display and several points of dislocation in understanding. Plastic Baroque provides the liminality, «that ever-extended errand which characterizes the baroque enterprise as perpetual mobility and displacement» (89). As Wölfflin wrote, «the Baroque never offers us perfection and fulfillment, or the static calm of “being”, only unrest of change and the tension of transience» (qtd. in Kadir 1986, 89). The Baroque artwork *Plastic Looking Back* is both eccentric and acentric – which, in the words of Kadir, makes it become a «subversive and ever-errant deflector bent on de-authorizing all privileged programs and centeredness – metaphysics, orthodoxy, myth, authenticity, primogenial acts, hieratic monads, transcendental signifieds, mnemonic determinacies, and mystified historicities – manifests an inexorable gravitation toward its illusionary antitheses» (90).

Maravall sees the world as unfinished and its innermost contexture as possessing «a contradictory, unstable, dynamic consistency» (1986, 88). The world, as Maravall notes, is «struggle of oppositions» (157) – and this ensures the movement. What, then, did the Baroque individuals do? He writes that

in having to ask themselves in a much more dramatic way than at other times about the ambience of their existence, inasmuch as they perceived it to be critically threatened, Baroque individuals acquired their knowledge of the world and their suffering, pessimistic experience about what the world was; but they also confirmed, with tragicomic simultaneity, that by learning how to play a skillful game they could also aim for positive results. From the notion of this polyvalent

mixture of the world, the Baroque human being drew the elements to construct his or her own figure. (158)

This is no different from Plastic Baroque individuals and their being in the world. The material-art with its spectrality, horror, excess, prospective hubristic predicament builds its conflict with a world in the wake of relentless suffering and instability. The inherent movement in the world and world formations construct moments of disruption and violence. This is as true of Baroque as it is of Plastic Baroque, where the individuals have always been caught up in agonism. It speaks of the reflexivity of the subject and repremises the subject-object order. Perhaps, this vision of the individual and the world keeps reformulating the gaze too.

Plastic Baroque, aligning with the principles of Baroque vision, owes to the view of the subject: how one sees the object built with plastic initiates a collapse of the object into the subject. With a different relation between the subject and object in play, the conflation is both corporeal and internal. Longobardi's art throws open the subject in transition as the materiality of the matter connects with how our body interacts and responds to it; from materiality the experience shifts to how the matter affects the subject internally; this revises the Cartesian form of subjectivity. It is plastic that we use and are actively familiar with; it is the material that occupies a fair share of our body and physical space. But the baroque-ness of the art constructs an unhomeliness of space and the material produces its own moment of rupture from familiarity to precarity, from spatio-visual gaudy remarkableness to existential thoughts, from a moment of familiar present to prospects of unexpected and unprecedented spectrality.

Conclusion

Walter Benjamin saw in the Baroque «a kind of self-deconstructive art – severe, iconoclastic works that, instead of proposing escapist visions of permanence without change, formally encode the inevitable corrosive work of history as decay and ruin» (Zamora & Kaup 2010, 55). Plastic Baroque is deconstructive in that it speaks of a ruin of thought, a decaying culture at the precipice of a material catastrophe. Antinomical in nature, and similarly to how Benjamin conceived of the Baroque, art here takes a “plastic form”: Baroque and the Plastic Baroque have «eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation» (55). Art becomes dialectical, allegorical and, to put it with Benjamin's words, a «plastic symbol» (2010, 63). This is less about offering a corrective to classicism than it is a disruptive way to make art change its own image of expression. Plastic art is an art form that makes art rethink its own ways of expression and establishment. This is not a corrective; not an extension either. It is art speaking in a language that surprises art's very own conditions of expression. Plastic Baroque is our new point of inquiry and the trans-aesthetic juncture of deep contemplation in contemporary art history.

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“Cineplastia”.

Dalla plastica al post-cinema (e ritorno)*

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Plasticity generally refers to the property of natural or synthetic materials that can be molded into any shape. However, the term is also used to describe images that are either three-dimensional or involve the representation of solid objects with haptic values and a three-dimensional effect. Cinema has been characterized as a plastic art form in both senses. In the first sense, cinematic plasticity refers to the ability of animated films to manipulate the shape of their characters at will. In this article, I focus instead on the second sense of the term and reconstruct the utopian quest for a “plastic cinema”, that is, a post-cinematic device capable of overcoming the traditional limitations of the film surface and thus achieving a complete detachment or “emersion” of the image from the two-dimensional surface of the screen.

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Si l'histoire des arts plastiques n'est pas seulement celle de leur esthétique
mais d'abord de leur psychologie, elle est essentiellement celle de la
ressemblance ou, si l'on veut, du réalisme.

A. Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?*

1. *Plastice*

Partire è un po' morire, o almeno così recita un famoso adagio. Ne era certamente convinta, già duemila e seicento anni fa, una ragazza di Corinto che, tormentata dall'idea di doversi separare (per sempre?) dall'amato in procinto di affrontare un lungo viaggio, si mise nottetempo a disegnarne le fattezze, ricalcandone il profilo sull'ombra proiettata dalla luce di una lanterna sulla parete della camera da letto. Questa immagine – questo *eidolon* – le avrebbe recato conforto, sostituendo l'assente e presentificandolo fino al giorno del suo ritorno.

Il mattino seguente, però, quella piatta silhouette dovette sembrarle ben poca cosa. Le venne allora in soccorso il padre, Butade di Sicione, che di professione, per una di quelle fortunate coincidenze che i miti riservano, faceva il vasaio. Tirati fuori gli attrezzi del mestiere, impastò un po' di argilla e la imprime sul tracciato lineare, ottenendo un bassorilievo da cui poi trasse un modello tridimensionale del volto che lasciò seccare e infine cuocere al forno insieme ad altri oggetti. E fu così, secondo Plinio (1988, 472-476), che un artigiano inventò la *plastice*, cioè l'arte di modellare *similitudines*.

Il racconto eziologico associa la nascita della plastica al desiderio di colmare, tramite la presenza di un corpo vicario, il vuoto lasciato dall'assenza del corpo in carne e ossa (Vernant 1998, Belting 2011). E se si riflette sul fatto che Butade operò sulla base del precedente abbozzo pittorico tratteggiato dalla figlia e che la plastica diede a sua volta origine, nella genealogia pliniana, alla scultura e alla statuaria, è possibile affermare che quel desiderio costitutivamente inappagabile che i Greci chiamavano *pothos* abbia rappresentato il motore primo non tanto di una singola arte quanto, piuttosto, della produzione iconica *tout court* (Bettini 2008, 11). Estendendo il ragionamento al di là della cornice temporale e concettuale cui il testo di Plinio rimane vincolato, si può inoltre arrivare a sostenere – come mi propongo di fare in questa sede – che quello stesso desiderio “plastico” sia stato anche alla base delle ben più giovani forme artistiche della fotografia e del cinema, e persino di quella variegata costellazione mediale che va sotto il nome di «post-cinema» (Denson & Leyda 2016; Chateau & Moure 2020).

Partiamo da una constatazione: per descrivere l'opera approntata da Butade, lo scrittore romano utilizza il termine *typus*, il cui significato primario è quello di «impronta». *Typtein*, in greco, significa innanzitutto «battere», «premere», «imprimere». L'aspetto culturalmente più interessante è l'ambiguità che caratterizza la semantica legata a questo verbo e ai suoi derivati, che possono indicare tanto l'atto di esercitare una pressione quanto il risultato di tale atto – tanto l'attività quanto la passività, tanto la causa efficiente quanto l'effetto che da essa deriva. Il *typos* può quindi essere inteso «nelle due direzioni del premente e del premuto, del

battente e del battuto, del formante e del formato» (Pinotti 2006, 18): è sia la matrice sia l'immagine che se ne ricava, sia l'impressione sia l'impronta. Da questo punto di vista, il volto-maschera dell'amato (la sua raffigurazione «tipica» in quanto impregnata della «persona» tramite un contatto garantito da quell'impronta del corpo che è l'ombra) costituisce il proto-tipo della fotografia. E non è un caso che sempre a Butade venga attribuita l'invenzione dei *pros-typa* e degli *ec-typa*, volti-maschere (*personae*, di nuovo) in rilievo posti a ornamento delle cornici inferiori dei tetti di templi e altri edifici prestigiosi: i modellatori di tali “tipi”, chiosa Plinio, erano chiamati *plastae* (1988, 476).

La plastica pare dunque originariamente legata all'arte di plasmare *personae* che, in virtù di un (effettivo o presunto) contatto con i modelli, risultano in grado di trattenere le caratteristiche tipiche della loro *Persönlichkeit*, per dirla con quel grande esperto di calchi e impronte che è stato Julius von Schlosser (2011, 41). E in effetti anche la costellazione semantica che ruota attorno alla plastica è caratterizzata dalla medesima, apparentemente paradossale compresenza di attività e passività: se da un lato chiamiamo «plastiche» le arti (compresa quella chirurgica) del modellare e del *dare* forma, dall'altro definiamo «plastici» i materiali duttili, malleabili, cioè pronti a *ricevere* la forma (dall'argilla alla cera, dalla cellulosa alla gomma fino, appunto, ai polimeri plastici). Plastica è l'attività del pedagogo come quella della società, capaci di plasmare gli individui e il loro vivere insieme; ma la plasticità è anche caratteristica biologica fondamentale dell'organismo in grado di adattarsi alle pressioni selettive (Darwin 1980, 70, 87, 102), del cervello sempre pronto a modificarsi in base alle sollecitazioni provenienti dall'ambiente circostante (Malabou 2007), nonché del sé e della sua natura costitutivamente metamorfica (Northoff et al. 2014).

Tale legame tra plastica, tipo e impronta (o *imprinting*) è messo in luce, nel testo di Plinio, sin dall'inizio. Il “ritratto” pittorico abbozzato dalla giovane corinzia si configura infatti come sublimazione di un calco proto-fotografico: *esprime* l'amato perché in esso l'amato si è *impresso* per il tramite della sua ombra, immagine naturale, automatica e acheropita per antonomasia che la ragazza si limita a ricalcare. L'analogia tra la plastica così intesa e la fotografia è tutt'altro che peregrina, come dimostra il fatto, rimarcato da Ernst Jünger (1991, 121), che un tempo «fotografare [*photographieren*]” si diceva “asportare [*abnehmen*]”. Si asporta una sorta di parvenza esteriore, l'aspetto stesso dell'uomo, come se si togliesse una maschera». Un rapido sguardo all'etimologia, del resto, mostra come “ritratto” derivi da *trahere*, “tirare”, “far uscire”, “trarre da”.

Nella narrazione pliniana, questo desiderio “estrattivo” alla base della foto-grafia aveva già trovato un primo appagamento nella skia-grafia, termine che indica, letteralmente, il «disegno dell'ombra», e che viene utilizzato in senso spregiativo da Platone per definire la pittura come arte illusionistica, per sua essenza votata al *trompe l'œil* e alla riproduzione “umbratile”, fantasmatica, ingannevole del reale. Ombra è quella dell'amato cui si aggrappa la fanciulla di Corinto, e ombre sono anche quelle proiettate dal fuoco sulla parete-schermo della caverna platonica: immagini che celano la loro natura di immagini, impronte che, per la ragazza come per i prigionieri, non si limitano a rinviare ai loro modelli, ma finiscono per confondersi e identificarsi con essi. Il legame tra ombra, impronta, fotografia e (proto)cinema è dunque di natura costitutiva (Le Maître 2010).

È precisamente a questo plesso tematico che allude Jean-Louis Baudry (2017, 79-81) quando interpreta la celebre allegoria della *Repubblica* come adombramento prototipico del dispositivo cinematografico, secondo un modello ermeneutico recentemente ripreso nel quadro di ricostruzioni teoriche che considerano le grotte del Paleolitico alla stregua di ambienti arqueo-immersivi capaci di abbracciare il fruitore a 360°, immergendolo in un turbinio di pitture e ombre rese ancor più plastiche dalle irregolarità delle pareti su cui erano disegnate e ancor più animate dal riflesso degli imprevedibili movimenti del fuoco che rischiava le notti primordiali dei nostri antenati (Nechvatal 2005, Di Marino 2021). L’animazione dell’inanimato è il sogno della plastica ben prima che del cinema: come l’una è sin dall’inizio cinematografica, l’altro è sin dall’inizio plastico, tanto che si può dire, con Dominique Chateau (2004, 38), che il cinema non sia altro che «plasticità in atto». Lo aveva compreso, già nel 1920, Élie Faure, profetizzando che l’arte del futuro sarebbe scaturita da una fusione sempre più perfetta di plastica e cinema: sarebbe stata, appunto, una *cineplastica* (Faure 1920).

2. Sogni plastici: il cinema totale

Prima di congedarci dalla ragazza di Corinto e da suo padre è importante sottolineare un ultimo aspetto del racconto pliniano. Il desiderio di trattenerne l’amato viene appagato dal progressivo materializzarsi di un corpo in immagine capace di fungere da sostituto del corpo in carne e ossa. Il punto di partenza è dato dall’ombra che si proietta sulla parete automaticamente, passivamente, senza bisogno di alcun intervento umano. Il passaggio successivo consiste nella silhouette tratteggiata dalla giovane, in cui l’attività della mano rimane ancora subordinata alla passività che caratterizza il ricalco in quanto tale. Infine, l’intervento paterno conduce all’attività plastica in senso stretto: le parti dell’immagine ottenute facendo aderire l’argilla al disegno sottostante vengono integrate dall’invenzione delle parti mancanti fino alla realizzazione di un modello autonomo, emancipato dalla silhouette e dall’ombra che ne era alla base.

Questa progressione dalla passività a una sempre più spiccata attività plastico-formatrice va di pari passo con il graduale distaccarsi dell’immagine dallo sfondo: dall’iniziale bidimensionalità dell’ombra e del disegno calcato su di essa, l’immagine guadagna via via in spessore attraverso il bassorilievo, per ottenere da ultimo la piena corporeità del modello a tutto tondo. La trasformazione plastica dell’immagine corre quindi parallela al progressivo “scollamento” dell’immagine stessa tanto dallo sfondo cui rimaneva inizialmente vincolata quanto dal mero calco dell’originale (e sull’originale).

La plastica ha insomma un sogno: foggiare corpi. Herder fa ruotare la sua monumentale *Plastik* proprio intorno al «sogno plastico [*bildendem Träume*]» – così recita il sottotitolo dell’opera – di colui che riuscì a trasformare un’immagine in un corpo, Pigmalione. Come la Galatea del mito ovidiano, anche quella herderiana «mi può abbracciare, può farmi ingiunocchiare, può far sì che io diventi suo amico e compagno di gioco, essa è presente, è qui [*sie ist gegenwärtig, sie ist da*]» (Herder 1994, 50). Quello della plastica è dunque un sogno di presenza, corporeità e animazione. Ed è significativo, da questo punto di vista, che «plastica» venga definita anche

la pittura ogni qual volta sia in grado di trasmettere, attraverso la resa delle ombre e il sapiente uso di giochi chiaroscurali, quel particolare senso di rilievo, volumetria e spazialità che Bernard Berenson (1997, 1948) definiva in termini di «valori tattili». [1] È ancora Herder a rimarcarlo: «Improvvisamente le figure disegnate [*Figuren*] iniziano ad animarsi; non è forse come se *fuoriuscissero* e diventassero *corpi* [*Gestalten*]? Si avverte la loro *presenza*, si tenta di *afferrarle*, il sogno diventa *verità*» (1994, 33; trad. modificata). Ecco ricomparire sotto nuova veste alcuni degli elementi già incontrati nel racconto della fanciulla di Corinto: un'immagine piatta, bidimensionale, assume sempre più consistenza plastica, distaccandosi dallo sfondo cui era inizialmente relegata, animandosi, invadendo il nostro spazio e mettendo in crisi la distanza che la contemplazione estetica tradizionalmente impone: «Proprio questo è il trionfo del pittore! Il suo incanto deve trasformare la vista in tatto» (Herder 1994, 44).

[1] Per lo stesso motivo, del resto, chiamiamo «plastici» le carte geografiche basate su una rappresentazione a rilievo ipsometrico del terreno, nelle quali le colline e le montagne emergono dalla superficie sottostante, guadagnando quella corporeità tridimensionale di cui le comuni cartine sono prive.

L'invenzione del cinema ha dato nuova linfa a questo sogno pigmalionesco di animazione plastica, offrendo allo spettatore un corpo vicario (Voss 2013) e all'immagine ciò che ancora le mancava: il movimento. Forse nessuno ha saputo descrivere il dispositivo filmico come appagamento allucinatorio di un desiderio meglio di quanto abbia fatto Edmondo De Amicis in un breve e poco noto racconto del 1907, *Cinematografo cerebrale*. La storia è di una semplicità disarmante. Il protagonista, chiamato il Cavaliere, si ritrova in casa da solo mentre moglie e figlie si concedono una serata a teatro. È passato così tanto dall'ultima volta che ha potuto godersi un po' di tempo libero che ora non sa come impiegarlo: non ricorda che cosa significhi «il pensare per pensare, senza uno scopo determinato, e tanto meno l'analizzare i propri pensieri, il fare spettacolo della propria mente a sé medesima» (De Amicis 1996, 589). Rilassarsi senza pensare a *niente* si rivela subito operazione impossibile, perché la psiche viene travolta da un turbinio di immagini che affiorano da chissà dove e ne richiamano altre e altre ancora, secondo un meccanismo di associazioni inconscie incontrollabile e imprevedibile. In breve il Cavaliere non sa più se sia sveglio o stia sognando, e di visione in visione si ritrova a immaginarsi di mentire, di rubare, persino di tradire la moglie con la cameriera. Fino a quando l'improvviso ritorno della famiglia non pone termine al suo fantasticare/sognare, riportandolo alla vita di tutti i giorni.

Ciò che maggiormente colpisce del racconto di De Amicis è il fatto che il termine «cinematografo» compaia soltanto nel titolo: nel testo non ce n'è traccia. Giunti alla fine della storia, ci si ritrova quindi costretti a interrogarsi sulle motivazioni profonde che hanno spinto l'autore a dedicare a un dispositivo tecnico un'opera che di quel dispositivo, in senso stretto, non parla mai. Ed è qui che entra in gioco il secondo termine del titolo, «cerebrale». Il cinema viene accostato alla psiche in virtù di una comune forza plastica: il meccanismo dell'associazione di idee che dà forma alle immagini della fantasia e del mondo onirico richiama da vicino il montaggio cinematografico e la sua capacità di produrre nuove associazioni, e con esse nuove realtà. Come in un sogno, le avventure del Cavaliere gli rivelano lati dimenticati, sepolti, rimossi della sua personalità, recando testimonianza dell'esistenza di un sé sottratto ai vincoli e alle norme che regolano i rapporti sociali e le loro prassi consuete.

Questa dimensione inconscia non è solo quella dell'*Interpretazione dei sogni* freudiana, pubblicata nel 1899, ma anche quella del cinema, la cui invenzione viene fatta tradizionalmente risalire allo stesso giro di anni, e più precisamente al 1895. L'analogia tra sogno e cinema su cui si sono soffermati diversi autori (cfr. Grossi 2021) poggia in fondo sulla natura intrinsecamente plastica tanto dell'uno quanto dell'altro. Il «lavoro onirico» grazie al quale il sognatore trasforma idee astratte in immagini visive è descritto da Freud come costitutivamente plastico: i sogni, così come i ricordi d'infanzia, sono «plasticamente visivi [*plastisch visuelle*]» (1967a, 312) e danno luogo a «scene elaborate addirittura plasticamente [*geradezu plastisch herausgearbeitete Szenen*]» (1967b, 96-97). Se il sogno è il soddisfacimento allucinatorio, per mezzo di immagini, di un desiderio inappagato, il cinema esternalizza questo processo fino a produrre un'allucinazione condivisa, intersoggettiva. Da questa prospettiva si comprende meglio la tesi di André Bazin (1973a, 5) secondo cui il bisogno di illusione avrebbe «divorato a poco a poco le arti plastiche», celebrando nel cinema uno dei suoi più vistosi trionfi.

Eppure, sin dai suoi albori, il cinema stesso non è apparso come un punto di arrivo, bensì come un ulteriore punto di partenza. Il cinema ha sognato il post-cinema. E lo ha sognato dal punto di vista tanto della produzione quanto della fruizione filmiche. *L'Arrivo del treno alla stazione di La Ciotat*, proiettato dai fratelli Lumière nel 1895, fa notoriamente leva proprio sul potere illusionistico di un dispositivo che, veicolando l'impressione di uno sfondamento della quarta parete e di uno “scollamento” delle immagini dalla superficie schermica, avrebbe causato un fuggi fuggi generale degli spettatori. Se è vero che non esistono testimonianze dirette a supporto di questo presunto avvenimento (Loiperdinger & Elzer 2004), ciò non significa affatto che l'aneddoto sia privo di valore, al contrario: esso assurge a mito fondativo del cinema precisamente perché è in grado di condensare in sé l'idea di un apparato mediale grazie al quale l'immagine – proprio come nel racconto della ragazza di Corinto, che inizia con la proiezione proto-cinematografica di un'ombra gettata dalla luce di una lanterna – guadagna progressivamente in plasticità fino a distaccarsi dalla superficie schermica e ad annullare la distanza che separa lo spettatore dal mondo iconico. La verità del mito non è quindi di natura storico-evenemenziale, dal momento che essa non parla di un fatto empirico (l'inverosimile fuga del pubblico dalla sala), bensì di un fatto *culturale*: Engberg e Bolter (2020) lo hanno ribattezzato «effetto La Ciotat», insistendo sull'onda lunga generata dal celebre film e, soprattutto, dal sogno che in quel film aveva trovato un primo appagamento allucinatorio e che oggi continua ad alimentare la corsa tecnologica verso dispositivi (si pensi ad esempio ai cosiddetti schermi anamorfici) capaci di trasmettere una straordinaria impressione di “emersione” dell'immagine dallo schermo.

Fin dall'inizio, dunque, il sogno plastico del cinema è stato il sogno del superamento del cinema stesso. È ancora Bazin a notarlo quando afferma, nel 1946, che «tutti i perfezionamenti che assomma il cinema non possono paradossalmente che riavvicinarlo alle sue origini. Il cinema non è ancora stato inventato!» (1973b, 15). In quell'incipit mitico del dispositivo cinematografico che è *L'Arrivo del treno alla stazione di La Ciotat* si condensa il desiderio del cinema stesso, che il critico francese ha descritto nei termini di un «realismo integrale» capace di restituire «un'illusione

perfetta del mondo esterno con il suono, il colore e il rilievo» (1973b, 13-15). Un paio di anni prima di Bazin, nel 1944, anche René Barjavel, riferendosi al sogno dei Lumières di una tridimensionalità stereoscopica e fantasticando sui suoi potenziali sviluppi, aveva insistito sul concetto di un «cinema totale» frutto di un progressivo soddisfacimento del desiderio inaugurale di vedere le immagini (esplicitamente definite «virtuali») animarsi, guadagnando in plasticità e rilievo fino a liberarsi dalla superficie bidimensionale dello schermo e della pellicola: «Il cinema disporrà un giorno del volume come dispone oggi del suono e del colore» (2001, 59-60).

Barjavel non era il solo, in quegli anni cruciali per la storia e la teoria del cinema, a prefigurare l'avvento del post-cinema. Basti pensare a Morton Heilig e al suo utopico «cinema del futuro», immaginato nel 1955 (Helig 1992), o al celebre romanzo di Adolfo Bioy Casares *L'invenzione di Morel*, che già nel 1940 immaginava un «cinema plastico» (Schmidt 2014, 117) capace di riprodurre la realtà in tutti i suoi aspetti multisensoriali, generando un'illusione perfetta e mettendo quindi fuori gioco «in un'unica mossa il *framing* dell'immagine e la sua esperienza fenomenologica» (Pinotti 2021, 169). Oppure, ancora prima, a Stanley Weinbaum e al suo visionario *Gli occhiali di Pigmalione*, che nel 1935 profetizzava l'avvento della realtà virtuale e che sin dal titolo rende omaggio al mito ovidiano dell'animazione plastica: «Un film oggi interessa i sensi della vista e dell'udito. Supponiamo che io vi aggiunga il gusto, l'odorato, e perfino il tatto. [...] Supponiamo che possa renderti partecipe della trama, che tu possa parlare alle ombre e che quelle ti rispondano, e invece di svolgersi sullo schermo, la trama ti riguardi in prima persona e tu ne faccia parte. Questo non sarebbe rendere reale un sogno?» (Weinbaum 2013, 57-58).

3. «Dallo schermismo al plasticismo»: Saint-Pol-Roux

Prima di tutti gli autori citati sin qui, a immaginare un cinema plastico capace di donare corpo e rilievo alle immagini liberandole dalla superficie dello schermo era stato un altro intellettuale, pressoché totalmente ignorato nell'ambito dei *media studies*. Per seguirne le tracce bisogna recarsi a punta Pen-Hir, meta ideale per chiunque voglia esplorare la Bretagna tenendosi alla larga dalle rotte turistiche più battute. Immerso nel parco naturale dell'Armorica, il promontorio della penisola di Crozon ammalia con le sue ripide scogliere che si gettano in acque tra le più pericolose della sponda europea dell'Atlantico. È qui che si trovano le rovine di un imponente podere turrato costruito nel 1903, sulla base di una vecchia casa di pescatori, da Pierre-Paul Roux, meglio noto con lo pseudonimo di Saint-Pol-Roux. Dopo gli anni della giovinezza spesi tra Marsiglia, Lione e Parigi, dove ha avuto modo di frequentare con una certa assiduità il circolo intellettuale riunitosi intorno a Mallarmé, il *poète oublié* – come lo definisce André Breton nel 1923 dedicandogli la raccolta di scritti *Clair de terre* [2] – decide di trasferirsi in questo eremo di stante anni luce da ogni forma di mondanità, ribattezzandolo in seguito Manoir de Coecilian in memoria del figlio caduto poco più che ventenne nel tritacarne di Verdun.

La notte del 23 giugno 1940 questo luogo diventa teatro di una delle innumerevoli pagine buie della Campagna di Francia. Sono passate poco più di ventiquattr'ore dal secondo armistizio di Compiègne

[2] Walter Benjamin sarà tra i pochi a far conoscere il nome di Saint-Pol-Roux oltre i confini francesi. Si veda a riguardo Schultz 1988.

e il territorio francese è ufficialmente smembrato in due, con le regioni meridionali a formare la Repubblica di Vichy (di fatto uno stato satellite del Terzo Reich) e le zone settentrionali, coste atlantiche comprese, sotto occupazione tedesca. Un soldato nazista ubriaco fa irruzione nella tenuta di Saint-Pol-Roux, ferisce gravemente lui e sua figlia Divine e uccide la governante, Rose Bruteller. L'anziano poeta, celebrato dai Surrealisti come loro antesignano (Breton 2003, 30-31) e «unico vero precursore del movimento "moderno"» (Breton 1988, 901), riesce a fuggire e viene ricoverato a Brest, ma una volta dimesso torna a casa e scopre che gran parte dei suoi manoscritti, frutto di una vita di lavoro, è andata persa o bruciata. Ricoverato nuovamente, morirà poche settimane dopo.

Qualcosa però si salva, da questa storia di barbarie che ho qui sommariamente ricostruito. Appunti, note e abbozzi che Divine prima recupera, poi custodisce e infine deposita presso la Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet di Parigi. Tra questo materiale magmatico c'è un plico classificato col numero 9823, comprendente due quaderni e alcuni fogli di vario formato che risalgono probabilmente agli anni compresi tra il 1925 e il 1930 e che sono stati ordinati, per quanto possibile, da Gérard Macé. Vi è racchiuso il sogno di un cinema a venire, di un *cinéma vivant*, come si legge su una pagina che reca una dedica ad Abel Gance e che dà il nome all'intera raccolta, pubblicata per la prima volta soltanto nel 1972 (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 74).

All'epoca in cui scrive, Saint-Pol-Roux è convinto che il cinema si trovi ancora agli albori del suo tragitto mediale, a uno stadio primitivo vincolato alla presenza dello schermo e soggetto alle limitazioni imposte dalle cornici, dalla bidimensionalità dell'immagine e dalla distanza che necessariamente si interpone tra scena e spettatore. Nemmeno i registi più audaci sarebbero riusciti a liberare il medium filmico da tali costrizioni apparentemente inaggirabili: «Sì, bellissimo, *La corazzata Potëmkin* di Sua Maestà Ejzenštejn, ma ancora costretto in una cornice – ancora relegato in una scatola di conserve» (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 49). Curioso, questo riferimento al maestro sovietico, che di lì a poco avrebbe preconizzato l'avvento di innovazioni tecniche che sarebbero dovute sfociare nell'invenzione di un cinema stereoscopico (*stereokino*) capace di far leva su un irresistibile effetto di tridimensionalità per «gettare un ponte sull'abisso che divide spettatore e attore», nel tentativo «di "attirare" il fruitore fin dentro ciò che un tempo non era altro che la superficie piana dello schermo e di "proiettare" verso di lui [...] ciò che prima rimaneva disteso lungo lo specchio della superficie schermica» (Ejzenštejn 1982, 170-172). Ejzenštejn immaginava così l'evoluzione del cinema in un medium ancora più immersivo grazie al quale sarebbe stato ad esempio possibile far comparire un gigantesco ragno sospeso tra lo schermo e il pubblico, oppure degli uccelli in volo «dalla sala verso la profondità dello schermo» o posati «lungo un filo teso sopra le teste degli spettatori» (Ejzenštejn 1982, 165).

Queste parole, datate 1947, sembrano riecheggiare quanto Saint-Pol-Roux andava fantasticando una ventina di anni prima, quando profetizzava che il cinema del futuro sarebbe riuscito a «uscire dalle cornici» (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 84) e a emanciparsi dagli schermi:

Stufo di vedere l'immagine sul muro, l'uomo vuole passare dietro per conoscere quel che ha visto davanti [...], vuole andare attorno, ammirare, toccare, conoscere

completamente quello che finora gli è stato permesso di vedere solo in superficie.
Così l'immagine si fa rilievo, equivalente all'uomo che l'aggira. Un'immagine capace
dunque di parlare, cantare, ridere, piangere, amare, odiare. (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 16)

Il cambiamento prospettato avrebbe investito tanto il fruitore (costringendolo ad abbandonare il tradizionale atteggiamento estetico della contemplazione frontale a distanza e obbligandolo a immergersi nel mondo iconico fino a diventarne parte integrante e addirittura costitutiva) quanto il produttore: nel passaggio «dallo schermismo [*écranisme*] al plasticismo [*plasticisme*]» (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 78), il regista avrebbe potuto contare su una «nuova cinecamera, il *cretarium*», che gli avrebbe consentito di riprendere «non una sola, bensì tutte le inquadrature» (Saint-Pol-Roux 1984, 84). Si tratta insomma di qualcosa di molto simile alle moderne videocamere 360°, e non è un caso che l'«utopia tecno-poetica» (Wall-Romana 2013, 152-153) di Saint-Pol-Roux sia stata indicata come antesignana degli ambienti immersivi contemporanei.

È l'idea di un cinema totale in grado di condurre l'immagine dalla superficie al rilievo, facendole guadagnare un grado di realtà plastica assimilabile a quello della realtà in carne e ossa. Se il cinema tradizionale, per Saint-Pol-Roux, restava «fermo alle ombre di Platone» (1984, 108), quello a venire avrebbe condotto a una nuova forma mediale, la *cineplastia*: «Il cinema non deve essere solo sonoro e parlato ma, uscendo dallo schermo, deve diventare plastico, vivente. In breve, invece delle ombre della caverna, la Vita stessa, solare» (1984, 74). In epoche e contesti mediali radicalmente diversi, la ragazza di Corinto e Saint-Pol-Roux hanno in fondo sognato lo stesso sogno.

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From Discourse to Figure.

Plasticity and Mimesis in Disrupted Realism

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Grounded in the philosophical discourse mainly articulated by Catherine Malabou and Nidesh Lawtoo, this study posits that the so-called Disrupted Realism, a distinct tendency within contemporary representational painting as proposed by writer and curator John Seed, and exemplified by the works of Antonio López García, Jenny Saville, Alex Kanevsky, Ann Gale and others, actively embodies and interrogates the concept of plasticity in relation to mimesis, with its receptive, creative and destructive capacities manifested in the painting practices and conceptual connotations. Through their distinctive approaches to depicting the natural world, these painters not only reflect, but also expand upon the nature of plasticity — engaging in a (trans)formative process that challenges traditional notions of mimesis, representation and realism, showing them to be “plastic” concepts. This dynamic, dialectic interaction often filled with contradictions, illuminates how this type of contemporary painting, often termed “realist”, contributes to and reshapes philosophical discussions on subjectivity, identity, form, essence and transformation.

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1. Introduction

Even though it remains impossible to completely define a signification of an artwork, to describe all its meanings, clearly, in a contained linguistic space, it can be insightful and productive to try to satisfy, however brief and limited this effort might be, our everlasting search for understanding. This allows us to outline at least a «silhouette» of interpretation «that was hitherto hidden» and explore the depth of discourse embodied in art (Malabou 2010, 55-56). The aim of this study is to inhabit a plastic space by examining the works of painters described as “Disrupted Realists” to highlight how plasticity, in relation to the transformed notion of mimesis, operates within the visual arts as a dynamic process of becoming, rather than a static, fixed state of being (Malabou 2005, 11). To address the title of the study, From discourse to figure is a reference to Jean-François Lyotard’s influential interdisciplinary work *Discourse, Figure*, but also serves as a reflection of the methodological approach applied in this study, structured to follow the two co-implicated terms in «the transition of the category from its concept into external reality», or rather, more directly, to move [1] «from the interior of discourse... into the figure» (Malabou 2010, 13, 56). Such a structure benefits from exploring the «purity of a thought» within the tangible «materiality of a culture», specifically in the paintings of Disrupted Realism (Malabou 2010, 14), [2] exemplified primarily by painters like Antonio López García, Jenny Saville, [3] Alex Kanevsky, Kai Samuels Davis, Ann Gale, Nicola Samori and others. Described by John Seed, who first characterized the phenomenon and curated a major exhibition on the topic in 2018, not as a style or even a tendency, but a «set of developments in painting that crosses international borders and stylistic boundaries» (Seed 2018), Disrupted Realism not only represents but actively constructs and reconfigures a system of ideas, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between the abstract and the concrete, where art becomes a medium through which theoretical discourse is not merely illustrated, but critically examined and materially instantiated.

Building on the function of Disrupted Realism, to conceptually represent, deconstruct and expand a system of ideas, it is imperative to highlight the significance of plasticity, which, as Nidesh Lawtoo has shown thoroughly, not only reinvigorates the ancient concept of mimesis, but also allows interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the humanities and the neurosciences (2016, 131-132; 2017, 1205). Without being reductionist, this fusion underscores a critical examination of how artistic expressions, like those found in Disrupted Realism, align with, and illuminate, neuroscientific understandings of perception, emotion, and the cognitive processes involved in producing and viewing art. This in no way guarantees that any scientific theory or philosophical concept, when analogized, would serve a useful backdrop for the cultural domain, but it means that

[1] I am using this term to imply «movement», or a methodological flowing energy, which is, in fact, «the foundation of the dialectical process» (Malabou 2005, 12).

[2] This categorization deserves a more in-depth elaboration in a separate study, but for the purposes of this paper it is safe to say there is enough distinction within contemporary representational painting to give this selection its own theoretical framework and discuss its implications.

[3] While not included in his first explorations of the topic, John Seed grants Jenny Saville special consideration in his newest book *More Disruption: Representational Art in Flux* (2023). It is important to recognize, though, that the categorization of artists within this tendency need not be confined solely to those selected by Seed. Broadening the scope to consider the phenomenon itself encourages an examination of the underlying principles and techniques that define Disrupted Realism, rather than limiting our perspective to a specific roster of artists.

plasticity, specifically, has a rich genealogy [4] deeply connected to mimesis and the fields of neuroscience and aesthetics, beyond surface-level comparisons that might mislead our inquiry.

The goal of such parallels and transdisciplinary analogies, therefore, isn't to seek in neurons, for example, the solutions to cultural questions. Nor is it to overstate the possibilities of a conceptual analysis to solve neuroscientific problems, like the relation between the neuronal and the mental (the body/mind problem). Instead, the aim is to use scientific findings and philosophical investigations about human nature [5]

and condition – like those in contemporary neuroscience – to offer a model, a symbolic schema [6] for understanding (or decoding, to use a Derridean term) a certain type of representational painting. In short, as Lawtoo puts it, such approaches can «give material substance» to scholars in the humanities (2017, 1221). It must be noted, however, that the aim here isn't merely to apply theory to art; it is also to show how art exemplifies and, more importantly even, extends theoretical discourse. Therefore, it would be productive to return the concepts of plasticity and mimesis, as well as their relation, to the context of the symbolic and conceptual, or simply – aesthetics, after they have been enriched outside of it.

2. Interior of Discourse: The Theoretical Framework

2.1 – Plasticity: Emergence and Annihilation

The concept of plasticity has emerged as a significant philosophical construct, primarily and most thoroughly through the work of Catherine Malabou, who has, through a Hegelian reading of the neurosciences, redefined traditional views on form and transformation. Despite her successful application of the rich history of the concept mainly to the field of neuroscience and recent discoveries related to neuroplasticity, which underscores the brain's ability to reconfigure itself both functionally and structurally in response to diverse stimuli (2008, 20), for the purposes of this paper, our interests lie primarily in the aesthetic and conceptual connotations of plasticity. In her critical reinterpretation, plasticity is dialectically structured in a play of the emergence and annihilation of form (2008, 72). Emergence (or construction) of form denotes the simultaneous capacity to *receive form* (the plasticity of the molded, formed and “formable”, like clay which passively takes shape) and the power to *give form* (the plasticity of the molder, the

[4] The rich genealogy of these topics includes, to borrow Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology, both the ancients and the moderns, from Aristotle and Plato, to Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Lacoue-Labarthe himself, Derrida, and more recently, Malabou and Lawtoo, whose work grounds the theoretical framework proposed in this study.

[5] Much has been said in recent decades about the brain's capacity to change its innate, genetic constitution over time, in its «ability to establish new synaptic connections between neurons, which modify their capacity for transmission depending on our physical activities, cultural impressions, and life experiences» (Lawtoo 2017, 1203). In fact, genetic endowment and experience are the two main factors that characterize the growth and

the development of not just the brain and human nature, but any organism in the natural world, the third being the principles, or the laws of nature which are «organism-independent» (Chomsky 2005, 1, 6, 9). With regard to the first factor, Malabou writes about *developmental* plasticity in «the execution of the genetic program» during the first six months of life, which «sculpts» the brain such that «the identity of an individual begins to outline itself» (2008, 20). With regard to experience of the external environment, the second factor, Malabou writes about *modulational* plasticity, which allows the brain to adapt to its environment and change the «transmission efficacy» of the «plastic synapses», resulting in new neuronal connections (2008, 22).

[6] In the context of the methodology of this study, a *symbolic schema* suggests a flexible, adaptive framework that uses both direct and analogous methods to link theory with practice. In Kantian terms, this *hypotyposis* has both schematic and symbolic aspects (Malabou 2005, 202). On the one hand, while it will not be imposing strict rules per se, this method will explore how theoretical concepts (plasticity and mimesis) manifest in the tangible form of paintings (of Disrupted Realism). This systematic exploration aligns with the schematic aspect, as it involves a structured, though not rigid, application of abstract concepts to concrete examples. On the other hand, these artworks do not always directly embody theoretical concepts in a literal, one-to-one correspondence, but rather resonate with, reflect, or express these concepts in nuanced, often indirect, symbolic ways.

formative, who or which actively shapes form), aligned with the etymology of the Greek word *plassein*, and more frequently connected to the “plastic arts” (2008, 5). The second property in this contradictory nature of plasticity is annihilation (or destruction) of form, which is the ability to cause «violent explosions», linked to a different use of the term *plastique*, an explosive substance which shapes the words *plastiquage* and *plastique* (2008, 5). Both properties are crucial for understanding the conceptual implications and painterly processes of the Disrupted Realists.

These etymological explanations that form the meaning of plasticity do not imply that any similar notion that could be, mistakenly so, understood as a synonym, like “flexibility”, is useful for this analysis, nor that plasticity is a notion at all: it goes beyond that. As Malabou points out, while flexibility is a «vague notion», plasticity is a concept with a «long philosophical past» as well as tangible and productive relations to mimesis, another ancient concept, which is why it will be instrumental for this discussion (2008, 13).

In her work, Malabou discusses how plasticity pertains to Hegel’s dialectic, highlighting, along with his definition of philosophical exposition with the «goal of plasticity» in mind (2005, 11; Hegel 2018, 40), its relevance in understanding transformations beyond physical or biological alterations to encompass ideological and symbolic shifts (Malabou, 2008, 69-70), which can be readily applied to the analysis of art forms such as contemporary representational paintings. This philosophical lens is pivotal in examining how artworks engage with notions of forming and deforming, echoing the fluidity and dynamism that Malabou associates with structural and conceptual reshaping and a materiality that is “plastic” (Johnston 2014, 128). Furthermore, Malabou recognizes Hegel’s definition of what he calls the “Absolute Relation”, meaning the «relation between substantiality and accidentality» characterized by the «activity-of-form» that implies the «plasticity of substance itself», relating us back to the first property of plasticity, namely, the «capacity to both receive form and give form to its own content» (2005, 11-12). Thus defined, the “Absolute Relation” implicates what Barthes called the «infinite transformation» of substance (1972, 97), by the play of accidentality as a necessary condition of (artistic) creation. [7] In the phenomenon of Disrupted Realism, this involves «an interest in painterly improvisation», spontaneity, expected accidentality, controlled chaos and enough «skill to burn» (Seed 2018, 5, 7). In turn, these practices transform, disrupt and, perhaps, even de(con)struct the depicted and, through the «sudden transformation of nature» (Barthes 1972, 97), “plasticize” their subjects. This allows us to appropriate plasticity to discuss the ways in which art not only represents but actively constructs our perception of reality in general, but also shows how the painting practices of Disrupted Realists could thus be seen as plastic processes, forms of action that mold and are molded by material as well as cultural and historical conditions.

We can trace these “plastic” processes not only in the production, but also the reception of art. Akin to developmental and modulational plasticity, described by Malabou when speaking about the genetic endowments molded by the environment (2008, 20, 22), we can notice a parallel with the way one receives a work of art. Simultaneously, the observer

[7] This view of artistic creation, as analogous to a natural force, especially in the context of representational art, means that art «not only reproduces nature», even when “copying” it, «but rather re-produces the creative force of Being itself» (Lawtoo 2017, 1218).

receives form of the work and accepts it, while giving back to it a form shaped by his or her perception, informed by innate properties of the individual, their personal experiences, attitudes and associations.

The applicability of plasticity to contemporary art is especially pertinent in discussions about the representational, where the interplay of visibility and invisibility – presence and absence, creation and negation – reveals the inherent plasticity of representational practices. To use an example which will later be discussed in greater detail, the work of artists like Jenny Saville redefines bodily forms in ways that challenge and expand the viewer's understanding of corporeality and identity, illustrating plasticity's role in the continuous renegotiation of form and meaning, and in understanding more completely the conceptual motivation behind painting practices like those in Disrupted Realism.

2.2 – Mimesis: Between the Passive and the Active

The layered nature of mimesis has been investigated in the past, counter to the usual and limited view of mimesis as simple imitation, and recently tackled in an exhibition at the Museu Europeu d'Art Modern in Barcelona, titled *Mimesis: Representational Art 2023*, which included different considerations of the concept, «from the venerated traditional classic realism» described just now as a limited view (on the condition it is the only one presented), to «highly meticulous hyperrealism», to what is of particular interest in this discussion, namely, the «loose brushstrokes that lead to wild abstraction within realism» (Kloosterboer 2023, 9). This multiplicity of interpretation may be the result of an awareness of the inherent plasticity of mimesis, thoroughly explored in recent years by Nidesh Lawtoo, who designates the inquiry into the concept of plasticity as crucial for its potential to reshape our understanding of mimesis throughout history (and vice versa), as well as enabling significantly refreshed viewpoints in art theory. Through a «logic of repetition», Lawtoo argues, mimesis has manifested and adapted across epochs to fit new artistic and cultural paradigms (2017, 1201), which is a perspective that aligns with the broader historical and philosophical narratives explored in this paper.

Even though we will concern ourselves primarily with the philosophical and aesthetic genealogy of mimesis, it is interesting to note that recent interdisciplinary studies have begun to explore the role of mimesis (and plasticity, as was already mentioned) in cognitive science and neuroscience, suggesting that our capacity for imitation extends beyond artistic endeavors into the very fabric of cognition and our social reality (Lawtoo 2016, 131-132). [8] Nevertheless, as with many things in philosophy, the concept of mimesis can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, whose writings show that since its inception, the concept has been characterized by a complexity and an ambiguity that resonated throughout the historical discourses on the topic, shaping views we might hold today. Therefore, it could be argued that all art, since Plato and Aristotle, is reflected upon through its relation to mimesis in the broad sense (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101). Originally, the Greek term mimesis referred to the act of imitation, similar to how an actor would

[8] Mirror neurons, for example, represent a neuronal basis for mimetic behavior, underscoring the biological underpinnings of this ancient concept. These studies enrich the concept of mimesis, portraying it as a fundamental aspect of human nature that encompasses learning, language acquisition, and social behavior (Iacoboni 2009, 76-78).

replicate, or mime, the speech and actions of a mythic hero (Blinder 1986, 20). Over time though, mimesis evolved beyond its original descriptive definition of simple imitation, transforming into a concept that sparked a centuries-long discussion about human nature and the role of art in society. This expansion opened up new philosophical inquiries into how art reflects, shapes, and interprets human experiences. However, it was initially introduced into art theory with negative implications, beginning with Plato's critiques. In the hierarchy of reality and truth, or rather their stratification in relation to the Theory of Forms, Plato designates art (poetry to be exact) as being twice removed from it, therefore condemning art as being mimetic, imitational and ill-equipped as a form of knowledge (Havelock 1963, 30). In the same vein, Rousseau talks critically about acting talent as passively inhabiting, or to use the term in Malabou's sense, receiving a character, as «counterfeiting oneself» with illusionistic, deceitful connotations and a loss of identity (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 35).

Contrary to their view, Nietzsche understands mimesis, even in its literal sense of imitation in art, as a productive process to the highest degree of activity, more in line of what Aristotle outlined in his views on the matter (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101). Aristotle countered Plato's theory of mimesis with his own, which adopted a less critical stance towards art and allowed for a variety of approaches to representation, very effectively freeing the concept from its Platonic shackles. He notes the differences between drama and epic, where, for example, Homeric-type epics creatively mimic action through narration, while in drama, the characters themselves are active bearers of the action or the tragic conflict. This key distinction could be applied to painting, differentiating between a tendency toward descriptive illustration that passively «narrates» content (as much as such a thing is possible) on the one hand, and the suggestiveness and «the flexibility of paint itself» (Seed 2018, 7) on the other, where the particular and purposefully visible application of paint becomes the «active bearer» of meaning (Grlić 1974, 58).

But even with Aristotle's expansion of the concept which involves not just direct imitation but also capturing the essence of the subject matter, this double understanding of mimesis is already, albeit unknowingly, implied in Plato's work, as pointed out by Eric A. Havelock, depending on whether his critique is applied, on the one hand, to poetry, where it could describe an «act of composition which constitutes an act of creation», and on the other hand to a performance by an actor «who is a mouthpiece or a reciter» (1963, 22). This dichotomy between Plato's and Aristotle's views encapsulates the classical tension within the concept of mimesis: between imitation as deceit and passive reception, and imitation as a means of understanding and conveying meaning on a deeper level, which justifies Lawtoo's elegant classification of the paradox of mimesis (reflecting the paradoxical nature of plasticity), as being one of a *restricted* and a *general* nature (2017, 1214-1219). He explains restricted mimesis in terms of a «mass of spectators» who passively receive an identity of a model (2017, 1215). This has implications for the artistic, but also political context, where the «mass of spectators» becomes the Nietzschean *Masse*, «malleable, passive, and pathologically suggestible to authoritarian types» (Lawtoo 2017, 1217), or what Walter Lippmann deemed an uninformed public susceptible to manipulation and manufactured consent (1991, 248). Against this political,

restricted mimesis, Lawtoo proposes, via Malabou and Lacoue-Labarthe, the other side of the coin which concerns poetics, namely, general mimesis (2017, 1214). This offers a different type of mimesis that spawns from Aristotle's *Physics*, rather than Plato's *Republic* (better aligned with restricted mimesis). As the focus in this case is on the "plastic actor" (in our case a painter), general mimesis is well suited to the conceptual and technical position of the Disrupted Realist painter, whose painting practice is characterized by a «formative force», since they function as a «virtuoso mimetician who generates artistic characters not deprived of formal qualities» (Lawtoo 2017, 1214-1215).

As in the discussion on plasticity, it would be appropriate to turn to questions regarding the reception of art, now in the context of mimesis. In modern philosophical discourses, mimesis has been revisited and expanded beyond classical understanding. Philosophers like Adorno and Gadamer have explored how mimesis functions not just in terms of representation (to quote Schoenberg: «one paints a painting, not what it represents»; Adorno 2002, 4), but as a form of engagement with the world that involves a transformative process, where the viewer or reader is *present*, in the sense of a «genuine mode of participating», [9] rather than as a passive observer (Gadamer 2004, 121-122). Furthermore, semiotic theory about mimetic processes in art, as elaborated by David Blinder, aligns with Lawtoo's general mimesis, since it states that «pictorial resemblance rests primarily on the observer: The resemblance between pictures and reality is not given, but taken» (1986, 20), reflecting the transformation that turns «negative into positive, passivity into activity» (Lawtoo 2017, 1214). No matter the supposed objectivity of mimetic efforts, «it is a matter of how the viewer interprets the signs before him», says Blinder (1986, 20), allowing us to conclude that the act of viewing art, being present within the work, is both a creatively plastic and mimetic process. Let us now turn to a closer analysis of Disrupted Realism to further explore this theoretical framework outlined in this chapter.

[9] Gadamer applies the Greek concept of *theoria* to the type of spectator who «takes part» while being present (2004, 122).

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3. Into the Figure: A Closer Study of Disrupted Realism

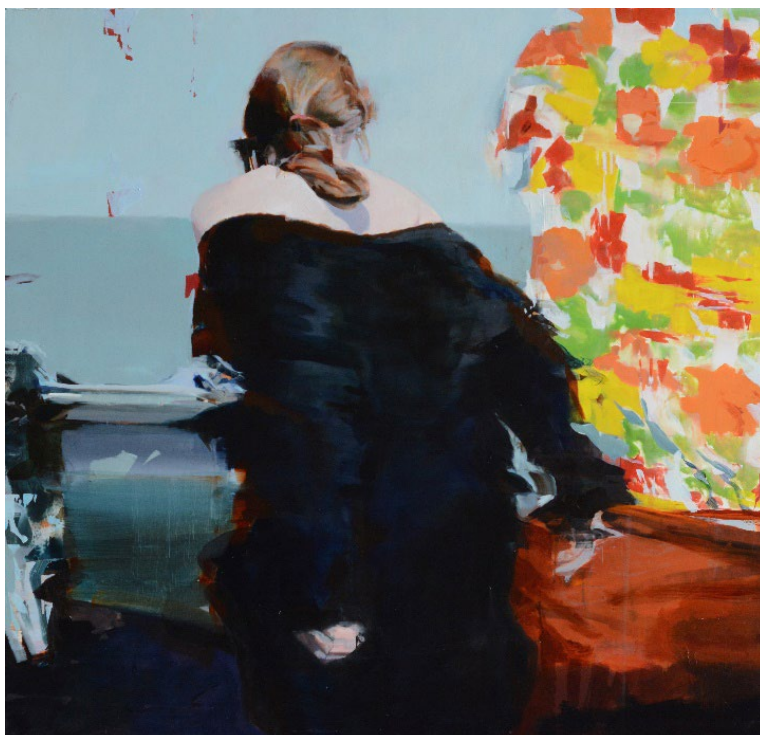
As we transition from the theoretically dense space of the "Interior of Discourse" to the more practical considerations in "Into the Figure", this chapter delves into the tangible manifestations of plasticity and mimesis within contemporary painting. Namely, this analysis will examine how Disrupted Realists – a group of artists connected through a network of exhibitions, art academies and other institutions of the artworld, – not only represent but actively question and reconstruct the very fabric of "realism". Special consideration will be given to Antonio López and Jenny Saville, who offer a generational foundation to the contemporary manifestation of this dialectical form of representation in painting, but others as well. Their work challenges traditional boundaries, blurring the lines between the abstract concepts discussed earlier and their concrete, visual realizations, thus offering a dynamic, evolving picture of contemporary aesthetics.

To begin, we will examine what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as a *figure-form*, which he explains using the work of Jackson Pollock. Although this connection to the painting process of Disrupted Realists might not be

immediately obvious, it is a compelling link worth exploring. Figure-form can be interpreted as a result of dialectic joining of *good form*, qualified as the Apollonian form (or rather, Pythagorean, Euclidian, Neoplatonic, rational, mathematical) and *anti-good form*, the Dionysian, “bad” form. An example of figure-form would require that «Apollo cooperate with Dionysus» (Lyotard 2011, 275), which is precisely why it is appropriate to offer examples of inherently contradictory Disrupted Realism. Any depiction of a landscape or cityscape by Antonio López (Exterior façade, summer, painted in 2020, for example [10]), or the human form by Ann Gale (Space Between [11]), Kai Samuels Davis (The Mirror, 2017), or Alex Kanevsky (Unstable Equilibrium [FIG. 1]), show more than obvious and purposeful disruptions of the pure mimetic illusion in the Platonic sense, and make a clear example of figure-form, as described above. The subject matter of these works is akin to plasticity since it refers to the «spontaneous organization of fragments» (Malabou 2010, 7), and lives in the plastic “space between” (in Ann Gale’s case, literally) appearance and disappearance, inside and outside, active and passive, mimicking a «double structure of plasticity» which in turn «shadows the double structure of mimesis» (Lawtoo 2017, 1213). Alex Kanevsky’s painting Unstable Equilibrium [fig. 1] is particularly interesting here (not least due to its title), for it contains the opposing forces of stillness and suggested movement that seem to rip the human figure between the dynamic energies of gestural expression of paint (sliding left and right, both thickly applied and in parts scraped off the painted surface, tearing the contour

[10] See: <https://en.antoniolopezweboficial.com/obra-actual?pgid=18ijv-2v2-4f892509-af11-4a2e-9d63-9c-d3e35cd11f>

[11] See: <https://paintingperceptions.com/interview-with-ann-gale/>



[FIG. 1] Alex Kanevsky, *Unstable Equilibrium* (2018). Oil on wood, 91 x 91 cm
© Alex Kanevsky, courtesy of the artist.

of the figure), therefore also corresponding to this structure that «turns stable oppositions into destabilizing equivalences» (Lawtoo 2017, 1213).

On the topic of tearing the contour of the figure, another term developed by Lyotard might prove useful for this analysis. *Figure-image* refers to the «transgression of the contour», or the «abuse» (in other words: disruption) enacted on the «rules regulating the formation of the perceived object» (2011, 274). And although Kanevsky's painting certainly commits this "abuse" via the gestural expression of paint which is its «object of deconstruction», figure-image is best exemplified by Jenny Saville's series of paintings titled *In the Realm of the Mothers* [12]

showing «the coexistence of several silhouettes» (2011, 274).

[12] See: <https://www.thebroad.org/art/jenny-saville/realm-mothers-ii>

This simultaneity erases the mathematical, Euclidian space of the Apollonian form, with bodies intertwined in such a way they «display several positions in a single place and time» (2011, 275). The loss of rational space and any hint of linear perspective signifies also the loss of a compositional focus, akin to the "allover" approach developed by the Abstract Expressionists. This leads (but never gets there, inhabiting instead the "space between") towards the «elimination of all recognizable figure» (2011, 275), which can be applied, to a varying degree, to all painting practices in Disrupted Realism.

There is also a third approach that Lyotard develops which can be linked to Disrupted Realism, namely his description of the relationship between the *graphic* and the *figural* in the painting process, emphasizing how disruptions in form can expose underlying tensions and challenge conventional boundaries (2011, 212). When a painter adheres to conventions that the eye has grown accustomed to through copying of styles and repetition by previous generations, they engage with what is termed "graphic space". In such instances, «the figural power of a line», or a brushstroke, «can only break out, like a scandal» (2011, 212). This represents an unconventional approach that is disruptive, critical, transformative, and defamiliarizing. It slows down the viewing process, compelling us to actively engage and pause before the image. The figural departs from its element (conventions, habits), moving away from the «discourse of signification» (2011, 212). Such conventions, disrupted in this way, might be the restricted considerations of classical, Platonic mimesis (criticized via the disruptions), or the well-known historical styles of painting, even works themselves that are a part of our collective cultural consciousness. In the latter case, the Italian painter Nicola Samori serves as an illuminating example, and uses not nature as his subject, but a mimesis of nature (in a general sense), namely, the older forms of painting, such as tenebrism, often making a copy of a specific work that he then disrupts through an iconoclastic process, involving scraping and chemically altering the painted surface. This perfectly aligns with the notion that Disrupted Realism has a dialectical "original essence", meaning that any change or distortion, any disruption, however extreme, of the "original" structure of the picture (the copied work in Samori), becomes the structure. As Gadamer puts it, «it still remains itself» (2004, 120-121).

The next convention we can analyze is one of a geometric space, getting us back to the work of the Spanish painter Antonio López. Although the artist initially employs a very strictly organized and traditionally understood geometric space to the picture plane, especially in his monumental

cityscapes, but also the more intimate still lifes, the geometry (the drawing) is so precise and delicate that each instance of “error” (purposeful, of course), or disruption by an apparent unfinishedness (like the simultaneity of white contours outlining individual grapes – figure-image, or the breaks in continuity of the painted and drawn layers) further accentuates and intensifies his critique of that space, which is why its “original essence” was never purely geometric to begin with, but rather dialectical, plastic. Lyotard links the geometric space with the Quattrocento (2011, 196), which provided a conceptual backbone for western European painting until the avant-garde, cubism especially, offered the deconstruction of that rationality, unambiguity, closure, even progress (represented in the linear movement steered by orthogonal lines towards the Ineffable One). It is no coincidence that John Seed recognizes Cézanne and cubism as the precursors to Disrupted Realism, which shares their doubt in the purely rational and geometric ordering of the world (2018, 6). Cézanne is especially relevant here, since he too, like López, tried to imbue the world with a geometric structure, as a response to the ephemeral qualities of impressionism, to make «something solid and durable like the art of museums» (Becks-Malorny 2007, 70), but in so doing, produced the fundamental impossibility of such an accomplishment in the modern age. To demonstrate the treatment of space in late Cézanne, Lyotard compares his work to Masaccio’s *The Tribute Money* (a different ordering of space than the one propagated by Alberti) and concludes that Cézanne makes us «see what seeing is», indicating a meta-perception of his subject (2011, 196-197). This is also an apt analysis of López’s many curved cityscapes (like in the previously mentioned *Exterior Façade, Summer*), which embody «the deconstruction of the focal zone by the curved area in the periphery of the field of vision» (2011, 197). This also means, in López, that the more we turn our gaze towards the periphery of the painting, the higher the degree of unfinishedness we notice, emphasizing a central focal point. Contrary to the geometric understanding of space in painting, López, like Cézanne before him, imbues *what* is visible with *how* it is visible, and by including «distortions, overlappings, ambiguities, and discrepancies» (2011, 197), comments on the very nature of vision and the mimetic processes thereby involved. More appropriate in both cases, therefore, is Lyotard’s notion of “plastic space”, which particularly refers to a type of space in visual arts that is dynamic and fluid, resisting static interpretation and form. This space is not fixed but is continuously formed and deformed by the forces and movements within the artwork. Unlike the more traditional, geometrically structured spaces, this plastic space engages the viewer in a less predictable experience.

Even though López’s work is closest to an identification with “hyperrealism” where he takes a position of an «unmoved and disinterested onlooker» (Diderot 1891, 7), we could argue that this is precisely the reason it contains the highest potential for an active critique of restricted mimesis. [13] To connect this argument with an astute observation by Lacoue-Labarthe, «the rule is always the same: the more it resembles, the more it differs», which designates López’s process as one of a «formative mimesis, properly artistic and poietic» (1985, 29, 34). Inherent to this paradox is a logic of semblance, «articulated» in the plastic and mimetic space of «sharing of appearance and

[13] Malabou employs the term “homeostasis” as a way to describe the maintenance of the system, and “self-generation” to describe the simultaneous ability to change the system (2008, 74), which readily applies to the characterization of López’s approach.

reality, of presence and of absence, of the same and of the other, or of the identity and difference» (1985, 29). This is not surprising since plasticity reflects a similar paradox in its simultaneous capacity of formation and explosion, emergence and annihilation, construction and deconstruction, which Malabou ascribes, in a typical interdisciplinary fashion, not only to the central nervous system, but the «dialectical nature of identity» as well (2008, 72, 74).

This “sharing” of contradictory notions, to which Lacoue-Labarthe ascribes the establishing of mimesis (1985, 29), is analogous to Malabou’s material relation of the dual aspect – plastic and graphic – defined in terms of presence, on the one hand, and «that which breaches presence», on the other (2010, 11). She further elaborates this as the relation of «flesh, face, body» and «traces and marks on the flesh, face, or body» (2010, 11), which can be recontextualized in the domain of painting, more specifically, Jenny Saville’s painting *Trace*. [14] The questions Malabou poses in her own analysis regarding the simultaneously “oppositional” and a “functional” relation between plastic and graphic elements, seem clearer here, considering what we have discussed in López’s work. In *Trace*, Saville’s depiction of unmistakably robust and palpable flesh exemplifies the “presence” that Malabou describes. The sheer physicality and scale of the nude body, seen from behind and with the head and legs obscured (and still more than two meters tall), convey a potent sense of that which is “present”, designating it in terms of time and space, and bringing the viewer into a confrontational encounter with the corporeal. The thing that breaches this plastic (in terms of the sculptural) presence is noted in the title of the painting, namely, the graphic traces and marks that show bodily discomfort, even trauma, illustrating clearly the “oppositional” relation between the plastic and the graphic. On the other hand, both elements form the same reality of the work and contribute “functionally” to its overall meaning and impact, embodied in the very materiality of the painting.

Perhaps the quintessential example that inhabits the space between “Discourse” and “Figure”, aligning closely with the theoretical framework discussed in this paper, is Jenny Saville’s painting *Propped*. [15] The painting has a very significant relation to both plasticity, described above in terms of the plastic and the graphic processes of formation and deformation, and mimesis. Saville’s use of text scraped across the flesh-like surface of the painting embodies this common dual capacity. The text – violent, direct, and integrally tied to the body it is inscribed upon – acts as both a graphic element that disrupts the presence of the body, and as a plastic element that molds the viewer’s perception of the body and meaning of the work itself.

Along with this consideration of plasticity, Saville examines the active and passive aspects of mimesis by carving, with conviction, a quote by the French feminist writer Luce Irigaray from her essay *When Our Lips Speak Together* on the surface of the painting, which acts as the plastic, the body, but does so in reverse, making it only legible with a mirror:

[14] See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/saville-trace-l04740>

[15] See: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/history-of-now-collection-david-teiger-l18623/lot.6.html>

If we continue to speak in this sameness – speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads – disappear, make us disappear. (Irigaray 1980, 69)

The integration of Irigaray text points to the negative or passive aspects of mimesis and plasticity, which involve the reception of form and the potential for this reception to enforce conformity or invisibility. Irigaray's critique speaks to the way language and traditional forms of representation can erase or suppress female voices and identities, only present as a mimetic reflection of men, in the passive sense. Saville's reversal of the text suggests a refusal of this passive reception, an assertion of agency that resists the disappearance of these identities. By reversing the text, Saville disrupts the traditional mimetic function of painting thereby requiring the viewer to use a mirror to read it. This act turns the mimetic process into one of active, formative engagement, rather than passive reception. The viewer must physically and cognitively engage with the work to decipher its meaning, whether turned towards the painting to serve as a metaphorical mirror, or away from it in an act of self-reflection, illustrating a transformative mimesis that shifts from passive to active. [16]

[16] The importance of this shift was recognized by Nietzsche, who, even though he affirms stereotypical gender norms by aligning the active and the passive as the virile and the feminine, suggests that «to convert mimesis is to virilize it», abandoning «the form of submission and becoming truly creative» (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101).

4. Final Reflections

In concluding the exploration of Disrupted Realism in contemporary painting, two central themes emerge that resonate deeply with the theoretical framework discussed throughout this paper. First, the painterly approach characteristic of Disrupted Realism exemplifies a profound plasticity, embodying the dual structure of both plasticity and mimesis in a distinctly dialectical manner. This approach not only demonstrates the artists' adeptness at navigating and expressing these complex philosophical concepts, but also highlights an inherent contradiction within the very act of representational painting. As these artists strive toward an objective representation of reality, for which the work of Antonio López makes the clearest case, they simultaneously underscore the inherent impossibility of such an endeavor, thereby sowing doubt about the feasibility of truly objective representation.

Furthermore, this dialectical tension within Disrupted Realism brings us full circle to Hegel's conception of plasticity, which extends beyond the confines of the plastic arts to encompass the formation of what might be termed a «plastic subject» (Lawtoo 2017, 1205). This subject, much like the art it creates and interprets, is continually shaped and reshaped, reflecting a dynamic process of becoming, rather than a static state of being. In essence, the practice of Disrupted Realism does not merely mimic the world, but interrogates and transforms it, engaging viewers in a deeper contemplation of what it means to perceive the world and represent the human experience.

Following Malabou's analysis of the neuronal self, we can recognize an analogy to the painting processes of the Disrupted Realists and conclude they are «structured by a dialectical play of the emergence and annihilation of form» (2008, 72). In this analogy, these disruptions would represent

the «creative bursts that progressively transform nature into freedom» and realism would represent «nature» transformed into «freedom» (2008, 74). Encapsulating this sense of freedom in painting, Alex Kanevsky describes a working atmosphere such that a painting is always in danger of «crashing and burning» (Seed 2018, 10), which is, again, comparable to the concept of plasticity, since it «signifies the disruption and deflagration of presence, the “explosive side of subjectivity”» (Malabou 2010, 9).

By examining the works of Disrupted Realism through this philosophical lens, we gain a richer understanding of not only the artworks themselves, but also of the broader implications for how art interacts with and informs our perception of the world. In this process, Disrupted Realism serves as a powerful artistic embodiment of philosophical explorations of plasticity and mimesis, illustrating the vibrant interplay between theory and practice, conceptual and visual – discourse and figure.

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Plasticità e patosofia.

Identità narrativa, schema motorio e metodo biografico fra Weizsäcker e Malabou

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The subject of the contribution is the relationship between the concept of plasticity developed by Catherine Malabou, especially in its meaning of “destructive plasticity”, and Viktor von Weizsäcker’s reflection on the “pathic”, from the writings of the 1920s dedicated to medical anthropology and the refoundation of a relational metaphysics, up to the complete elaboration of a pathosophy.

Both for the German physician and thinker and for the French philosopher, the intertwining of the question of the living being, the form and the rearticulation of narrative identity leads to outcomes capable of profoundly questioning our time. A particular in-depth analysis is dedicated to the dislocation of narrative identity with specific reference to some examples of contemporary narration both with reference to the critical work of W.G. Sebald, and through a specific survey relating to Scandinavian literatures, between the poetry of Inger Christensen – now inscribed in the canon of those literatures – and the very recent experiments in the writing of Naja Marie Aidt.

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Forma plastica – Condizioni della morfogenesi

Ormai vent'anni fa, nel 2005, facendo i conti con la prima, impegnativa fase di sviluppo del proprio pensiero e con il decisivo attraversamento di Hegel, Heidegger e Derrida che tale sviluppo comportava, Catherine Malabou ne ha tratto una indicazione addirittura lapidaria: «La forma si è segretamente trasformata. Essa appare, oggi, per ciò che è: plastica» (Malabou 2023a, 31).

Si tratta, osserverei, di una indicazione che in certo modo non ha cessato da allora di trasformarsi segretamente essa stessa, di esplicitare cioè il proprio potenziale teorico appunto nel segno della plasticità, permettendo cioè per un verso di costruire una sorta di topografia del pensiero plastico senza che però ciò comporti in alcun modo una riduzione del potenziale trasformativo del concetto di plasticità, mentre tuttavia per altro verso tale topografia non ha cessato di agire potentemente nel senso di una ridefinizione delle condizioni del discorso filosofico del nostro tempo.

Almeno introduttivamente e di necessità in termini solo assai generali varrà dunque la pena di provare a “riquadrate” ulteriormente il modo in cui nello sviluppo della plasticità che trova espressione nell'analisi fornita da Malabou giungano a ridefinirsi le condizioni di possibilità del pensiero.

Se la plasticità della forma diviene l'epicentro dei movimenti tellurici che riguardano il pensiero del nostro tempo, ciò comporterà anzitutto un deciso mutamento di paradigma rispetto all'energetica che attraversa una certa tradizione del contemporaneo (Deleuze, esemplarmente), ma altrettanto decisamente comporterà una rivoluzione concettuale nei confronti delle modalità in cui quantomeno nel corso dell'ultimo secolo il pensiero filosofico si è riferito alla questione del vivente privilegiando la funzione e nel senso della “sintesi moderna” neodarwinista la variazione e l'adattamento, a scapito appunto della forma e delle dinamiche trasformative dell'identità che attraversano l'organismo, il vivente formato.

Oggetto specifico della ricerca condotta da Malabou è divenuto in tal modo (ancora con le parole dello stesso lavoro, Malabou 2023a, 34) «il legame segreto tra unità formale e articolazione, tra la compiutezza della forma e la possibilità della sua dislocazione». Nel seguito si tornerà ancora presto su questo termine, per i nostri fini saliente.

Di un tale impegnativo piano di lavoro – in buona parte a giudizio di chi scrive addirittura coestensivo con le possibilità di una morfologia del nostro tempo – Malabou ha individuato al tempo stesso le condizioni di possibilità che trovano esplicitazione nel farsi della forma e la manifestazione limite, quella che in certo modo definirei la soglia di indecidibilità fra esterno e interno dello stesso processo morfogenetico.

Provo anzitutto a giustificare l'affermazione appena fatta circa la coestensività fra la ricerca di Malabou relativa al “legame segreto tra unità formale e articolazione” e la morfologia del nostro tempo, proponendo qui in breve alcune considerazioni, che troveranno ulteriore riscontro negli sviluppi dell'argomentazione proposta:

1. la relazione fra *compiutezza* e *dislocazione* ridefinisce totalmente il concetto stesso di forma/Gestalt, mettendo in crisi la tradizionale concezione che muove dalla relazione fra “invarianti” e

“trasformazioni” («*We define a gestalt as the invariants of a collection of patterns that can mutually be transformed into each other through a class of transformations encoded by, or conversely, determining that gestalt*»: così ad esempio Breidbach & Jost 2006, 23), e permette piuttosto di cogliere la normatività come *attività della forma*, vita della forma compresa nella sua *singularità*.

2. Strettamente correlata con questa prima osservazione, è quella in base alla quale nella connessione fra *forma* e *vita* il riferimento all’ambito biologico smette di avere una valenza solo “analogica”, ma viene assunto in tutta la sua pienezza e direi “cogenza” proprio in quanto attività della forma. L’attività è cioè *atto biologico*, e dunque unione, nel vivente, non solo di *legalità* e *divenire*, ma ancor prima di *attività* e *passività*: «La profonda motivazione dell’inquietudine patica» – dice in questo senso uno dei massimi pensatori del vivente del Novecento, Viktor von Weizsäcker (1990a, 183) – «risiede nel fatto che l’essere vivente non è in sé acquietato, ma è al contempo sé stesso e qualcosa che muta, e cioè un essere diveniente. Questa antilogica costituisce la sua inquietudine». Torneremo a lungo nell’ultima parte di questo contributo a Weizsäcker e al significato dell’inquietudine patica di cui abbiamo appena letto. Osserviamo intanto che ciò che Weizsäcker definisce “antilogica” del vivente, e che per i fini dell’argomentazione qui proposta è evidentemente un altro modo di descrivere la *normatività della forma*, trova espressione in quella *dinamica* dell’attività della forma che si lascia oggi adeguatamente descrivere tramite il concetto di *uso* elaborato su basi wittgensteiniane da Paolo Virno, il quale parla di una nozione di *uso* che precede l’effettiva specificazione fra le differenti modalità operative e investigative, costituendone in certo modo kantianamente la *condizione di possibilità*. Virno parla dell’uso come della «comune premessa» (Virno 2015, 158) della *poiesis* e della *praxis*, sottolineando come nell’uso, meglio ancora «nel modo di essere delle cose usabili», venga meno un’altra distinzione tradizionale del discorso filosofico: «quella tra potenza e atto». L’uso, suggerisce ancora Virno, «non ha mai a che fare con qualcosa che sta di fronte, quindi con un oggetto in senso stretto, contrapposto all’Io [...]. Quel che si usa è adiacente, collaterale, capace di attrito. La cosa utilizzata retroagisce sul vivente che la utilizza, trasformandone la condotta» (Virno 2015, 155). La nozione di uso nell’accezione elaborata da Virno sottolinea dunque la valenza delle “relazioni ambientali” in cui si danno le forme e la loro attività, mettendo in questione qualsiasi concezione essenzialista e sottolineando le pratiche di “maneggio” in cui di volta in volta forme e funzioni determinate trovano i loro accordi operativi.
3. *Dislocando* nel vero senso del termine questa sottolineatura della relazione fra attività e passività ottenuta per il tramite del riferimento della forma al vivente, la plasticità negli sviluppi più recenti della riflessione di Malabou apre però in maniera sempre più decisa in direzione di uno “sfondo” ulteriore costituito dal fatto macroscopico del *confronto*, anzi dell’*interazione* fra storia umana e storia profonda della terra, che Malabou – interrogandosi sulle condizioni

del pensiero nell'epoca dell'Antropocene – intende anzitutto come “sfida paradossale” posta al pensiero dalla relazione fra la vita e l'inanimato (così appunto Malabou 2022; nello stesso senso anche la postfazione alla nuova edizione francese di Malabou 2023b). Si tratta evidentemente di un motivo di straordinario interesse teorico, che qui ci limitiamo solo a sfiorare con l'unico scopo di mostrare la straordinaria apertura teorica resa possibile dal discorso di Malabou sul nesso forma/plasticità – in questo caso appunto in relazione alla questione oggi attualissima dell'Antropocene.

Tale molteplice apertura teorica, proseguendo con quanto si diceva, si dimostra anzitutto nel lavoro di Malabou sulle *condizioni di possibilità* del processo morfogenetico stesso. Faccio qui riferimento a un testo – *Avant demain. Épigenèse et rationalité* (Malabou 2020) – che costituisce probabilmente uno dei vertici del pensiero filosofico dei nostri giorni, nonché uno degli stimoli più grandi per un pensiero morfologico contemporaneo. Qui, fra le altre cose, Malabou mostra appunto come la *genesì della forma* non vada ricercata a partire da una scaturigine profonda, da un *hypocentre* profondamente nascosto e “codificato”, ma vada piuttosto intesa come «un *effetto di superficie*» (Malabou 2020, 72): non si tratterà cioè di riaffermare nella genesi della forma una qualche *legge morfogenetica* preesistente, un *codice* appunto, ma piuttosto vi si realizzerà un incontro ogni volta unico, senza precedenti, in cui proprio il carattere *reciprocamente eterogeneo* di leggi e fenomeni costituisce la *condizione* del loro incontro e del farsi *epigenetico* della forma.

Non a caso a questo proposito Malabou parlerà di transizione dal *codice* al *libro*: dalla preformazione all'epigenesi, dalla *traccia* alla *forma*.

Diciamo qui che si tratta di *un effetto*, o più propriamente di una *struttura epigenetica*, una struttura che si manifesta come reazione sistemica *formale* nell'incontro eterogenetico (uso il termine nell'accezione di Sarti et al. 2022, La Mantia et al. 2023, Batt 2024), nell'incontro cioè di materiali e principi formali tutt'altro che reciprocamente neutrali o indifferenti, ma il cui *divenire forma* manifesta la propria peculiare legalità, rende ragione delle condizioni di possibilità della forma, giusto *nell'occasione dell'esperienza*.

In questo senso la *genesì della forma* trova nell'accidente plastico al tempo stesso la sua manifestazione limite nonché l'occasione in cui nel modo più cristallino si danno osservativamente proprio nella reciproca eterogeneità di leggi e fenomeni le *condizioni di possibilità* del loro incontro determinato, cioè del *darsi* della forma.

È appunto per questo che la stessa Malabou sottolinea a più riprese come l'accidente plastico – giusto *in quanto* «improvvisazione esistenziale assoluta» (Malabou 2019, 31) – acquisisca adesso una cogenza filosofica assolutamente inedita, configurandosi come una paradossale «specie di accidente», tale da dar luogo a una *struttura ontologica*, che innalza il piano strutturale/morfogenetico al rango dell'ontologia.

Abbiamo già definito tale “momento” del configurarsi dell'accidente come una *soglia di indecidibilità* fra esterno e interno del processo morfogenetico, ed è proprio in questo senso che la plasticità rivela – come dice Malabou – il legame segreto fra compiutezza e dislocazione, ma che tale operazione implica persino nel configurarsi dell'*unità formale* e della *compiutezza*

una propensione *eterogenetica* che appare del resto chiaramente delineata nel discorso di Malabou già a partire dal testo del 2005 da cui abbiamo preso le mosse, allorché ella, con riferimento a quella che Lévi-Strauss denomina articolazione fra *elemento plastico* ed *elemento grafico*, afferma che il proprio percorso filosofico, pur nelle sue diverse articolazioni, costituisce «un unico e medesimo tentativo di situare, su ogni profilo delle opere o dei problemi presi in considerazione, la *rottura simbolica tra l'elemento plastico e l'elemento grafico del pensiero*» (Malabou 2023a, 35), dove per conto nostro il temine saliente, ancor più della distinzione fra plastico e grafico e ancor più della “rottura simbolica”, è il *situare*, cioè la formulazione di una topografia o se si preferisce di un'ontologia eterogenetica della forma.

Vero *punto di crisi* nel discorso che qui Malabou sviluppa è notoriamente la tesi del *tramonto della scrittura*, che appare legarsi al manifestarsi del concetto di plasticità come «stile di un'epoca» (Malabou 2023a, 31) – e cioè della nostra epoca – e che appare peculiarmente innestarsi appunto in tale *movimento* di rottura fra plastico e grafico. La tesi non potrebbe trovare espressione più chiara: se per un verso sarà possibile «constatare che la plasticità designa, al contempo, un nuovo modo d'essere della forma e una nuova comprensione di questo stesso modo d'essere, vale a dire: un nuovo *schema*» (Malabou 2023a, 109), per altro verso ciò implicherà che nella ricerca di un “utensile” o di uno strumento che consenta l'accesso a queste nuove organizzazioni e configurazioni formali si dovrà però constatare che «questo strumento *non è più la scrittura*» (Malabou 2023a, 109).

Esplicitando, proverei anzitutto a dire che a tramontare è la *scrittura* in quanto *traccia*, nel momento in cui appunto «*le tracce prendono forma*» (Malabou 2023a, 113), nel momento in cui cioè la forma si riconosce plastica e la plasticità si propone come lo *schema motorio* del nostro tempo, come il suo *stile*.

Malabou in altre parole non “pronostica” affatto un tramonto della *forma-scrittura*, con cui anzi dialoga costantemente la costruzione di una *teoria dell'accidente* (Malabou 2019), ma piuttosto restituisce per il tramite della *forma plastica* la transizione dall'*ontologia della traccia* all'*ontologia dell'accidente* (come *forma d'essere*).

Momento saliente di tale transizione, nella ricerca di Malabou, è anzi esplicitamente – come si è accennato – il passaggio *dal codice al libro* (Malabou 2020, 153-166), che si qualifica per Malabou come un movimento cruciale nella rilettura epigenetica della razionalità e nella centratura sulle *condizioni di possibilità* della forma del pensiero.

Quanto si osserva, tuttavia, non equivale affatto da parte nostra a ipotizzare per così dire una soluzione “irenica”, né a postulare senza mezzi termini una “attualità filosofica” della *forma* umanistica della scrittura (letteraria). Tutt'altro. Diremmo casomai che la forma-scrittura si trova dinanzi a una duplice scommessa radicale.

Una scommessa che, servendoci ancora delle parole di Malabou, da un punto di vista “formale” può esser descritta come indagine sulla possibilità per la *forma-scrittura* letteraria – e dunque come *discorso sulle condizioni di possibilità* – di situarsi nella *rottura simbolica fra elemento plastico ed elemento grafico del pensiero*, e dunque in breve di configurare una morfogenesi eterogenetica, mentre dal punto di vista

della configurazione temporale può esser descritta a partire dall'*unione paradossale della vita e dell'inanimato*, e dunque come discorso sull'elaborazione da parte della letteratura dell'intreccio chiasmatico – se così vogliamo dire – fra storia umana e storia profonda della terra.

Dislocazione

Sgombriamo anzitutto il campo da un possibile equivoco – forse per la verità ormai un po' "fuori moda" ma in fondo sempre rinascente: la *forma della scrittura* si risolverà forse – pocanzi in qualche modo abbiamo lasciato che ne sorgesse il dubbio – in un metadiscorso sulle proprie condizioni di possibilità? In modo ancora più subdolo: la rottura fra plastico e grafico sarà *simbolica* in quanto "puramente trascendentale", ovvero paradossalmente messa al sicuro nella *forma* plastica, persino qualora essa venga intesa nella sua accezione distruttiva?

Il lavoro di Malabou (2020) sull'epigenesi del trascendentale ci mostra evidentemente che le cose non stanno così, ma del resto come vedremo subito è tutto il percorso di ricerca di Malabou a portarsi in una direzione differente e assai più arrischiata.

Domandiamoci tuttavia ancora e principalmente: che grado di purezza pertiene allo schema motorio della plasticità?

Ancora nel volume del 2005, Malabou parla con riferimento a Hegel di *plasticità del concetto di plasticità* (Malabou 2023a, 50-51) e prosegue: «La storia e il "mezzo di soccorso" si soccorrono vicendevolmente. L'uno non può procedere senza l'altra. L'atto della creazione concettuale non è mai totalmente trascendentale».

Mi sembra importante osservare anzitutto come qui Malabou non stia affatto "prefigurando" una filosofia della storia di qualsiasi tipo (ed è qui certo massima la tensione col discorso hegeliano), ma stia piuttosto osservando all'opera l'*epigenesi della plasticità*, che si fa stile di un'epoca giusto in quanto epigeneticamente si compie nella *revolutio* (torneremo su questo termine, avvertendo che al momento ci stiamo limitando a prenderlo in prestito da Weizsäcker) delle sue condizioni storiche ed anzi – come scrive Malabou tornando ancora sul concetto di schema motorio *dopo* Heidegger – nella «*configurazione ultrastorica del mondo*» (Malabou 2023a, 109).

È dunque giunto il momento di formulare senz'altro la nostra ipotesi sulla *forma plastica* della scrittura letteraria del nostro tempo (mi permetto di rinviare anche a Tedesco 2023). Nella sua metamorfosi epigenetica, la plasticità si fa dunque schema motorio del nostro tempo *riconoscendosi trasformata* nella forma della *dislocazione*. Come dire che la forma plastica della scrittura letteraria assume in modo del tutto specifico come proprio compito quello di *situare ed elaborare* il «legame segreto tra *unità formale e articolazione*, tra la *compiutezza della forma* e la *possibilità della sua dislocazione*» (Malabou 2023a, 34): e ciò accade appunto e trova la sua paradossale *compiutezza* in una forma che è *forma della dislocazione*.

Diversamente detto: la *dislocazione* non è un "gesto" distruttivo, ma è forma *della* plasticità distruttrice, spesso una forma estremamente compiuta.

La *forma* che apparirà in filigrana e da cui verrà irrorato il dialogo della morfologia emerge dalla *dislocazione dell'Io lirico* che caratterizza e connota stilisticamente il nostro tempo.

Nelle letterature scandinave – che qui scegliamo come *test case* ai nostri fini particolarmente esemplare per la connessione con la questione della *temporalità profonda* della terra nonché per l'interesse e il rigore inusuale dei risultati estetici che vi vengono raggiunti – la questione assume una connotazione chiarissima nella critica al modernismo, e particolarmente nella critica alla centralità del soggetto lirico moderno della cosiddetta *centrallyrik* (Larsen 2010), espressa nella sua produzione poetica e saggistica da una delle voci principali di tali letterature, qual è senz'altro quella della danese Inger Christensen.

Concetto centrale nella produzione saggistica di Christensen, declinato poi in una serie di varianti e rifrazioni nel lavoro poetico, è quello di *derealizzazione* (Christensen 2019). All'urgenza *moderna* della *realizzazione* di un Sé avvertito come distaccato dal mondo e contrapposto al mondo nel bisogno di *sottomettere* la realtà tramite una dolorosa pratica di auto-addestramento dell'umano, Christensen oppone la *de-realizzazione*, cioè una “disposizione per il mondo” in cui si mette in atto il *contromovimento* di una sospensione della temporalità unidirezionale moderna e della sua logica dell'azione, in alternativa alla quale talvolta Christensen parla senz'altro di *anti-azione*, per riaprire piuttosto le sorgenti di una lingua poetica come voce *umana* della natura.

In tale contromovimento, per il tramite di tale anti-azione, rinveniamo appunto lo *schema motorio* della dislocazione del soggetto moderno, e lo ritroviamo anzitutto in quanto apertura della forma poetica all'unità paradossale *della vita e dell'inanimato*, alla tensione estrema della soglia di indecidibilità tra la denuncia del pervertimento moderno della relazione con il mondo e la visione di uno spazio di costruzione utopico di un mondo liberato.

Nel poemetto del 1981 *Alfabet* (Christensen 2020, 391-457) le descrizioni distopiche del mondo *dopo* la catastrofe nucleare sono caratterizzate da una temporalità “invertita”, così da rappresentare come presente la visione anticipatrice del mondo abbandonato dalla vita. Si leggano in questo senso questi pochi versi (Christensen 1987, 110-111):

se den vandklare kilde	guarda la fonte d'acqua chiara
er størknet og lille	è rappresa e piccola
på vej op ad bjerget igen	sta salendo la montagna di nuovo
og de bundløse roser	e le rose senza fondo
har skjult sig i moser	si sono nascoste nei pantani
umisteligt pollen lagt hen	polline imperdibile messo via
i uendelighed	per l'eternità

L'anticipazione della catastrofe ne costituisce la denuncia profetica (Holm 2020), mentre la *forma temporale* che in tal modo si propone in un “regime di indecidibilità” *tra rimemorazione del passato e anticipazione del futuro* (torneremo su questa *figura* con Weizsäcker) e particolarmente tra vissuto umano e immagine di una terra inanimata e indifferente alla storia umana, risulta per un verso funzionale alla denuncia del rischio di annientamento della vita sulla terra, ma per l'altro verso apre a una logica

differente di svolgimento del tempo storico e della relazione fra gli esseri umani, i viventi e la terra. Apre cioè in direzione di una *derealizzazione* di quei rapporti distruttivi che anticipa una differente armonia e incarna una forma linguistica liberante.

Non coglieremmo tuttavia la reale portata filosofica e poetologica della *derealizzazione* di cui dice esemplarmente Christensen nonché il significato della *dislocazione* per la comprensione della plasticità se non ritornassimo a considerare come tale *movimento* di dislocazione sia da intendere al tempo stesso anzitutto come analisi relativa alle *condizioni di possibilità* della forma plastica, e come appunto qui sia da situare il luogo specifico di elaborazione della morfogenesi eterogenetica in cui si configura la *plasticità distruttrice*.

Per quanto nei “motivi” della poetica di Christensen adesso ricordati – e in modo specifico in quello della *derealizzazione come anti-azione* – tutto ciò appaia piuttosto *agito*, operato poeticamente, che non condotto esplicitamente a un livello di riflessione teorica, l’indagine sulle *condizioni di possibilità* dell’agire formante della poesia/letteratura giunge tuttavia già qui a esiti nettissimi: solo alle condizioni di una *poetica della sottrazione* la forma della scrittura sarà in grado di articolarsi come forma plastica, e cioè come schema motorio del nostro tempo.

Il problema teorico (permettendoci qui una breve digressione verso l’ambito tedesco) emerge viceversa in quanto tale in tutta chiarezza in un autore per noi tanto più significativo in questo contesto per il forte interesse che nella sua prospettiva riveste la ricerca antropologica di Lévi-Strauss, il quale a sua volta notoriamente esprime uno dei “volti” delle maschere di trasformazione di cui dice Malabou nel testo del 2005 sulla plasticità, oltre a “inaugurare” addirittura lo stesso spazio metaforico inteso con tali maschere (Lévi-Strauss 1985).

Ci riferiamo qui a W.G. Sebald, colui che trova probabilmente la formulazione più limpida per il nesso teorico di cui siamo qui alla ricerca. In uno dei suoi brevi lavori critici su Kafka, dal titolo *Tiere, Menschen, Maschinen – Zu Kafkas Evolutionsgeschichte* (Sebald 1986; vedi Tedesco 2019), Sebald tratta infatti di due celebri racconti kafkiani di animali, *Forschungen eines Hundes* e *Bericht an eine Akademie*, osservando come in entrambi i casi il tentativo di “auto-metamorfosi” compiuto dai protagonisti delle vicende (il cane che digiunando si dedica alle sue indagini sulla caninità, come la ex-scimmia che narra all’accademia il modo in cui abbandonata la sua natura di scimmia ha raggiunto la agognata condizione umana) muova di fatto dalla *decisione di autodistruggersi*, sicché divenga chiaro che «la destabilizzazione dei presupposti essenziali» – e cioè nello specifico di quelli della vita animale – «è al tempo stesso condizione cruciale» per lo sviluppo della nuova situazione esistenziale dell’ominazione (Sebald 1986, 196).

Detto in breve, il discorso critico di Sebald si costruisce in misura notevolissima attorno a quel che con Lévi-Strauss potremmo definire il «carattere mitopoetico del bricolage» (Lévi-Strauss 2015, 31) o ancora, attorno al modo in cui risultano esposte alla *potenza dell’accidente* le strutture mitiche costruite dall’essere umano. Il «confronto fra struttura e accidente» (Lévi-Strauss 2015, 41) diviene la ragione formale della narrazione. Come scrive Sebald (1986, 199): «Con laconica insistenza, i testi di Kafka sottolineano che i miti giunti fino a noi non reggono più sotto i vincoli della contingenza».

Lévi-Strauss distingue l'operare mitopoietico del *bricoleur* da quello dell'*ingegnere*.

Laddove infatti l'*ingegnere* mira alla costruzione di una struttura integralmente nuova e dotata di carattere di stabilità e permanenza, il *bricoleur* rielabora residui e frammenti di storie e miti precedenti che vengono rifunzionalizzati, «testimoni fossili della storia» (Lévi-Strauss 2015, 35) rifigurati in nuove *narrazioni*, in nuovi *mitologemi*; tra le *strutture mitiche* esposte alla potenza dell'accidente c'è anzitutto, per Sebald, il mitologema centrale del "divenire umano" e della rigida separazione fra umano e animale. I *racconti di animali* di Kafka e in essi il presentarsi della distruzione delle *condizioni* d'esistenza come *presupposto* della narrazione sottopongono a critica radicale appunto quel mitologema, anzitutto esponendo alla potenza plastica dell'accidente la sua pretesa di stabilità.

È per questa via che in Sebald la potenza dell'accidente di cui diceva Lévi-Strauss è adesso senz'altro quella di un *accidente plastico*; è per questo che l'evento che genera uno scarto dall'essenza non viene compensato, ma diviene *condizione formale* – condizione formale dell'evento oggetto della narrazione e della stessa forma plastica della scrittura.

La distruzione dei presupposti fisiologici e psicologici dell'esistenza diviene così il paradossale presupposto delle indagini condotte dall'animale che si è "disancorato" dalla propria specie biologica, ma al tempo stesso diviene la condizione della narrazione stessa di Kafka e la premessa della ricezione da parte del lettore, chiamato appunto a proseguire per così dire la stessa operazione di *dissoluzione plastica* della propria identità come punto più profondo e ambivalente di un procedere sperimentale il cui potere salvifico si manifesta esclusivamente nella distruzione.

Abbiamo dunque di fronte una prospettiva che assume come propria *condizione di possibilità* formale la stessa *distruzione dei presupposti dell'esistenza*, e che in tal modo assume non meramente che solo sulle macerie esistenziali si possa edificare, ma assai più radicalmente che solo la *distruzione dei presupposti* possa valere come *condizione di possibilità*. Il discorso si sposta cioè da un piano empirico, fattuale, esperienziale, a un piano trascendentale, che però sarà verificabile solo attraverso quella non preventivabile «specie d'accidente» (Malabou 2019, 31) che è la forma plastica che si genera nella *slavina*, anzi nell'*epicentro del sisma* (Malabou 2020, 71-76), nel movimento pulsante della distruzione.

Lavorare attraverso il discorso della letteratura sulla forma del nostro tempo significherà dunque provare ad articolare una prospettiva che assuma esattamente come propria *condizione di possibilità* la stessa *distruzione dei presupposti* della forma della scrittura e che muova appunto dalla restituzione quanto più coerente possibile di tale rilevazione come dalla propria *condizione formale*. In questo assai impegnativo senso la diagnosi di Malabou sul *tramonto della scrittura* non è aggirabile, e quanto prima ravvisato circa la transizione dall'ontologia della traccia all'ontologia della forma plastica non intende essere appunto – come si diceva – una "soluzione irenica".

Chiudiamo brevemente questa sezione rinviando a un esempio altissimo e per più versi "estremo" della letteratura scandinava contemporanea, costituito dal romanzo autobiografico di Naja Marie Aidt, *Har døden taget noget fra dig så giv det tilbage. Carls bog*, (Aidt 2021). Aidt è

senz'altro una delle voci più significative della letteratura danese recente dopo Inger Christensen, della quale riprende la critica rigorosa della *centrallyrik* e la ricerca di una forma poetica fondata sulla pluralità delle voci e dei soggetti (*interaktionslyrik/ flerstemmighed*, Larsen 2010).

Il romanzo muove dall'esperienza terribile della morte assurda di un figlio preda di una crisi psicotica a seguito dell'assunzione di droghe, ma quanto lo caratterizza è il tentativo di una costruzione che non rappresenti un "superamento" empatizzante del lutto, ma che faccia di quella stessa cesura la propria formale condizione di possibilità.

Il libro è intriso di riferimenti spirituali, letterari, mitologici; ma alla connotazione positiva del rinvio a questo mondo si associa costantemente il rifiuto di "servirsene" come giustificazione dell'accaduto o compensazione nei confronti di esso.

Altrettanto vale per la *forma poetico/narrativa*, che presenta per un verso un grado estremo di elaborazione formale e una estrema sapienza nella composizione e scomposizione formale, ma per altro verso mira decisamente verso un'indagine sulla perdita del linguaggio.

Scrivo Aidt in uno dei momenti di riflessione conclusiva sulla propria "poetica": «Come se ciò che è stato donato continuasse per sempre a roteare. Dai vivi ai vivi. Dai morti ai vivi. E dai vivi ai morti. Un movimento circolare, non lineare» (Aidt 2021, 121).

A differenza di quanto avviene nel caso dei cicli metamorfici di cui parla Malabou sull'esempio della dea Metis (Malabou 2019, 37-38), ripetizione e circolarità non costituiscono qui un modo della conservazione dell'identità sostanziale, ma tutto al contrario fanno sì che l'accidente non venga "sterilizzato" e normalizzato in un decorso ininterrotto, ma piuttosto operano in modo tale che l'accidente stesso diventi *ragione formale* di una nuova temporalità, che il racconto restituisce nella sua ruvidità e nelle sue sconessioni.

Schema motorio, identità narrativa e "metodo biografico"

Nell'analisi sin qui condotta abbiamo bensì fatto riferimento al concetto di *schema motorio* nell'accezione propostane da Catherine Malabou, ma abbiamo evitato sinora di confrontarci diffusamente con il concetto, limitandoci a ravvisare il nesso forte che esso intrattiene con quello di *dislocazione* – per noi saliente, come si è detto, in vista del movimento proprio della forma letteraria. Sarà adesso il momento di considerare tuttavia più da vicino questo concetto e la sua pervasività in relazione alle condizioni del pensiero nel "nostro tempo".

È qui che il nostro discorso incontra nuovamente e circostanziatamente la riflessione di Viktor von Weizsäcker teorico – al tempo stesso – della *creaturalità* e del *Gestaltkreis*. Per il tramite del primo concetto (oggetto fra la fine degli anni Venti e l'inizio degli anni Trenta in Germania di una elaborazione teorica collettiva da parte di filosofi, medici, biologi e teologi cattolici, protestanti ed ebrei raccolti nella rivista *Die Kreatur*, della quale lo stesso Weizsäcker fu iniziatore e promotore) si rimette in discussione la *sovranità* del soggetto moderno comprendendo adesso come l'essere umano si trovi esposto alle stesse forze biologiche, chimiche e fisiche che presiedono alle altre forme viventi e alle trasformazioni del tempo profondo della terra, in un nesso di forme correlate insieme nel

farsi di un crogiuolo di differenti temporalità che tutte le attraversano e che per altro verso esse stesse contribuiscono a configurare.

Se tuttavia questa configurazione temporale non costituisce la rappresentazione funzionale astratta di un “sistema di forze”, ma si orienta viceversa verso la concretezza *biografica* di un individuo (Weizsäcker 1990b, 94), verso la sua *creaturalità* appunto, ciò avviene perché ciò che muove l’indagine è per il medico e biologo Weizsäcker in ultima analisi semplicemente la «*sollecitudine* verso la manifestazione del dolore» (Weizsäcker 1990c, 99), ovvero la *cura come atteggiamento* del medico nei confronti del malato. Atteggiamento che prende parte nella *cura* alla forma di vita del malato, il quale sperimenta nel dolore, come scrive Weizsäcker, «lo spazio di scissione della stessa saldatura che tiene unito e diviso il mondo» (Weizsäcker 1990c, 105).

L’esperienza del dolore, dunque, e con essa l’esperienza della cura, si posizionano esattamente nello spazio di tale *scissione e saldatura del mondo*. Uno spazio che evidentemente rinvia per noi all’accidente plastico inteso come *soglia di indecidibilità* fra esterno e interno, a patto di rimarcare ulteriormente anche qui come tale soglia non sia affatto una “zona di indifferenza” e non sia affatto il “luogo d’iscrizione” di tracce diagnostiche o di altro tipo. Nulla di tutto ciò: il posizionarsi sulla soglia del dolore, l’accidente plastico, la cura sono semplicemente ma irriducibilmente *forme*, figure della creaturalità vivente, non preventivabili, non “deducibili” nemmeno dal mondo in cui tali forme creaturali agiscono e patiscono, altrettanto “fragili” quanto dotate della «tenace facoltà di persistere di ciò che una volta è pervenuto alla realtà», per dirla con le parole di Goethe (1796).

Il malato non è una cartella diagnostico-terapeutica: «definisco malato colui che mi chiama come medico e in cui come medico riconosco lo stato di bisogno» (Weizsäcker 1990b, 84). Non una traccia (un insieme di tracce) ma una *forma creaturale*.

Nel pensiero di Weizsäcker la scena della cura, della *crisi* e del *cambiamento funzionale* prende il posto in cui prima si trovava la fiducia nell’unità di un “Io” che potesse stare a fondamento del relazionarsi stesso di un soggetto con un mondo, la fiducia nella descrizione di un sistema di presupposti logici che presiedano al sapere e all’agire umani, ed insieme a tale attitudine teorica si ridefinisce persino la possibilità di delineare senz’altro una genesi organica della soggettività.

Nello studio della relazione fra medico e malato, la centralità del *corpo attraversato dal conflitto* spinge a ridefinire l’identità in senso dialogico e metamorfico, nel suo divenire altro e nel suo aprirsi all’altro. Per Weizsäcker è giusto il “metodo biografico” dell’antropologia medica a guidare verso l’immagine di una identità molteplice; il nostro stesso corpo è il luogo di una “Meta-Identität”, plurale e metamorfica, in cui la conflittualità e la crisi designano la cesura profonda che attraversa l’essere umano costituendone la peculiare risorsa.

Alla ristrutturazione delle funzioni sensoriali e dell’ordinamento spazio-sensoriale cui esse presiedono, si associa non solo la plasticità degli *Affekte*, ovvero di istinti, pulsioni e in breve dell’intero mondo affettivo umano, ma persino una omologa propensione metamorfica alla sostituzione vicendevole e motivata delle configurazioni formali (*Gestaltwandel*). Meta-identità è dunque il vissuto relazionale del corpo, il modo in cui

esso sperimenta in forme immaginative e investimenti funzionali sempre differenti uno scenario vitale intimamente molteplice. La meta-identità umana è allora lo spazio dialogico e metamorfico di costruzione di una identità *nella crisi*.

Proviamo dunque a seguire ancora per breve tratto l'articolazione di questi temi alla luce del prospettarsi con Malabou di una ontologia dell'accidente plastico. Nel frammento prima citato, Goethe (1796) contrappone alla *vis centrifuga* della potenza metamorfica del reale la *vis centripeta* che trova espressione in una *tale tenace facoltà di persistere*, implicando un *impulso alla specificazione* in cui l'individualità formata protegge ed espone il proprio singolare infinito.

La duplicità della forma che si annuncia in tal modo in Goethe al primo configurarsi storico di una morfologia e che non smette di ritrovarsi nel discorso di Malabou come tentativo di situarsi nella rottura simbolica, non è dunque qualcosa di statico, ma è anzi intrinsecamente *schema motorio*, come scrive ancora Malabou nel saggio del 2005 da cui siamo partiti. La plasticità – dice Malabou – è lo schema motorio del nostro tempo.

Viktor von Weizsäcker nel corso delle sue ricerche dagli anni Venti agli anni Quaranta del Novecento riconosce e teorizza un tale "schema motorio" della forma plastica, definendolo *Gestaltkreis*, circolo della forma, proprio a partire da un'analisi della relazione fra motricità e percezione che chiama in causa, insieme, saperi medici, biologici, percettologici e un'acutissima sensibilità metodologica per la rivoluzione dei paradigmi della scienza moderna che tali analisi portano con sé.

Il *Gestaltkreis* si propone infatti come *teoria dell'unità di percezione e movimento*, e intende la forma come *unità diveniente* mossa da una inquietudine patica. Riportiamo di seguito la definizione ampia cui lo stesso Weizsäcker giunge a conclusione del suo percorso teorico e analitico:

Gestaltkreis significa: il fenomeno biologico non si spiega a partire da una serie causale di funzioni ad esso soggiacenti, da cui derivi il fenomeno stesso; piuttosto, il fenomeno è elemento costitutivo di un atto in sé concluso. La sua unità può essere rappresentata a partire dall'analisi della crisi. Suo peculiare attributo è il patico contrapposto all'ontico. La sua struttura si ricava a partire dall'analisi dialettica della decisione critica attraverso le categorie soggettive dell'*io voglio, sono obbligato a, posso, devo, mi è permesso*. L'ordine reciproco di queste categorie a sua volta non può essere rappresentato mediante una categoria ontica come spazio, tempo, causalità, ma attraverso l'ordine gregale dell'*io* e del *tu*, egli ed esso ecc. Ogni atto biologico, colto come *Gestaltkreis*, non è anello di una catena né cifra di una serie, ma costituisce di fronte ad un *prima* una migrazione verso un *dopo*, una *revolutio*. (Weizsäcker 1997, 316-317)

Weizsäcker definirà *Patosofia* la scienza nuova della forma che muove dalla *crisi*; una scienza che dovrà anzitutto mantenersi ricettiva nei confronti del carattere patico del vivente, in certo modo dunque raddoppiandone e ripercorrendone *nella forma della cura* la forma patica (Weizsäcker 1956; Wiedebach 2014). È di particolare interesse il progressivo slittamento che si determina nel discorso di Weizsäcker, per cui la perfetta corrispondenza fra incontro dialogico e articolazione delle categorie patiche

(la *Begegnung* come relazione io-tu) lascia spazio alla teorizzazione di una *Umgang* in grado di dar conto anche di una relazione io-cosa non riducibile al “primato del vivente” di cui peraltro la stessa logica dell’incontro è frutto. Sino ai suoi esiti conclusivi l’orizzonte della ricerca di Weizsäcker rimane senza alcun dubbio quello della forma, da intendersi come “messa in forma” delle interazioni, realizzarsi di volta in volta determinato della relazione che le *soggettività patiche* istituiscono nell’incontro con sé stesse, con altri e con le cose del mondo.

Ebbene, dice Weizsäcker, l’istituirsi di tali soggettività patiche (sempre plurali) costituisce ogni volta una *revolutio*, diremmo dunque che vi si configura un evento morfogenetico non preventivabile e non revocabile: un *accidente plastico*, proveremmo forse a dire oggi con Malabou, mentre per parte sua Weizsäcker giunge a dire che ogni “atto biologico” «è una *improvvisazione*» (Weizsäcker 1997, 304), chiarendo che con tale espressione non si intende segnalare una “assenza di legge”, ma che il cambiamento è «trasformazione costitutiva» (Weizsäcker 1997, 304).

Strana continuità e altissima tensione, nel lessico di Weizsäcker, fra “werden” (divenire) e “revolutio”. Perché il processo della temporalizzazione per la soggettività patica è indissolubilmente le due cose insieme: *scissione e saldatura del mondo*. Scarto, dislocazione, e però proprio per questo plasticamente vi si configura – come dirà Malabou (2019, 33) – «pur sempre una forma». *Morfogenesi eterogenetica*, quale ormai possiamo apprendere a riconoscere nella *forma* del nostro tempo.

Ed è qui che si verifica, nella riflessione di Weizsäcker, la possibilità della *narrazione*, una possibilità senz’altro in controtendenza rispetto ai canoni di una medicina obiettiva/strumentale in quegli anni Venti del Novecento in cui lo stesso Weizsäcker (2017) avvia il progetto di una antropologia medica, ma più che mai da ripensare alla luce degli sviluppi a noi contemporanei della *medicina narrativa* (Charon 2019, Good et al. 2010). Di particolare rilievo appare nel lavoro di Weizsäcker la costruzione del metodo biografico, centrato appunto sulla narrazione del malato, e l’attenzione rivolta verso quella peculiare *struttura prolettica* (così Weizsäcker 1956, 255-260) che configura nell’esperienza del malato e nella relazione fra medico e paziente un vero e proprio sviluppo epigenetico della forma tra rimemorazione del passato e anticipazione del futuro. Si tratta evidentemente – ma non insistiamo ulteriormente su un aspetto che emerge già nel modo più chiaro da quanto precede – di una “narrazione” a più livelli, non solo né di necessità *principalmente* verbale, ma fisica, corporea, agita e patita nell’unità della *forma (plastica) vivente*.

«La vita» – scrive Weizsäcker (2011, 42-45) in pagine memorabili di un lavoro dedicato appunto alla relazione fra *Forma e tempo* – «non è nel tempo ma sempre nuovamente lo istituisce; e dunque si mantiene attraverso il tempo e si rapporta estaticamente al tempo». Nella costruzione della forma s’incrociano necessità dell’essere e libera determinabilità della *revolutio* in una complementarità di determinatezza e indeterminazione in cui, scrive ancora Weizsäcker, «ciò che manca allo sguardo che precede – la determinatezza – viene fornito da quello che segue, e ciò che manca a quello che segue – l’indeterminatezza – pertiene allo sguardo che precede. L’indeterminatezza viene completata nella forma della necessità dallo sguardo che segue, l’invariabilità viene completata nella forma della libera determinabilità dallo sguardo che precede. La vita è là dove, in ogni

momento, un indeterminato *diviene* invariabile. L'indeterminatezza si completa con l'invariabilità in realtà della vita».

Al tramonto di un'ontologia della traccia e alla luce della possibilità di instaurarvi un dialogo per noi fruttuoso con la *metamorfosi plastica* del pensiero ravvisata dalle ricerche di Catherine Malabou, osserviamo qui conclusivamente, la riflessione morfologica di Weizsäcker costituisce uno dei tentativi più densamente articolati di situare il ripensamento del trascendentale e dunque l'indagine sulle *condizioni di possibilità della forma* proprio *nella scissione e nella saldatura* fra ontico e patico, fra processi morfogenetici e dislocazione dell'identità.

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plasticity

II

Plastic Imprints.

Rethinking Plasticity with Material Aesthetics

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This essay explores the material and aesthetic aspects of the concept of plasticity. Catherine Malabou's influential account understands plasticity from a morphological perspective built on human subjectivity. Her account, however, overlooks the plasticity of nonliving materials as well as the origins of plasticity in the field of aesthetics and the arts. At the same time, Malabou rejects the figure of the imprint, which she associates to the Derridean trace. Drawing on Gilbert Simondon and Georges Didi-Huberman's theories, my argument is based on a reappraisal of the imprint understood as a non-reductive, non-hylomorphic way of conceiving of the event of material morphogenesis that is at stake in plasticity. By addressing these points – the imprint, the arts, aesthetics, and nonliving materials – it will be possible to gain a renewed understanding of plasticity and make it into the core concept of a new materialist account centered on the affects and the “sensations” of singular materials: a material aesthetics. This theoretical operation will prove possible only by remaining close to the materials (here, wood, clay, wax, plaster, ...) and to the practices (here, the technique of waste-mold casting).

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«How to respond to the insistent call of a word? [...] A word that asks thought to *revive* it, to *reignite* it? How to welcome this desire for lexical conflagration? To these questions, *plasticity* confronts us abruptly and unexpectedly» (Malabou 2000, 7; my trans.). With these words, at the end of October 1999, Catherine Malabou opened a conference on plasticity at Le Fresnoy. The event gathered scholars and thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Georges Didi-Huberman, Baldine Saint-Girons, Peter Szendy, but also (neuro)biologists (Jean-Jacques Kupiec, Susan D. Healy) and plastic experts (Jeffrey L. Meikle and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent). Going on in her introduction to the conference, Malabou argued that the time had come to finally turn plasticity into a full-fledged philosophical concept – even into an operative schema for thought in general. In her view, such an operation would have required to take on and prolong a theoretical movement that had already been initiated by Hegel: «For the first time with Hegel, plasticity reaches the essential», she explained, and went on: «The philosopher *snatches plasticity from its strictly aesthetic anchorage* in order to attach it to a problematic space which, so far, had not been its own: *subjectivity*. It is now that the subject is called plastic» (Malabou 2000, 8-9; my trans., my emphases). [1] Plasticity, for Malabou, could become a concept only insofar as it would abandon aesthetics and the arts.

[1] On the historical inaccuracy of this reconstruction and on the possible theoretical reasons behind it, see Lawtoo 2017, 1205-1206.

Malabou resorts quite often to the strategy of creating concepts through displacement: philosophizing is for her a «matter of import-export» (Opelz 2022a, 660). As was for Georges Canguilhem, «to elaborate a concept [*travailler un concept*] is [...] to export it outside its original domain» (Canguilhem 1970, 206; qtd. in Malabou 2005a, 7). Such an original domain or «native land» (Malabou 2005a, 8) is often identified with the field of aesthetics and the arts – a field that needs to be left behind in favor of a focus on human subjectivity. [2] If plasticity's first instances were indeed to be found in the artisanal and artistic practices of modelling and molding (the Greek *πλαστικά τέχνη*) as well as in the sheer materiality of nonliving materials such as clay and wax (Dongowski 2002, 815; Saint-Girons 2000, 33), Malabou's philosophy understands plasticity in a different, human-oriented sense by stressing its connections to the neurosciences.

[2] The very same strategy is adopted by Malabou for other concepts too, such as the concept of fantastic (Malabou 2010, 38) or the concept of mimesis (Malabou 2023). On this strategy in general see Opelz 2022b, 629-630.

At the turn of the century, plasticity demanded «to gain access to the [domain of the] concept» (Malabou 2000, 7; my trans.). But «objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder», as Theodor Adorno (1973, 5) once put it. My contention is that Malabou's philosophical operation leaves behind important aspects of plasticity by neglecting its origins in the artisanal and artistic practices. What about the materiality of clay and wax once plasticity has become a full-fledged concept? Is plasticity's only materiality that of neurons and brain cells? What about the plasticity of plaster – does it leave a trace, an imprint, on its concept? How do plastics shape the concept of plasticity?

In Malabou's account, plasticity becomes a philosophical concept on three conditions. First: plasticity needs to abandon its aesthetic and artistic origins. Second: it must come to concern the human subject. Third: it must be underpinned by a new materialist perspective; or, as she put it

at Le Fresnoy: «It is not possible to conceptualize plasticity without elaborating anew a certain kind of materialism, which is to say, without updating the relationship [...] between matter and spirit» (Malabou 2000, 11; my trans.). A «non-reductive new materialism» (Malabou & Crockett 2010, 27) is not only one of the conditions for thinking plasticity philosophically, it is also the desired outcome of Malabou's operation. However, an inconsistency seems to lie between these points: the first condition undermines the third, since, as I would like to contend, the rejection of the artistic and aesthetic aspects of plasticity prevents Malabou's account from becoming a truly material-oriented new materialism.

By outlining a theoretical alternative based on the model of the *imprint* instead of that of the *form*, this essay aims to explore the *material*, *nonhuman*, and *aesthetic* aspects of the concept of plasticity. The first section illustrates Malabou's understanding of plasticity in terms of a dynamic and post-metaphysical morphology and introduces her rejection of the figure of the imprint, which she associates to the Derridean trace. The second section further discusses the latter point and, by stressing the activity of nonliving materials, advances the hypothesis of framing plasticity in terms of nonreductive imprint – a notion that is analyzed more thoroughly in the third section, where the imprint is described as a material system of morphogenesis. The fourth section explores the convergence of imprint and plasticity by considering the field of sculpture, casting, and molding: if plasticity as form concerns the statue, plasticity as imprint concerns the technical operation that takes place inside the mold. The practice, here, perturbs the standard theory of plasticity. The fifth section draws some of the theoretical conclusions that follow from such a different understanding of plasticity, hinting at a new materialist account centered on the affects and “sensations” of singular materials. Plasticity thus becomes the core concept of a material aesthetics.

1. From form to imprint

«“Plasticity” [...] describes the nature of that which is “plastic”, being at once capable of *receiving* and of *giving form*», Malabou (2005a, 8; my emphases) claims. It is this undecidable oscillation between form-giving and form-taking that characterizes the conceptuality of plasticity, the well-defined logical structure that turns it into a concept. So, «on the one hand [plasticity] signifies the act of shaping [*der Akt der Formgebung*], the *Bildung*, on the other hand, the quality of assuming form [*die Eigenschaft zur Formannahme*], the *Bildbarkeit* [the fact of being moldable]» (Alloa 2018, 211; my trans.). Coming with a morphological duplicity, plasticity refers both to a «formative activity [*gestaltende Tätigkeit*]» that expresses the active aspect of «modelling [*Modellierung*]» and «form-giving», and to «the ability of possibly being formed», which can be understood as «being malleable [*Modellierbarkeit*]» to a certain extent (212; my trans.). In Malabou's view, plasticity goes even beyond such an active-and-passive formation, encompassing also destruction. In this sense, plasticity takes place in the undecidable *entre-deux* between opposite categories (formation and destruction, activity and passivity, mind and brain), therefore resisting all dichotomic description of reality. The inclusion of destruction, however, does not prevent Malabou from outlining an account centered

on the notion of form: even the plastic «power to annihilate form» (2010, 87) remains firmly tied to the formal dimension, which she never really wishes to overcome, positing it as the limit of her own thought (2010, 49; 2022a, 319). Destructive plasticity thus names the substitution of a form with another form (2005b, 37; see also 2012a; 2012b) rather than the actual explosion of the form into a formless state.

Form, thus, lies at the core of Malabou's plasticity. However, such form is not the static form of classic metaphysics (Malabou 2007, 438) – it is rather «the form that comes after presence» (2010, 57), a dynamic form caught up in the experience of a constant indecision. Oscillating between the activity of forming and the passivity of being formed, between formation and destruction (or negative deformation), plasticity refers to a morphological becoming. Such metamorphic movement does not come without constraints: it rather combines transformation and a certain reluctance to change. Moreover, plasticity entails irreversibility: the plastic element cannot return to its previous form after undergoing this kind of transformation. In this sense plasticity should not be conflated with endless polymorphism (2005a, 8, 10; 2008, 15), nor with flexibility (2008, 12–14), elasticity (2008, 15), or resilience (2012a, 181–184). Instead, plasticity describes the ability of changing form permanently while also maintaining the possibility of further change. Such further change, in turn, is not to be taken for granted; so that we might say that the active aspect of plasticity consists not only in a formative power, but also in the ability of partially resisting subsequent formation.

When connecting plasticity and form, Malabou usually starts off by recalling the etymology of the term, which can be traced back to the Greek verb πλάσσειν, meaning “to model”, “to mold”, “to shape”, “to form”. As Malabou aims to point out, reference to the form is a paramount feature of plasticity. However, the very first meaning of πλάσσειν was not “to form” in general, but rather «to form out of a malleable material (especially wax and clay)» (Dongowski 2002, 815; my trans.). In its first instance, plasticity had to do with the materiality of very specific materials, those that were used in the plastic arts of molding and casting. If we further examine the Greek vocabulary, this convergence becomes more and more evident. In *Meteorology*, Aristotle outlines a taxonomy of materials and notices:

Some things, e.g., copper [χαλκός] and wax [κηρός], are impressible [θλαστά], others [...] are not [ἀθλαστα]. [...] Those impressionable that retain the shape impressed on them and are easily molded by the hand are called “plastic” [πλαστά]; those that are not easily molded, such as stone or wood, or are easily molded but do not retain the shape impressed, like wool or a sponge, are not plastic [οὐ πλαστά]. (Aristotle 1931, IV, 9, 386a)

The vocabulary of plasticity largely overlaps with that of impressionability, as both series of words – θλαστός (impressible) and πλαστός (plastic) – are clearly related to πλάσσειν. If the formal aspect is definitely a part of the story, the figure of the *imprint* would seem better suited for characterizing plasticity, as it combines form-giving and form-taking with the materiality of those materials that “retain the shape” acquired by means of contact. Malabou, however, does not consider a material like clay as

properly plastic, “at once capable of receiving and of giving form”, and attributes to it only passivity instead. «On one hand, [plasticity] designates the capacity of certain materials, such as clay or plaster, to receive form. On the other hand, it designates the power to give form – the power of a sculptor» (Malabou 2012a, 17). By attributing the passive aspect of plasticity to inorganic materials and the active one to the human agent, Malabou ends up separating the two poles that plasticity was supposed to bring together.

If, for Malabou, it is not clay that can be regarded as plastic, what is then? In her account, it is the human subject that which is properly plastic; moreover, if we were to consider the human from a material point of view, then proper plasticity would be attributed to the brain (Watkin 2016, 77-109). In this sense, plasticity serves to describe the auto-formation of the brain more than the morphogenetic system set in motion by the imprint, which is drastically rejected. [3] Why is it so?

[3] In fact, on one occasion Malabou did describe plasticity in terms of an irreversible imprint that can be further transformed, see Malabou 2008, 15-16. However, in that passage the imprint is treated quite generically, and its conceptual implications and richness in theoretical potential are left behind. When discussing the imprint specifically, Malabou rejects all possibility of resorting to it for better grasping the concept of plasticity.

2. (mât + x): Being friends with the wood

The reasons behind Malabou’s rejection of the imprint are worthy of reconstruction, and they are to be traced back to the many and complex ties that connect and distance Malabou’s philosophy and Jacques Derrida’s. Derrida served as Malabou’s doctoral supervisor, and deconstruction greatly influenced her thought, arguably provoking in her what could be described as an attitude of «mimetic agonism» (Lawtoo 2023, 45). It is in their theoretical relationship that, I believe, the alternative between form and imprint as models for plasticity can find an explanation.

In a 2007 essay titled *The end of writing? Grammarology and plasticity*, later to be included in *Changer de différence. Le féminin et la question philosophique*, Malabou (2007; 2009, 51-79) reproached Derrida’s inability to elaborate a true materialism: despite the aspirations expressed in the initial pages of his *Of Grammarology*, Derrida – Malabou claimed – was never able to account for matter in terms that could go beyond the idea of a mere material substrate for cultural inscription. The imprint was to be assimilated to such dynamic of graphic inscription (which, in Derrida’s thought, goes together with generalized writing and with the figures of text, code, language, discourse, trace).

The issue became even clearer in a subsequent essay, titled *Are there still traces?* (Malabou 2022b). Here the imprint, understood as graphic inscription, seems to work by violently imposing a form onto a pre-existing, formless matter, thus complying with the hylomorphic paradigm of classical metaphysics. The imprint is thereby framed as a reductive figure, as an image of the opposition between form and matter (Goldgaber 2018). In contrast to this, Malabou aims to conceive of matter and form in non-dichotomic and non-oppositional terms. Considering novelty as an immanent transformation of a material form rather than as a formal inscription on a material surface, Malabou sets an exclusive alternative between Derrida’s graphic imprint and her own plastic form: «The formation of form is not the simple flip side of the being-imprinted of the imprint; it designates a dramatically different economy than that of the imprint» (Malabou 2022b,

289). [4] Instead of understanding the imprint as the oscillating coexistence of form-taking and form-giving that is at stake in plasticity, Malabou reduces it to the imposition of form on matter that characterizes the hylomorphic paradigm, and attributes this theoretical position to Derrida.

However, it should be noticed that Derrida himself aimed at overcoming the hylomorphic tradition as an offshoot of Western metaphysics, and that his very scepticism towards the notion of form found reason in the light of this overall goal. For Derrida, form is presence (Derrida 1982, 157-158), whereas the imprint is the never-present trace that logically and ontologically precedes all forms, making them possible. The very dynamic of inscription is for Derrida more complex than it is presented by Malabou – suffices it to recall his reflections on the *subjectile* (Derrida 1994) and on *χώρα* (Derrida 1993), where these “places of inscription” are said to exceed and precede the very opposition between «the anthropomorphic schemas of the verb *to receive* and the verb *to give*» (Derrida in Kipnis & Leiser 1997, 17). [5]

In yet another context, that of the 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, Derrida outlined the *pars construens* of his understanding of the relations between form and matter. Resorting to the ancient Sanskrit root of the word “material”, *mât*, he wrote:

What we need [...] is not to invent something to cancel out *mât*, but something to make all its supplements (*mât* + X) resonate and sing throughout the equally potent forces of laughter and love [*de faire vibrer ou chanter tous ses suppléments (mât + X) par la puissance du rire ou de l'amour*]. You know how to make the material laugh. (Derrida 1985, 126; 2015, 208)

The formula (*mât* + X) does not express the imposition of form on matter, it rather expresses the form as a prolongation of material forces that traverse it. By experimenting with the possibility of adding ever-new determinations (+ X) to *mât*, Derrida singled out an approach to matter marked by a certain “eroticism”: love and laughter call into question the *φιλία* that can characterise the relationship with the material.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's joiner comes to mind: the one who, thanks to a «competent intimacy», is «the *friend* of the wood» (1994, 3; my emphasis). A good example of this idea can be found in the work of Italian artist Giuseppe Penone – a woodworker who is so familiar with the wood that he can actually *feel* with it, in a gesture of sympathy (as in *συμπάθεια*, “feeling together”). Penone's art is famously built on lived relationships with natural entities such as trees and rocks: when carving a cedar, for example, Penone engages in a corporeal confrontation that becomes a poietic dialogue with the material [FIG. 1]. Even in those artworks where the material seems to be grabbed and dominated by the artist's hand, like *Alpi Marittime – Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto*, Penone actually aims at a productive interaction with the material's own agency. «I feel the flowing of the tree around my hand / leaning against the tree», he writes. «The hand sinks in the tree trunk which for the speed of its growth and the plasticity of its matter is the ideal fluid element to be molded» (Penone 2009, 27; my trans.).

[4] The implicit reference goes to a passage of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*: «*Différance* is [...] the formation of form. But it is on the other hand the being-imprinted of the imprint» (1997, 63). Constituted signs (forms) result from the trace (the imprint) that does not exist as presence but is the condition of possibility of the articulation of all forms. In this sense, the activity of the process of formation and the passivity of the already occurred impression can appear as interrelated in the figure of *différance*.

[5] For further elaboration on *χώρα* and plasticity, see Martell 2023.



[FIG. 1] Giuseppe Penone working on *Cedro di Versailles* (Cedar of Versailles) in his studio, 2000. © Archivio Penone

Interestingly, Penone's debarked trees are also one of the very few artistic cases ever mentioned by Malabou, and he is most likely the only sculptor she ever names in her writings. In a footnote of her *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Malabou states: «With the series *Trees* and *Repeat the forest*, Penone established a principle of the self-formation of the work. The sculptor does not create. Instead, he causes the form to appear by removing the tree's growth rings until he finds its heart: the tree, as a prefiguration of itself, thereby comes to light» (2010, 115). Malabou understands the artwork as a plastic self-formation in which the artist acts as a facilitator at best, merely witnessing the natural form spontaneously emerge. But this is not how Penone, an artist of the imprint, actually proceeds. In his practice, the artwork is not just a natural form that forms itself thanks to a plastic life that might seem reminiscent of the theories by Cambridge Platonists: it is rather the result of a complex, at times conflictual material encounter – an “erotic” relation, a $\phi\lambda\iota\alpha$, a «dance of agency» (Malafouris 2008, 34) in which the woodworker “makes the wood laugh”.

With a single theoretical gesture, Malabou's description of Penone's work obliterates both the material and the imprint: as James Martell notices, «the trace [the imprint] (the [...] technical splitting and cutting of bark and wood [...]) disappears completely as the self-forming form emerges by/from/to itself. In this artwork, as [Malabou] sees it, there is no more trace of the rejected matter and wood, no more trace of the trace itself» (2021, 97). [6] The imprint, as we shall see in more detail, describes a morphogenetic system based on differential relationality instead of substantive forms, however dynamic they might be. This allows to maintain the plasticity of materials, showing material forces – *mât*

[6] Tellingly, $\tilde{\upsilon}\lambda\eta$ meant both “matter” and “wood” (see Bensaude-Vincent 2011, 109). This allows to anticipate a further point in my argument: that the generic and abstract notion of matter is always to be traced back to specific materials. On this in more detail see *infra*, section 5.

– that do not negate the forms but rather traverse them, couple with them, make them emerge as they do: (*mât* + X) as an alternative to the hylomorphic schema.

Derrida's thought was not hylomorphic in its inspiration nor in its results (and not even in its legacy, one might add). [7] And Malabou's? Her focus on the self-formation of the form as well as her understanding of plasticity on the model of the plastic human brain make her quite insensitive to *mât*. Her plasticity describes the activity of form without matter, «*morphè sans hylé*», «plasticity without (need of) support, surface, beyond, or even elsewhere» (Martell 2021, 96). In Malabou's account, the rejection of the imprint goes hand in hand with the rejection of the domains of aesthetics and the arts and with the rejection of inorganic materials' plasticity (intended not as mere malleability but as the complex oscillation and co-presence of activity and passivity). This results in an account that cannot be regarded as a material-oriented new materialism, but rather as a materialism of the flesh, if not as a full-fledged embodied spiritualism. By addressing these points (the imprint, the arts and aesthetics, and inorganic materials), it may be possible to obtain a different concept of plasticity – one that more thoroughly underpins a new materialist account.

[7] It is worth recalling that both Karen Barad and Vicki Kirby's new materialisms stem from a materialist reading of Derrida. On the reasons why their accounts are more coherent new materialisms than other equally or more well-known accounts, see Gamble et al. 2019. It might also be worth noticing that, in spite of her intention to outline a new materialism, Malabou's account is never included among the new materialist accounts (see for instance Hoppe & Lemke 2021), which, contrary to hers, are usually concerned with the activity of nonhuman and non-living matter.

3. A material system of morphogenesis

Conceiving of plasticity on the model of the imprint requires understanding the imprint in a way that makes it diverge from the oversimplistic idea of the imposition of an active form on a passive matter. Plasticity would thus not go back to the two-dimensional, reductive imprint of hylomorphism but rather to the imprint as a material system of morphogenesis, [8] a multi-dimensional system characterized by the ontological precedence of the relations that animate it. Such a renewed understanding of plasticity can be attained by closely considering the concrete practices at work in the arts and crafts.

It is precisely by examining a technical operation – the production of a clay brick – that Gilbert Simondon has been able to call into question the hylomorphic paradigm – «the idea that the generation of form is reducible to the imposition upon inert matter of a pre-given abstract form» (Massumi 2009, 39). Technical procedures and their practical aspects undermine the conceptual validity of a long-standing metaphysical tradition: it is by getting in touch with the process of the making that a change in perspective becomes possible. This is why Simondon invites to «enter the workshop» and to get closer to the mold and to the clay: «The hylomorphic schema corresponds to the knowledge of someone who remains outside the workshop and considers nothing but what enters and exits it» (Simondon 2020, 30).

According to Simondon (2020), the fundamental flaw of hylomorphism consists in considering form and matter exclusively as the two

[8] It may be debated whether «morphogenesis» (however mitigated within the expression «material system of morphogenesis») is the most accurate term here, since it maintains the form (*μορφή*) as its guiding principle and refers to the making in the sense of creation (*γένεσις*) more than in the sense of a technical and material collaboration. I thank Professor James Martell for bringing up this point and for suggesting the invention of a new concept based on *θλαστιά* (rather than *μορφή*) and on *τέχνη* (rather than *γένεσις*) to solve the problem. To this, I will devote further effort in my forthcoming texts. In this essay, I maintain the term «morphogenesis» with this important caveat in mind.

extremes of the formative operation – a perspective that reduces them to an abstract dichotomy. The hylomorphic dualism hypostatizes both form and matter while at the same time making any real mediation between the two disappear. Making a brick would seem to require pressing soft clay into a rectangular mold, which, in turn, would simply give form to the formless material. But by observing the formative practice more closely, one notices that pure form and pure matter never exist as such: the mold is not an abstract, immaterial form; the clay has been worked and kneaded before being put in the mold. The transformative encounter between the two must be prepared in order to occur properly: the brick is not produced by the union of just any form and just any matter, but by the energy system in which *this* specific form («a *certain defined* mold, prepared in a *certain* fashion», Simondon 2020, 23) is related to *this* specific matter (a certain lump of clay and not another, submitted to a specific preparation). Form-taking is not about some material passively receiving a shape: it is about a transformative relation, a generative contact, a productive encounter. Commenting on Simondon's passage, Tim Ingold illustrates this shift in perspective: «The brick [...] results not from the *imposition* of form onto matter but from the *contraposition* of equal and opposed forces immanent in both the clay and the mold. In the field of forces, the form emerges as a more or less transitory equilibration» (2013, 25).

Form and matter never exist in general, nor do they exist as purely immaterial form and as matter absolutely devoid of formal dispositions. Each form (in this case, the mold for making the brick) is already always also embodied and material; each matter is always already formed (the clay has undergone a specific preparation that made it available for acquiring the shape of the brick – a “preparation” that can be traced back before all human processing: «before any elaboration, the clay in the marsh is already in a form, since it is already colloidal», which makes it «not just passively deformable, [but] actively plastic», Simondon 2020, 24). The craftsperson or the artist do not understand themselves as the only active party: they relate to the material and lend themselves to carefully listening to its tendencies and reactions, predisposing themselves to cooperate with it, to challenge it, to provoke it. This way of articulating form and matter in the process of making an imprint relies logically and practically on a no longer univocal distribution of activity and passivity. Plasticity thus becomes a matter of imprint, where the imprint is intended, in turn, as an energy system where a transformative contact occurs, perturbing both sides in an active and passive reciprocity.

To understand the plastic imprint as a *system of forces*, «it [would] not [even] be enough to enter the workshop»: «it would be necessary to be able to enter the mold with the clay, to be both mold and clay at once [*il faudrait pouvoir entrer dans le moule avec l'argile, se faire à la fois moule et argile*], to live and feel their common operation in order to be able to think the process of taking form in itself» (Simondon 2017, 248-249; 1989, 243; see also 2020, 30). This understanding of the imprint requires proximity and intimacy, it asks us to participate in the operation of material morphogenesis and, in turn, it allows to conceive of the relationship between matter and form in energetic and experiential terms.

The point has been stressed also by art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. Resorting to Simondon's argument, he claims for «the gesture

of the imprint [*empreinte*] [...] to be first and foremost the *experience of a relationship*» (2008, 33; my trans.). His work, both as theoretical and art historical research and as curatorial practice (Didi-Huberman & Semin 1997), [9] has a specific merit: that of applying the discourse on the nonreductive imprint to a specific set of objects, casts. [10] By examining molds, frottages, death masks, votive offerings – that is to say, by tying the imprint and its plastic logic to objects that have most often failed to find a place in the art historical discourse –, Didi-Huberman makes the argument on the imprint even more concrete and tangible, bringing casting and molding practices into play. At the same time, however, Didi-Huberman’s discourse maintains a strong theoretical core, which allows him to conceptualize the imprint in explicit proximity to Derrida’s trace (2008, 314). Both singular and multiple, both origin and copy, neither present nor absent, neither inside nor outside, the imprint – just like Derrida’s trace, and, in fact, not too differently from Malabou’s plasticity – is conceptually crafted to eschew metaphysical dichotomies.

[9] See the exhibition *L’empreinte*, held at the Centre Pompidou in 1997 and co-curated with Didier Semin, where, significantly, also artworks by Penone were displayed.

[10] Didi-Huberman’s concept of *empreinte* maintains the focus both on the cast as an *object* and on casting as a *process*.

4. Lost forms: From the statue to the mold

Let us go back, for a moment, to the turn of the century, when plasticity was still “demanding to gain access to conceptuality”. In the academic year 1998-1999, Malabou was invited by Didi-Huberman to hold a lecture at his seminar at the École pratique des hautes études. The seminar was devoted to Julius von Schlosser’s *Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs* (*History of Portraiture in Wax*). There, Malabou stated: «Georges Didi-Huberman’s work and mine currently share the same concern: responding to the call of a motif, a strangely persistent one – the motif of *plasticity*» (2005b, 31; my trans.). There was, however, a difference in approach: in addressing the wax portraits and ex-votos, Malabou’s focus was on the plasticity of the suffering subject who made the votive offerings, while Didi-Huberman’s attention was being devoted, in the very same years, to the plasticity of wax itself (Didi-Huberman 2000).

On at least one occasion, then, Malabou came close to seeing the possible convergence of the conceptuality of plasticity, on one hand, and the materiality of the molding practices, on the other. However, she did not really explore this possibility, which would have brought her closer to the “artistic origins” of plasticity. When considering the topic of plasticity’s beginnings in the arts and crafts, Malabou’s claims are in fact quite hasty: «Plasticity characterizes the art of “modeling” and, in the first instance, the art of *sculpture*» (2005a, 8; my emphasis), she states for instance; or, by retracing the argument to which we are now used: «speculative Hegelian philosophy rips the concept [of plasticity] away from its [...] *sculptural ties* [...], definitively conferring the metaphysical dignity of an essential characteristic of subjectivity upon it» (2010, 13; my emphasis). With such cursory statements, Malabou aligns with other authors (e.g., Lawtoo 2022, 150-152;

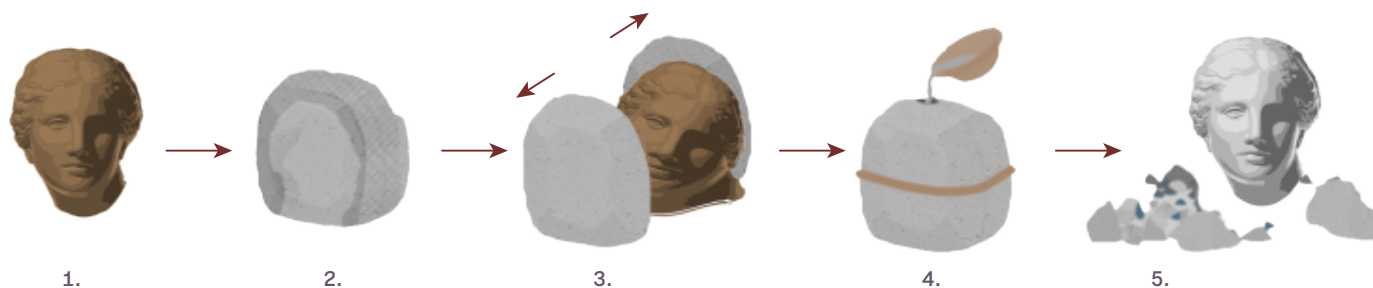
Meloni 2019, 7-8) in seeing plasticity as originating in *sculpture*, whereby sculpture is equated to the beautiful and concluded *form* of the statue (e.g., Malabou 2010, 9-10).

A different paradigm of plasticity, one that understands it on the model of nonreductive imprint, considers more carefully the complexity of the relations between plasticity and sculpture. The reasons to bring together plasticity and molding are theoretical as well as historical. If we go back to the Greek πλαστικά τέχνη, it is possible to observe that in the Classical Greece period (5th and 4th centuries BCE) the expression referred exclusively to the activity of modeling three-dimensional figures in clay or wax, and, occasionally, to casting bronze by using clay or wax models. It was only later on, during the Hellenistic period (323-31 BCE), that the expression “plastic arts” extended to include also statuary and carving, progressively leading to the identification of plastic arts and sculpture that we take for granted today (Dongowski 2002, 815-816; Saint-Girons 2000, 34; Chateau 1999, 16-17). Despite the Hellenistic extension, moreover, as late as in the 1st century CE it was still common to refer to the so-called “*plastica*” as a whole different category than those of *fusoria* and *sculptura* (Wittkower 1977, 30).

In Antiquity, then, plasticity referred to a τέχνη (intended as a craft or a “mechanical art”) that was not to be conflated with the art of sculpture. What I would like to contend at this point, is that plasticity does not originate in sculpture, as most authors hastily assume. On the contrary: it is sculpture that finds its origins and conditions of possibility in plasticity. [11] Here, it might be useful to adopt Simondon’s method and consider more closely the techniques involved in sculpture- and cast-making, in order to see which theory may stem from the practice.

Plasticity thus referred first and foremost to those techniques that concerned the humble model realized in wax or clay and employed in a number of practices that would subsequently lead to the sculptural object. For this reason, the journey of the plastic model (which turns it eventually into a nobler and more durable sculpture) is worthy of close consideration. In most cases, the object modelled by hand needs to be destroyed in order to obtain a fundamental, yet often overlooked object: the plaster master-copy, or original cast. As Didi-Huberman noticed, such *plastic* plaster cast is not a proper sculpture, but «constitutes the basis of sculpture [*ce par quoi procède la sculpture*]. [...] The molding process is a necessary step in the production of all bronzes and marbles that are not obtained through direct carving» (2008, 149-150; my trans.). Leaving aside the techniques that translate the form from plaster to stone or metal, let us focus on the technical procedure to make the original plaster cast. This technique is called *waste-mold casting*, and can be schematized as follows [FIG. 2]. First of all, a mold in liquid plaster is built over the clay or wax model, with the aim of creating a hollow mold: a negative of the form modelled by hand. At this point, the clay or wax is removed from inside the mold, thereby destroying the model. Subsequently, liquid plaster is poured into

[11] At the same time, we must be wary of regarding plasticity as a principle, a chronological beginning, or a foundational element. In fact, plasticity avoids the characteristics of the origin, metaphysically intended. In what follows, then, all reference to the origins of sculpture in plasticity and to the origins of plasticity in the πλαστικά τέχνη will not be intended in the sense of a stable, unitary, univocal origin but rather in the sense of a weak, plural, fragmented origin of Derridean fashion. As we will see, what pertains to plasticity in the sculptural process is lost for historical, cultural, technical, and material reasons, and it is therefore the very materiality of plasticity that makes it a defective, ungrounding origin.



[FIG. 2] Schematic illustration of waste-mold casting. (1) A clay model is realized by hand; (2) a plaster mold is built on the clay model; (3) a hollow mold is obtained and the clay model is destroyed; (4) the mold is filled with liquid plaster; (5) the plaster mold is destroyed to demold and thereby obtain the original plaster cast. Illustration by the author.

the hollow mold and left to solidify and take shape. Finally, the cast is demolded: the mold is broken in order to retrieve the new, more durable positive – that is, the plaster master-copy. [12]

This procedure raises many theoretical issues – the status of “originals” and “copies”, for instance. Among these issues, there is also the one that has been one of the central concerns of these pages: the relation between form and imprint. Let us consider a simple fact: that the mold, in some languages, is referred to as “form”. In Italian, the mold of waste-mold casting is called *forma persa* or *forma a perdere* (“lost form” or “form to be lost”); in German, one speaks of *Verfahren mit verlorener Form* (“technique with lost form”). Not only is in fact this *form* a hollow negative, it also needs to be destroyed, to be lost, in order for the “other of the form” to emerge. This other form, the counter-form that is extracted by demolding and that emerges as the positive cast, is not actually a form, but an *imprint*.

[12] For a technical overview on these topics, see for instance Beale 1975; D'Alessandro & Persegati 1987; Haak et al. 2019.

If plasticity has to do with modeling and molding, with clay and wax and plaster, with the morphological and material complexity of the imprint, then it is possible to claim that plasticity does not originate in sculpture: on the contrary, plasticity precedes sculpture technically and represents its condition of possibility. The clay model is destroyed in order to produce the plaster master-copy, from which marble and bronze statues are realized. Sculpture thus begins where its plastic origins are lost; the various sculptural forms – which appear as positive, pacified figures – are in fact haunted, from the very beginning, by just as many plastic imprints.

5. Material aesthetics

According to Malabou, the origins of plasticity were to be traced back to aesthetics and the arts, but, being non-philosophical or pre-conceptual, such origins seemed to be unworthy of attention. In this way, both *the material aspect of this aesthetic origin* and *the aesthetic aspect of this material origin* were left unquestioned by the “standard” philosophy of plasticity. After having brought plasticity back to the material techniques of the arts and crafts, it now seems possible to retrieve

the aesthetic aspects of plasticity too. In which sense is the materiality of plasticity also an *aesthetic* matter? It would be simplistic to claim that aesthetics is summoned because works of art are at stake, especially since plasticity does not really coincide with the art of sculpture but is related to the technical practices that underpin it. The aesthetic element inherent to material plasticity is to be found elsewhere: in nonhuman sensation. The chance, here, is to develop the concept of plasticity into a *material aesthetics*.

Rethinking plasticity by privileging the imprint led us inside the studio or the workshop, first, and then deep down inside the mold, where the materials experience a transforming contact. The imprint allowed us to appreciate both the morphological and the material aspects of plasticity, bringing them together not in a dichotomy but in a complex system. In this framework, the opposition between form and matter proved to be but a sterile abstraction. Now, it is possible to appreciate yet another aspect: namely, that this conceptual framework also shows the impossibility of speaking of “matter in general”. When discussing the entanglements of form and matter in the imprint, the discourse was never actually on matter as such: what was at stake was instead the lump of clay, the piece of wax, the pour of plaster... The imprint exposes the ontological autonomy of the single materials and the fact that “matter” is nowhere to be found. What we find, instead, are the specific materials with their peculiarities. In the process of form-taking, every material exhibits specific behaviors that depend on the relations it maintains with its milieu, on the ecological context into which it is inserted and with which it interacts. Plaster is responsive to the encounter with water; once liquid, it takes some time for it to “cure” or solidify. A material like glass, instead, is “sensitive” to temperature: it behaves very differently – as a solid or as a liquid – depending on this specific characteristic of the environment.

It is in this sense that plasticity understood on the relational model of the imprint can pave the way to a material aesthetics, or an aesthetics of materials. The focus of such aesthetics is not on artworks but on αἰσθησις, as the Greek etymology of “aesthetics” suggests: aesthetics as a science of sensation or sensibility. But αἰσθησις is not ascribed solely to the human participants involved in the relational context: it is the sensation of materials too, therefore relating to *affects* rather than percepts.

On this point, it seems possible to partially align with some trends in contemporary art history, such as the German *Materialästhetik* [13] or the French tradition of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales. [14] These trends, which aim to highlight art’s materiality, suggest to adopt a methodology of “complicity with the materials” (Rübel 2012, 15; Lange-Berndt 2015, 15), a methodology of intimacy that embraces specificity – since, as Didi-Huberman remarked in one of his writings on wax, «it is always improper to reflect upon “matter” in general» (Didi-Huberman 2000, 210; my trans.). In this sense, they do not recommend to consider materials alone and discard the human side of the

[14] On EHESS’ unconventional art historical tradition, to which Didi-Huberman belongs as one of its most prominent scholars, see Larsson 2020, 7.

[13] *Materialästhetik* is associated for instance to the research carried on by Monika Wagner and her group at Universität Hamburg. According to Petra Lange-Berndt (2015, 15), this tradition is to be traced back to

Aby Warburg, and today it extends to authors such as Didi-Huberman too. Tellingly, *Materialästhetik* is also well represented by Dietmar Rübel and by his book on plasticity in the art of the 20th century, in which he aligns with new materialisms and the debates in favor of material agency (Rübel 2012, 236).

equation: rather, they invite to investigate the relationship between humans and materials by adopting a nonhierarchical perspective.

First of all, this approach requires to come closer to those who work with materials and to consider the relationship between worker and material as fundamental in constituting both. If the wood is the flip side of the activity of the woodworker, then the identity of the woodworker too results, at least in part, from their relation to the material. The relation between wood and woodworker precedes both the material and the human. In the second place, material complicity requires to “follow the materials” (Lange-Berndt 2015, 16). This implies an intimacy that goes together with a degree of passivity, a certain vulnerability even, since by adopting this posture, one accepts to become entangled in an interaction where they cannot unequivocally control or direct the “matter-flow”. Finally, a method of material complicity requires to consider materials as performative rather than static entities. Considering materials in their ecological context, which involves human actors too, makes the focus shift from the essential properties of materials (what a material “is”) to their performative behaviors (what a material “can do”). From this perspective, a given material is not plastic *per se*: it can rather *behave plastically* if it is involved in certain relations with its environment.

Let us circle back, then, to plasticity as the core concept of a material aesthetics. Here, it would be with a subjective genitive that one could speak of the sensation *of* clay or the sensation *of* plaster: «sensation of this or that material, sensation embodied as and in material forms» (Lange-Berndt 2015, 15). Taking seriously the deconstruction of the hylomorphic paradigm and regarding the encounter between mold and clay in terms of a *relational experience* requires to acknowledge the existence of a material, nonhuman sensation that exceeds organic life. It is once again inside the mold, at the point of contact where wax and plaster meet, that plasticity proves to concern both materiality and aesthetics.

6. Conclusions

In Malabou’s philosophy, which represents the standard theory of plasticity today, the aesthetic and artistic origins of the concept are left unthought. It is precisely by bringing the concept of plasticity back to the field of the plastic arts, to the techniques of modeling and molding, to the materiality of clay and plaster, that an alternative perspective on plasticity may open up. In this essay, I have tried to outline a different account of plasticity – an account in which theory stems from practice and in which the aesthetic, nonhuman, and material elements of this concept are fully appreciated. Here, the form gives way to the imprint, just as molds and casts precede statues and sculptures, representing their condition of possibility. The plasticity of each material manifests not as an essential property but as a relational behavior: the material has its own “sensations” that make it interact, both actively and passively, with its environment. A reappraisal of the techniques involved in the arts and crafts, of the role and sensitivity of inorganic materials, and of the theoretical meaning of the imprint is the operation that allows to think the concept of plasticity anew – or, perhaps, to perform a productive return to plasticity’s neglected origins.

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Ecological Plasticity.

Forming Affective Morphologies, with a Case Study on Olfaction

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We introduce the concept of ecological plasticity and develop it through the case study of human olfaction. Extending the model of plasticity to the ecological discourse, we define ecological plasticity as a principle of systemic relationality according to which an agent takes on a form by interacting with a complex affective reality while, reciprocally, giving it a form. The concept of form is here conceived as a synthetic unity that encapsulates the possibilities of existence, sensibility and interaction of an agent immersed in a complex world of other agent-forms. An agent is always aesthetically and affectively immersed in a complex or ecological system: a body is that which is affected and assumes form within a complex affective reality, which is, in turn, co-formed in this process. This perspective, in contrast with static morphology, contributes to configuring a dynamic eco-affective ontology, as body forms are experientially and affectively renegotiated in loops of co-individuation, impeding a clear distinction between activity and passivity, subject and object. Those concepts are illustrated and crafted with reference to olfactory perception, as olfaction discloses an embodied and reciprocal field of co-affection. Via the perception of smells, bodies make sense of their environment, and this shaping cannot take place without the same bodies being touched, affected, and thus renegotiated.

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In this article, we introduce the concept of *ecological plasticity* and develop it through the case study of human olfaction. [1]

Extending the model of plasticity to the ecological discourse, we define ecological plasticity as a principle of systemic relationality according to which an agent takes on a form by interacting with a complex affective reality while, reciprocally, giving it a form. The concept of form is here conceived as a synthetic unity that encapsulates the possibilities of existence, sensibility and interaction of an agent immersed in a complex world of other agent-forms.

The article is structured into two parts: the first one (sections I and II) develops the concept of ecological plasticity in the light of the notion of complexity. The second one (section III) takes the case of olfactory perception as a concrete example to illustrate the type of analysis that the concept of ecological plasticity calls for. We adopt this order of exposition due to criteria of clarity, but we consider a stark division between an abstract and a concrete moment to be artificial. The two parts are necessary to each other, and as such, deeply intertwined.

[1] This article is the result of a collaborative effort between the two authors. Sections I and II are attributed to Emanuele Capozziello, while Section III is attributed to Sofia Livi. Despite this formal division, both the ideas and the results should be understood as the product of joint work conducted shoulder-to-shoulder, with each author providing consistent input and contributions to the sections written by the other.

1. Complexity, Morphology, Ecology

The jargon of complexity seems to have now permeated almost every realm of knowledge, political-institutional practice, and group or individual way of life (Urry 2005). The expression “the world is complex” has become both a catchphrase and an epoch-defining epistemological orientation that challenges any image of the world centred on criteria such as linearity, immutability, reductionism, and homogeneity (Prigogine & Stengers 2018; Cilliers 1998; Bocchi & Ceruti 2007). The emergence of ordered systems from initial conditions of disorder is one of the many expressions of complexity, which Edgar Morin describes as a peculiar multidisciplinary ontology preaching the universal «transformation of chaos into *logos*» (1992, 54). From contexts or conditions of disorder, delirium, and fragmentation, criteria and tendencies towards order, structure, and form emerge autopoietically or sympoietically. Reflections on complex systems are pervasive, as they confer intelligibility to phenomena spanning from the origin of life to economic crises, from car traffic to the biosphere-atmosphere feedback loops.

Complexity, therefore, does not mean *chaos*: [2] a complexity theorist in any field of knowledge will address processes and contexts that, despite the heterogeneity, multiplicity, time lag, or dispersion of factors, still give rise to macroscopic structures, emergent properties, or synergistic regularities. In other words, *form* is what distinguishes complexity from chaos; complexity always calls for a morphology (Riedl 2019), a theory of form as «the totality of the complex organized unit which is manifested phenomenally insofar as whole in time and space» (Morin 1992, 112). Indeed, as observed by René Thom:

[2] The use of the term “chaos” in this context is not intended in the technical sense associated with the physical and mathematical reflections on “deterministic chaos”, which – beginning ideally with the work of Henri Poincaré – has significantly contributed to shaping and directing the cluster of disciplines and multidisciplinary approaches encompassed by “complexity theory” (Ruelle 1991). As will be clarified in the course of this discussion, “chaos” here assumes, perhaps more classically from a philosophical perspective, the meaning of “formlessness”.

Whatever is the ultimate nature of reality (assuming that this expression has meaning), it is indisputable that our universe is not chaos. We perceive beings, objects,

things to which we give names. These beings or things are forms or structures endowed with a degree of stability; they take up some part of space and last for some period of time. (1975, 1)

In Thom's analyses, the Universe is conceived as a geometric *continuum* that manifests itself through forms (i.e., expressions of structural stability in space-time; see Thom 1993, 53-54). [3] According to Thom, the scientific focus of the morphologist should be directed towards those discontinuities that constitute "edges" perceptible in universal morphism, the *loci* of "catastrophe" (Thom 1993, 28). If we understand form as a unit of manifestation (more or less arbitrarily denoted) in a universal morphological *continuum* – which, therefore, by definition, does not admit emptiness or a-geometric and infra-morphic spaces within it [4] – *catastrophe* is understood as that point of discontinuity, interruption, or turning point that marks a boundary between phenomena (i.e., forms) that qualitatively manifest themselves as distinct. A catastrophe marking the edge of a plate, and thus allowing the distinguishability of the plate from the table it rests upon, is a rupture of the morphological equilibrium surface, of the topological *continuum* (Zeeman 1976). Understood as geometric-perceptive discontinuities, the singular catastrophic breaks of an ideal space-time homogeneity are the forms that serve as the bulwark against formless chaos, elements of structural stability that testify to recognizable order and organization.

Therefore, if the world is complex, this complexity manifests itself through forms or structures interconnected by complex relationships. As Thom acknowledges (1993, 63), understanding complexity in morphological terms, and therefore in terms of its possibilities of manifestation, implies the instantiation of an agent capable of perceiving a qualitative discontinuity, that is, a catastrophe, in the morphological *continuum* that is the world. Developing an epistemology of complexity always implies attention to the sensitivity of agents within a complex system to the forms through which the latter manifests. As Whitehead already intuited (1920, 21), reflection on the *objective* processes of structural organization alone is not sufficient to provide a complex image of the world, as one must also consider the *qualitative* dimension of experience or perception of those structures by the agents inhabiting the world. We can understand ecology as the knowledge or thought of this perennial exchange, in complex systems, between the qualitative and the systemic, the affective and the structural, the experiential and the observable.

According to Bateson, ecology is the ensemble of practices of knowledge of what he calls «the pattern which connects» (or «meta-pattern»): «What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?» (1979, 8). Therefore, ecology fundamentally results in «an aesthetic question: *How are you related to this creature? What pattern connects you to it?*» (9). Ecology can be understood as another name for complexity, but with a clear focus on the living dimension of our complex world(s), and so with a disposition to address the aesthetic, qualitative, experiential, perceptive, affective

[3] The key principle of morphology, according to J.W. Goethe, is that «everything that is must also manifests and shows itself» (qtd. in Vercellone & Tedesco 2020, 8).

[4] «Now it is precisely because all absolute forms are incapable of being contradicted that they can belong to a same Being and, in being able to, they effectively belong to it. Since they are forms, their real distinction is formal and carries no ontological difference among beings to which each might be attributed: they are all attributed to a single and same Being that is both ontologically one and formally diverse. There the real distinction already does not involve separability» (Deleuze 1993, 44-5).

exchanges between living agents and living environments. This is what Oele successfully grasps interpreting ecology through the idea of “e-co-affectivity”. [5] Hustak and Myers (2012) contend that ecology, in addition to its requisite evolutionary and adaptative framework, must incorporate an *involutionary* character. [6] This involves delving into the complex «stories of affinities, attractions, and intimacies» that bind living beings with each other and with their physical environments «in an affectively charged, multisensory partnership» (78-79). Ecology is the study of the formation of (affective) ecosystemic complexities: stories or scenes of bodies that «*learn to be affected*, meaning “effectuated”, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans» (Latour 2004, 205). The life of a body within an ecosystem embodies what Despret (2004) has conceptualized as «an experience of “making available”», wherein «the body and what affects it produce each other»: «The world disposes us to feel, and our body makes the world available» (127).

Ecology, following Latour, describes «the exchange of forms of action through the transactions between agencies of multiple origins and forms». Therefore, it configures the world as a «metamorphic zone», a space of perennial morphogenesis and transformation (2017, 58). “Being of this Earth”, that is, inhabiting a complex metamorphic zone, means «being enveloped in sensor circuits in the form of loops» (139). The forms through which the world expresses its complexity are characterized by traits, borders, and folds that are the result of histories of e-co-affective metamorphoses: «the metamorphoses that beings have experienced while living with others are so many *material-semiotic traces*: thus the shape of the orchid flower, thus the stripes of the zebras» (Despret & Chrulew 2020). Every ecological form – from ecosystemic configurations, to socio-natural co-adaptations, to animal shapes, and so on – testifies to a process of organization that involves both sensible agents and transformative structures.

2. Ecological Plasticity: Making Sense of Affective Complexities

We develop the concept of ecological plasticity in order to account for this qualitative/affective/aesthetic dimension in addressing an ecologically complex world. In the last decades, the notion of plasticity has garnered renewed interest due to the philosophical work of Catherine Malabou. She gives a twofold definition of plasticity: «the capacity to *receive form* (clay is called plastic, for example) and the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery)» (Malabou 2009, 5). The concept of plasticity directs our attention to processes of simultaneous *formativeness* and *formability*. We emphasize the “processual” nature of this definition. Following the

[5] «Instead of seeing affectivity merely in terms of the passive effect of a cause, the kind of affectivity I

[6] Without thereby reducing evolutionism to “adaptationism”. In this sense, the reference to the renowned essay by Gould and Lewontin (1979) is suggestive, wherein the two evolutionists, critiquing the faith in the universal explanatory capacity of natural selection for functionalization and optimization (“*what for* did this trait adapt?”), present an “architectural” approach focused on morphological constraints (i.e., structural, relational) to evolution, not limited to teleological and functionalist reasoning. Gould and Lewontin’s perspective, in other words, embodies an evolutionism that is somewhat “ecological” because it promotes a morphological-structural interpretation of the evolution of bodies, species, and environments. The “involutionary” proposal by Hustak and Myers constitutes an appropriate and necessary complement aimed at emphasizing the affective nature of these structurings.

propose puts at its center stage the receptive, responsive power of living beings to react to what happens to them, which may include their ability to participate in, and shape, how they are affected. [...] With the term “e-co-affectivity”, I seek to emphasize that affectivity neither occurs in a vacuum nor pertains to singular, discrete entities: it implies a certain place or milieu (hence “eco”, as in the Greek “oikos”) and connection to

others (hence “co”), whose mediation may have either destructive, or constructive, or ambiguous effects» (Oele 2020, 5).

morphological tradition inaugurated by Goethe, Malabou addresses the question of form through a reflection on dynamic-relational processes of formation (*Bildung*), giving secondary analytical value to the fixed, already given form (*Gestalt*). [7] Rather than focusing on instantaneous observations of structural stability, form should be investigated within the dynamics of stabilization and organization; it should always be understood as captured in processes of transformation, metamorphosis: a form always already preceded by other forms, and about to change form. [8] That being said, Malabou claims, a reflection on the complexity of the world – a world of intricate interrelations between perceptual, environmental, cognitive, political and ontogenetic elements – finds in plasticity «the poetical and aesthetic force» that configures it (Malabou 2009, 39). As we will attempt to show, if taken as a model, plasticity allows us to think about the transformative reciprocities that define ecological complexities, holding together aesthetic-qualitative aspects and morphological-systemic ones. With some partial exceptions (Malabou 2017), Malabou has not directly and systematically extended the model of plasticity to the ecological discourse. One of the objectives of this article – whose aims, however, go beyond a comparison with the thought of the French author – is to attempt this expansion.

«Today, *new metamorphic occurrences* are appearing», «the privileged regime of change today is the continuous implosion of form, through which it recasts and reforms itself continually» (Malabou 2010, 57); plasticity is the «motor scheme», the *Stimmung* of an epoch of complexification. Like Thom's universe, Malabou's world is also to be understood as a morphological *continuum*, more precisely as a metamorphic zone: «Nothing happens except self-transformation. [...] The plasticity of unavoidable transformation» (44). In this sense, «[p]lasticity refers to *the spontaneous organization of fragments*» (7). The introduction of the concept of plasticity to describe our complex world seems to serve the ecological purpose of highlighting the *affective complexities* through which the world and the agents that populate it give and receive form – individuating themselves and stabilizing the outer, embodying and moulding, structuring their own capacities and configuring the environment. In this regard, we can recall another philosopher of plasticity, Nietzsche, who speaks of «*plastic power*» as «the power distinctively to grow out of itself, transforming and assimilating everything past and alien, to heal wounds, replace what is lost, and reshape broken forms out of itself» (1980, 10). Plasticity is a properly vital force in that it is a force of ecological interaction and relationship: the «objective», systemic, structural complexity of a reality cannot be conceived without instantiating an agent that «makes sense» of its own reality, in a common and continuous metamorphic loop that incessantly transforms both of them. Plasticity is thus a concept that speaks of the *capacity of "making sense"* as a fundamental factor in understanding complexity and therefore necessitates thinking about complexity in ecological terms, namely as affective complexity.

[7] «The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt* [structured form]. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.

But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest

[8] The morphological or morphogenetic question, according to Malabou, is «the question of the *differentiated structure of all form* and hence the *formal or figural unity of all difference and articulation*» (2010, 2).

or defined – everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* [formation] to describe the end product and what is in process of production as well. Thus in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt*, or if we use the term we should at least do so only in reference to the idea, the concept, or to an empirical element held fast for a mere moment of time» (Goethe 1988, 63-64).

But what do we mean by “the capacity of making sense”? For *sense*, we can understand both sensitivity – what makes our sensible access to the world possible – and the «indeterminate condition of meaning, of the sense-making of experience, language, and the meanings of concepts and words» (Garroni 1992, 196, our trans.). In this twofold definition, “making sense” is an aesthetic practice: triggering and elaborating a perceptual, sensible, affective experience; but also *feeling at home* in the experience of the world – the world of which I experience *must* make sense, or it would be absurd, disorienting, chaotic. “Making sense” means the capacity of orienting in the world. And, as we have seen, it is possible to navigate a complex world only morphologically, that is, plastically: by exercising a capacity to give and receive forms; by entering the metamorphic zone. Sense is a plastic product of ecological interactions that require a description that is both qualitative-affective and structural-systemic. «Sense – [...] that’s metamorphosis», writes Malabou (2010, 62): [9]

making sense means inserting oneself, as a plastic agent, into the metamorphoses of a world of affective complexity. Therefore, as Malabou writes, plasticity lays on an understanding of «sense as *incorporation*» (9): making sense is something that not abstract agents, but *bodies* do.

If ecological plasticity is a conceptual tool for addressing affective complexities, describing agents that make sense of their reality by giving and receiving forms, then we should stress the embodied nature of these forms (animal morphologies, ecosystemic configurations, sensory schemes, ethological patterns...). [10] A fundamental premise for this understanding of form as always already “embodied form” is a complex and extended conception of the body, one that does not conceive it as an isolated individuality within a skin. Speaking of a body as “plastic”, indeed, means understanding the body as simultaneously capable of containing, maintaining, nurturing its individual form, and open to receiving that form from outside. According to Malabou, «[p]lasticity expresses the contradictory nature of hetero-affectation» (Malabou & Butler 2011, 623). The body is simultaneously what is capable of maintaining itself identical (and autopoietic) in its own form or structure, and what is always «out of itself (*außer sich*)», «lived elsewhere» (612). Agent and system, body and environment, «shape» and «scene», as Butler calls them, «emerge at once»: «To enter onto a scene is to assume a shape, and to assume a shape is, indeed, to enter onto a scene» (627).

From this emerges a fundamental principle of ecological plasticity: «I am at once here and there», or «*For a body to be a body, it must be bound to another body*» (631). One acquires form and gives form to one’s own reality exclusively within a metamorphic zone, within an affective and complex (from the Latin *complexus*: intertwined, embraced) *continuum* of bodies in transformation.

[9] In this citation, as in the following one, we replaced the word “meaning” with “sense”, believing that this maintains a closer proximity to the original French “sens”, which, according to the Larousse Dictionary, includes, among others, definitions such as: «1. *Chacune des fonctions psychophysiologiques par lesquelles un organisme reçoit des informations sur certains éléments du milieu extérieur, de nature physique (vue, audition, sensibilité à la pesanteur, toucher) ou chimique (goût, odorat)*»; «3. *Ce que quelque chose signifie, ensemble d’idées que représente un signe, un symbole*»; «5. *Raison d’être, valeur, finalité de quelque chose, ce qui le justifie et l’explique*» (<https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/sens/72087>, accessed April 12, 2024).

[10] Notably, enactivism is the address of research that has investigated how embodied, biological entities make sense of the environment they encounter. See, for example, Thompson 2007; Varela et al. 1991. For what concerns enactivist studies on affectivity, our paper is indebted to Giovanna Colombetti’s notable research on situated affectivity, quoted various times throughout the paper.

3. A Case Study: Human Olfaction

The co-emergence of the embodied agent and their ecological “scene” is thus at the core of the concept of ecological plasticity. The word *scene* is etymologically tainted by visual connotations: in classical Latin, *scēna* is the background against which the performance of a play takes place; in Ancient Greek, *σκηνή* originally denoted any light construction of cloth hung between tree branches to provide shade. This word, therefore, discloses a sense of delimitation, of giving form – possibly, through a game of lights and shadows – in which a play can acquire its meaning and legitimization. Our aim in this paragraph is to develop an analysis of the co-metamorphosis of the scene and an agent – their plastic co-emergence – set in a non-visuocentric scenario: namely, the one of the olfactive scene in humans. This field is particularly apt to deepen a theory of ecological plasticity: due to the lack of attention it has traditionally received, it can be useful to open new insights to put into question our visualist biases, that tend to posit the independence of subjects and objects. [11] However, two points have to be clarified here. The first one, is that the choice of focusing on this sense is not antithetical to the idea that human experience is strongly multimodal: the talk of olfaction lies in the conviction that to analyse one perceptual modality in isolation is an intellectual abstraction. [12] The second one, is that the anthropocentric point of departure (the focus on *human* olfaction) is here adopted with the aim of its deconstruction, as it will be shown by focusing on the role of the microbiome.

What does it mean, to reflect on the olfactive scene? The perception of smells discloses a scene that envelops, surrounds and moves the subject in various affective ways – smells can make subjects feel *at home*. [13]

Not only does the absence of the aroma of the world – a condition called *anosmia* – erase the pleasure of being in it, but it dissolves the very feeling of inhabiting a world: the de-odorization of the experience is reported as triggering a sense of «detachment, dissociation and unreality» (Watson et al. 2021, 11). Olfaction is characterized by the pervasive presence of a hedonic tonality (Ferdenzi et al. 2015; Martínez 2015; Skrzypulec 2023; Yeshurun & Sobel 2010): when we sniff, we are struck not only by the qualities of the smell itself, but also by the affective value that a smell has for a subject, where «affectivity» refers to the capacity of possibility to be “done something”, to be “struck” or “influenced” [...]. It refers to the capacity to be personally affected, to be “touched” in a meaningful way by what is affecting one» (Colombetti 2014, 1-2). [14] In this sense, emotions are affective states, but not all affective states are emotions, as «one is affected when something merely strikes one as meaningful, relevant, or salient» (Colombetti 2014, 2). The experience of odours, according to ecological theories of olfactory

[11] On vision as the sense of detachment, see Jonas (1954). On the dominance of vision in the paradigm of research on the senses, see Huttmacher (2019).

[12] See Fulkerson 2020, O’Callaghan 2019. We also acknowledge the arbitrary nature of the traditional Western penta-partitioning of the senses (Classen 1993). More generally, we adopt the view that the senses should be considered not in abstract isolation (as in artificial and controlled encounters with the world, the usual situations recreated in laboratory settings). Rather, the activity of perception should be comprehended in an ecological complexity. This is a principle that, as one of the main sources of inspiration for embodied approaches, J. J. Gibson has notoriously defended in his works (see, for example, Gibson 1966, 1979).

[13] The olfactive scene has been also investigated in the study of atmospheres. For example, see Griffero 2022, Mancipopi 2023, Stenslund 2015. Studies on atmospheres are close in spirit to our approach, as they highlight the relational and affective aspects of perceptual activity.

[14] More generally speaking, in the philosophy of perception there have been, recently, various attempts to recognise the affective component of perception, not only for what concerns olfaction. Those studies distinguish the sensory from the affective

perception, [15] is strongly synthetic and «multidimensional, with odour representations coming to integrally include, for example, both multimodal components (e.g., taste) and affective component» (Wilson & Stevenson 2006, 8). As Andreas Keller (2016) states, olfaction has evolved to be an evaluative sense, more than a descriptive one. [16] *Smellscapes* are not just about the presence of certain smells in the atmosphere, but, more interestingly, they include the affective tonality that smells elicit in our body: as Porteous (1985, 375) writes, «the smellscape is an emotive environment, not an intellectual one». [17] Those complex affective processes strongly depend on cortical plasticity and mnemonic processes, as «experience and cortical plasticity are not only important for traditional associative olfactory memory» (9), but they rather play a constitutive role in olfactive perception. [18] In this sense, «human olfaction demonstrates a high level of plasticity» (Wilson & Stevenson 2006, 187). This means that smells are not simply good or bad, intrinsically *homely* or *unhomely*. Certain stimuli are universally perceived as being unpleasant by humans, but the majority of the odors trigger an affective response that depends on the cultural norms a subject is exposed to (Classen et al. 2002; Kapoor 2022), the biography of the subject itself, their internal state at the moment of the sniffing (Plailly et al. 2011), and the context in which the stimulus is presented. [19] In line with this multiform variety, Wilson and Stevenson (2006) problematize the idea that particular features of a chemical stimulus generate systematic reactions.

To smell, does not just mean to keep track of the qualities in the atmosphere: it implies being moved – to experience psycho-physical reactions – by the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the scents and, through this formative movement, to correlatively give form to the environment. This exemplifies what we mean by the concept of ecological plasticity. The incorporation of the body of the subject in the metamorphic zone is a constitutive part of the experience of smells: as a grass blade, our bodies swing, moved by the scented breeze. And that is how a certain aroma acquires hedonic values for our subjective experience. But it would be an error to consider this swinging to merely be passive movement. As the anthropologist David Le Breton writes, the senses are not neutral ways of accessing the environment, as they were «windows» on the world, rather, «they are filters that trap and retain only what we have learned to put there or what we seek to identify by mobilizing our resources» (Le Breton 2022, 3-4). Accordingly, perception «is a process that involves *interpretation* and the ascribing of meaning; it is not a stimulus-response system» (Wilson & Stevenson 2006, 249, our emphasis). Subjects learn to recognize familiar smells and they contextually learn to value them as being pleasant or unpleasant – and this evaluation primarily consists of bodily reactions: think of your experience when meeting smells

[15] See Young 2016, 4. Young also cites Gottfried (2010) as a proponent of an ecological theory of olfaction.

[16] This is coherent with the admission of an affective component: as, in the previous quote, affectivity concerns what is relevant for the individual's interests.

that has been developed particularly in the studies concerning physical pain. See, for example, De Vignemont 2023, Fulkerson 2020. The work of

components of perception; in doing so, they inherit a distinction De Vignemont is particularly useful as it traces a taxonomy of the various positions of the supporters of affective perception.

[17] Psychological studies, for example, sometimes measure the affective component of an olfactory experience by measuring the level of arousal (Bensafi et al. 2002).

[18] Rachel Herz has conducted several experiments on how associative processes can influence the affective component of a smell. See Herz 2003, 2006, Herz et al. 2004, Herz & Von Clef 2001.

[19] «Affect is not tightly scripted. It is not a predetermined response automatically triggered by stimulus structure. Except for a few notable cases, such as cadaverine (even that yields variations), most smells are markedly ambiguous in their hedonic assessments by humans» (Barwich 2020, 130). See Chrea et al. 2009; Ferdenzi et al. 2011, 2013; Herz & Von Clef 2001.

that for you are disgusting, arousing, or deliciously fragrant. Through olfaction, subjects are tuned to an «emotional map» (Tafalla 2013, 1293), a scene that is filled with phenomenal affective qualities that depend on synthetic processes, in which embodied agents plastically learn to interpret the environment and assign value to it.

Coming back to the perception of *homely* smells: to inhale a smell that has *for us* the phenomenal properties of warmly and conformably making us feel at home or in a safe space, means that our body has been morphologically tuned, through the years, to the practice of assigning positive value to that kind of odour that we usually encounter in safe settings. The environment plastically shapes bodies and their tendencies to make sense in one way or another to the stimuli they encounter, through a process of learning; conversely, bodies affectively organize the environment – they do not perceive chaotic fragments of senseless perception. The sensing is full of *sense*. As Colombetti puts it, «all living systems are sense-making systems, namely [...] they inhabit a world that is significant for them, a world that they themselves enact or bring forth as the correlate of their needs and concerns» (2014, 1-2). In this sense, olfaction is a modality in which the co-formation of the subject and a correlative *sensible* environment is evident. The possibilities of my olfactory perception (the *scene* in which my perceptual play takes place) are informed by my previous interactions with the environment: there are constraints on what I can perceive as being a discontinuity in the olfactory atmosphere (familiar smells are usually kept under the threshold of consciousness and not registered in consciousness as being the rupture of a *continuum*), of what I can perceive as being pleasant or unpleasant, and these morphological bounds manifest the form of my previous interactions. This form is continually renegotiated: it is *plastic*. Subjects, through exposition and repetitive association, change their hedonic evaluation of smells – some odours that at first exposure cause uneasiness might be perceived, with time, as being familiar or comforting.

The interactions with the environment do not shape our olfactory abilities only via the malleability of our capacity to hedonically interpret the environment. The discourse on plasticity usually refers to the plasticity of the brain (Malabou 2009), as being shaped and pruned by experience is a characteristic of the synaptic substance, and this morphological re-organization of the neurological matter is at the core of the cerebral processes and their notable capacity for adaptivity. However, the body itself is a plastic and continuous re-negotiation of surfaces and their interfaces (Oele 2020), and the case of olfaction can help illuminate this aspect of dynamic configuration of the ecological borders.

Recent studies focus on the role of nasal microbiome in overall human health, and in particular in the functioning of the olfactory system (Biswas et al. 2020; Koskinen et al. 2018; Lazarini et al. 2022). The term “microbiome” refers to the system of microorganisms which live in and on a host organism, and with “nasal microbiome” it is meant the community of microorganisms that inhabit the mucosa of the nasal cavity. This colony of microbes modulates the olfactory epithelium, thus influencing the perceptual olfactory capacities (Royet & Plailly 2004). The concept of *symbiosis* is usually employed to describe this kind of relationship between microbiome and host (see, notably, Margulis 1971). However, to talk about

colonizers and colonized suggests the implicit adoption of a certain ecological perspective – in this case, the anthropocentric one. Also, the relationship of symbiosis may be interpreted as occurring among individuated, discrete and autonomous biological entities. To avoid this segmentation, the term *holobiont* is used to refer not to a complex of «as autonomous entities but rather [to] [...] biomolecular networks» (Bordenstein & Theis 2015, 1). This conceptual shift is called for by the fact that, for example in humans, the microbiome is constitutive of key biological processes such as the immune system, the functioning of cognitive capacities and also the genetical basis of the individual phenotype – functions that are usually considered to be individuating of the organism: this complexity of biological interrelations put into question the concept of an individual biological entity (Rees et al. 2018). As said, the olfactory capacities are influenced by the type of microbes that enter in relation to the nasal mucosa. In particular, levels of performance in olfaction (in particular, odorant threshold and discrimination) in adult healthy subjects are correlated with the presence of certain microbial communities (Koskinen et al. 2018). This means that the perceptual ability to discriminate and sense odorants in the environment depends on the richness and composition of the microbiome in the nose, illustrating how olfactory perception relies on a complex network of interactions that plastically morph and define surfaces, questioning the idea of biological enclosure.

As mentioned, the analysis of microbiome is an innovative area of research that requires the reframing of the classical concepts of biological individuality, of organism, body and interfaces. [20] In particular, the role of the nasal microbiome in the olfactive capacity is a topic still in need of further investigation (François et al. 2016; Lazarini et al. 2022), and it requires to embrace an ecological perspective towards the perceptual ability of a biological system, in which the perceptual endeavour becomes an extended process in which *continua* of bodies plastically enter in complex affective relationships. Sustaining the adoption of such a perspective, we think that the concept of ecological plasticity highlights the complexity of ecological interrelations, the irreducibility of activity and passivity, the co-formation of biological complexes and their correlative aesthetic scenarios. Those biological reflections are part of a larger conceptual embroider co-habited by ethical problematizations of the concept of the self and the body «figured as discrete and coherent individual subjects, and as fundamentally autonomous» (Neimanis 2017, 2). [21] The development of the Western concept of the individual as confined in a privatised space delimited by the borders of the skin has historical origins, dependent on socio-economic dynamics and structures of power (Lupton 1998). The properties of openness and fluidity have been historically attributed to subjectivities and bodies that derange from the norm (Bordo 1993) and removed from the idealization of the neutral subject (Grosz 1994). Recently, many feminist enterprises have tried to question the «rather dry, if convenient, myth» of the «[d]iscrete individualism» (Neimanis 2017, 2), for example through the concept of fluidity, «as bodies of water we leak and

[20] See, for example, in philosophy of mind: Boem et al. 2021. For a review of the present-day biology's approach to these questions, see McFall-Ngai et al. 2013.

[21] Feminist thinkers have often expressed antibiologistic position, to support a strong social constructivist take on the body. But, for example, Wilson argues that «sustained interest in biological detail will have a reorganizing effect on feminist theories of the body», and that «exploring the entanglements of biochemistry, affectivity, and the physiology of the internal organs will provide us with new avenues into the body» (2004, 14). See also Birke 2020, Wilson 2015.

seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation» (2). An ecological deconstruction of the myth of organismic autonomy, and a consequent focus on the inescapable web of interrelations and co-dependence of living systems, pave the theoretical way for an ethical practice of *sym-poiesis* (Haraway 2016). This is the type of *ethos* that we hope the concept of ecological plasticity might inspire, as the emphasis on the necessary intermingling of living beings calls for our morphological responsibility. The *hybris* of the human subject is in fact humbled by the constitutive dependency on other forms of life – ecosystems that are, among other things, affected in complex and unexpected (but not chaotic) ways by the many actions the humans themselves perform on the environment.

Emblematically, the act of smelling is, therefore, a Janus complex. The perception looks back to past interactions, as previous networks of biological encounters inform the capacities of the holobiontic complex of both discriminating smells and assigning a hedonic value to them. But smells also face the future, as being exposed to a certain environment and smelling a certain odour opens to a change in the future conditions of olfactory possibilities: being exposed to a certain aroma can modify the surfaces of the biological complex that is the subject of the perception, but also of the hedonics of the next encounter with that very scent – that is to say, the form of the affective perception. The subject and their smells-capes are therefore intertwined in a plastic dance, in which a continual bi-stability between what is contained and what contains, what gives and what receives form, can be described as a complex e-co-affective metamorphosis. In this dynamic and recursive interaction lies the lymph of ecological plasticity.

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Plasticità in arte ed estesia.

Considerazioni morfodinamiche in semiotica

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The article will address plasticity in art through semiotic observations on aesthesia and the emergence of meaning in aesthetics. After briefly retracing some of the meanings that the notion of plasticity has taken on in art theory over the centuries, the correlation between plasticity and aesthetics will be examined in relation to the phenomenality of the work and the dynamics involved in the formation of form. From the point of view of creation, the paintings of Margaret Watts Hughes, dating from the end of the nineteenth century, will offer the cue to observe how morphology was conceived as shaped by body and voice, and can therefore be experienced by the observer as substantially incorporating the dynamics of the act of creation. The focus will then shift to the aesthetic apprehension of the work, and the importance of the semio-perceptual act in the inescapable process of co-definition of form.

With reference to the thoughts on the semiogenesis of meaning elaborated by Jean Petitot and René Thom, the rereading of the latter's essays on art, in particular contemporary art, will lead us to reflect on a morphodynamic understanding of sense, in which aesthesia – or sensitive apprehension – does not stabilise but, as in the homoclinic points mentioned by Thom in mathematics, oscillates and vibrates, evading the possible channelling of the sense.

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Incipit

Le ricerche neuroscientifiche recenti hanno portato a rivalorizzare il concetto di plasticità in filosofia e, più generalmente, in ambito umanistico. Una breve ricostruzione dell'uso del termine in estetica e in teoria dell'arte attesta nondimeno la varietà delle sue accezioni storiche. Data l'importanza che il termine ha assunto anche in semiotica, in particolare in seno alle teorie greimasiane e, in generale, francofone, si propone qui di reconsiderarne i fondamenti concettuali in relazione all'atto di produzione dell'opera, tenendo altresì conto di come quest'ultimo si configuri al momento della fruizione estetica e di come l'opera interagisca con le dinamiche dell'*estesìa* (o apprensione sensibile). L'analisi si avvarrà dell'osservazione dell'opera pittorica di Margaret Watts Hughes, artista attiva dalla fine dell'800, e, sul lato teoretico, di alcune delle riflessioni condotte dal matematico ed epistemologo René Thom quando cercava di esplorare i modi di significazione propri dell'arte. Ciò condurrà a chiedersi, quindi, se la nozione semiotica di plastico non debba essere aggiornata e riformulata tenendo conto della sua natura morfodinamica.

L'introduzione del concetto di plastico in arte

Per quanto riguarda l'arte e la creazione di opere, il concetto di plasticità è intriso di retaggi culturali alquanto vari. In estetica, il termine compare, ancor prima che nel saggio *Plastik* di Herder, negli scritti di Shaftesbury, e più precisamente nelle annotazioni inedite per il quarto trattato del suo libro incompiuto *Second Characters or The Language of Forms*, intitolato *Plastics or The Original Progress and Power of Designatory Art* (Shaftesbury 1914, 89-178). In effetti il filosofo inglese Anthony Ashley Cooper, meglio noto come terzo conte di Shaftesbury, aveva introdotto il termine in arte nel distinguere, in uno schema alla seconda pagina del suo trattato, fra caratteri plastici (*Plastical*) e caratteri grafici (*Graphical*) (Shaftesbury 1914, 91). A un primo sguardo, tale distinzione potrebbe sembrar suggerire che il termine si applichi unicamente a opere che coinvolgano il volume, in contrapposizione a forme grafiche e pittoriche, dato che i caratteri *plastici* sono associati a «Statuaria», «Goffratura, o lavorazione a rilievo», «Opera a stucco, intaglio di pietre», «Lavorazione convessa», «Incisione, acquaforte, lavorazione di sigilli», «Lavorazione concava o cava» (Shaftesbury 1914, 91; trad. dell'autrice). Eppure, non si tratta solo di opere modellate con forme convesse e concave; nel trattato, ad esempio, l'autore include più estesamente tanto la scultura quanto la pittura come risultanti dalla formazione della «*materia plastica*» (Shaftesbury 1914, 142). [1] L'uso, in un certo senso, versatile del termine *plastico* pare quindi piuttosto un modo per evidenziare le dinamiche incorporate nella forma, dinamiche considerate non tanto in termini di processo di creazione, ma come dinamiche *incarnate*, inscritte nella forma risultante dell'opera.

Il termine *plastico*, che sarà in seguito correlato alle arti e pertanto, come indica Dominique Chateau (1999, 37), adottato nell'estetica francese per designare le arti (*arts plastiques*) soltanto a partire dalla metà del XIX secolo, implica, in *Plastics* di Shaftesbury, un'attività di dar forma *dall'interno*. Secondo Shaftesbury, l'opera plastica, quale quella

[1] L'autore utilizza l'espressione latina. Si veda anche Kern 2020.

del pittore, si origina dapprima nell'immaginario, con il formarsi delle «sue idee», e poi con «la sua mano: i suoi colpi di pennello» (Shaftesbury 1914, 142; trad. dell'autrice). Chateau osserva che queste righe pongono le basi per una distinzione, che sarà chiaramente delineata in seguito, [2] fra un'estetica dall'alto, in cui la concezione avviene innanzitutto attraverso l'idea o il bello, e un'estetica dal basso, che riguarda principalmente la percezione estetica. Con uno sguardo retrospettivo, si potrebbe affermare che *Plastik* (1778) di Herder abbraccia maggiormente la seconda ottica, poiché la sua enfasi sulle sensazioni, sul piacere tramite i sensi, soprattutto il tatto, privilegia piuttosto l'apprensione sensibile.

[2] Dominique Chateau (2023, 31) trova questa distinzione chiaramente formulata in "Die Ästhetik von Oben und von Unten" in Gustav Fechner, *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1876), ripresa in Francia nella tesi di dottorato di Charles Lalo (1908).

L'applicazione di una distinzione fra estetiche top-down ed estetiche bottom-up, trasposta a tali filosofie da un punto di vista teorico formulato molto più tardi, può tuttavia comportare non solo una semplificazione delle possibili letture delle estetiche del passato, ma della complessità delle dinamiche che l'idea di plasticità porta con sé. Inoltre, dato che è spesso possibile rintracciare origini diverse, è utile ricordare che il termine affonda le sue radici anche nella religione e nelle sacre scritture, con le quali l'arte tende a confrontarsi. In merito, proprio per la plasticità, l'opera d'arte viene a trovarsi in un parallelismo che pone la sua genesi al pari della creazione divina, conformemente a quanto scriveva l'umanista Giannozzo Manetti nel 1451-53 a proposito dell'uomo «protoplasto» (2018, 131) – «*proto-plaustus*» (2018, 130) in latino –, plasmato da Dio. [3]

[3] *De dignitate et excellentia hominis* di Iacobi Manetti fu pubblicato per la prima volta nel 1532 (Basel: Andreas Hartmann) con aggiunte successive.

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Esiste, non da ultimo, un senso che rinvia alla qualità materiale di ciò che può essere continuamente modellato, plasmato e trasformato, senso che la francese *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772) attesta definendo *plastique* all'interno della scultura, ma differenziandola da questa in quanto «nella prima le figure si fanno aggiungendo materia, laddove nell'altra le si fa così dal blocco togliendo ciò che è superfluo» (Diderot & D'Alembert 1751-1772, Vol. XII (1765), 732; trad. dell'autrice). [4] Tale definizione è ereditata da *De Statua* (1464) dell'Alberti, le cui pagine iniziali distinguevano appunto tre modi di scolpire: la prima «via» consiste «e con il porre, e con il levare» materia, come nella lavorazione della cera, dello stucco e dell'argilla; il secondo modo è «solo con il levar via», come nella scultura; il terzo solo nell'aggiungere, al modo degli argentieri (Alberti 1804, 107-109, spec. 108). In un'ottica per certi versi simile, che mira a metterne in luce le dinamiche costitutive, il termine trova ancora continuità in uno dei significati d'epoca contemporanea su cui insisterà Roland Barthes (1957), quando parlerà della plasticità (*la plastique*) quale trasformazione potenzialmente infinita della plastica in quanto materiale (*le plastique*).

[4] «PLASTIQUE, PLASTICE, (*Sculpture*.) art *plastique*, c'est une partie de la Sculpture qui consiste à modeler toutes sortes de figures en plâtre, en terre, en stuc, &c. Les artistes qui s'exercent à ces sortes d'ouvrages s'appellent en latin *plastés*. La *Plastique* differe de la Sculpture, en ce que dans la premiere les figures se font en ajoutant de la matiere, au lieu que dans l'autre on les fait pour ainsi du bloc en ôtant ce qui est superflu» [sic].

Margaret Watts Hughes: dipingere con la voce

Tenendo a mente questa multistratificata storicizzazione di significati che le ricerche più recenti ci portano a guardare sotto nuova luce, vorrei esaminare il concetto di plasticità in relazione all'estesia. Si tratta di osservare

le dinamiche della forma che sono inscritte nella materialità dell'opera, nel medium e nei mezzi di espressione artistica, ma anche, nondimeno, nella relazione estetica che il fruitore è portato ad avere con l'opera. Si potrebbe persino sostenere che quest'ultimo punto includa il senso e la potenziale significanza dei precedenti, e che ciò richieda di superar quello che è forse stato l'equivoco semiotico secondo il quale il termine *plastico*, visto come semioticamente opposto all'iconico o al figurativo, designerebbe un livello sottostante e indipendente dall'eventuale iconizzazione della forma in figure. Correlare la plasticità all'estesia, ossia concepire una plasticità all'interno dell'apprensione estetica del sensibile, per non parlare della sua comprensione interpretativa, significa riscoprire le morfodinamiche del percepito, la fenomenicità dell'opera, la quale può essere considerata un oggetto solo nel senso dell'*oggetto dinamico* di Peirce. In questo ambito, molto si deve al lavoro di Jean Petitot tra i cui maggiori contributi è l'aver indagato a fondo le dinamiche incorporate nella morfologia del percepito; e ciò a diversi livelli teorici, dallo studio dell'espressività del gruppo scultoreo del Laocoonte all'approfondimento delle strutture percettive tramite la neurogeometria della visione (Petitot 2014). Le ricerche intraprese da Petitot hanno tra l'altro catalizzato una serie di studi, portando a una nuova rivalutazione della teoria delle catastrofi di René Thom, e offerto ulteriori elementi di riflessione, specialmente sui rapporti tra forma e forze.

Si prendano in analisi i particolarissimi dipinti realizzati alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo da Margaret Watts Hughes (nome di nascita: Megan Watts), che manifestano costantemente un modo di rivelare le dinamiche delle forze nella materialità delle forme. Queste dinamiche, in effetti, non riguardano solo il processo specifico di creazione messo in atto dall'artista ma, poiché molti dei suoi dipinti oscillano fra il non figurativo e suggestive rappresentazioni di elementi geologici, vegetali, organici e paesaggi, lo sguardo dell'osservatore si trova anch'esso avvinto dalle dinamiche della materia, catturato nel riconoscere o esaminare il potenziale delle sue variazioni, le sue densità, diffrazioni, conglomerazioni e possibili configurazioni. L'impressione di onde e la distribuzione sequenziale della materia conformemente a gradi di frequenza incitano a correlare l'apprensione estetica con il processo genetico che si suppone essere all'origine delle forme.

Margaret Watts Hughes fu una cantante che creò un modo peculiare di dipingere, servendosi della voce come 'pennello' per dar forma a materiale pigmentato. I suoi dipinti erano prodotti con l'emissione e la propagazione spaziale di frequenze sonore, essenzialmente vocali, trasmesse a una superficie vibratile avente funzione di tela. Per far ciò, inventò l'*eidophone*, consistente in un ricevitore sul quale era tesa una membrana elastica che coglieva le intensità e le variazioni della voce immessa nello strumento attraverso un tubo. Questo dispositivo relativamente semplice permetteva di visualizzare figure sonore e onde sulla membrana, sulla quale l'artista aveva in precedenza cosperso sabbia, polvere, sottili strati di liquidi come acqua, latte e glicerina colorata, o polveri inumidite di diversa consistenza, fino all'uso di paste umide colorate, che trovò più atte a registrare i movimenti della materia.

In un articolo del 1891, Margaret Watts Hughes descrive pazientemente come questi esperimenti, iniziati nel 1885, si basino sia su

modulazioni di intensità della propria voce sia sulla densità dei materiali. Dall'intento iniziale di trovare un mezzo per poter discernere prontamente le frequenze sonore, la scoperta e l'osservazione delle figure che ne possono scaturire la conducono ad affinare la messa a punto della consistenza di pigmenti e fluidi impiegati, affinché essi captino le oscillazioni impresse dai suoni. L'artista nota che, di frequente, le propagazioni si dipartono da centri di irradiazione o di moto, che espongono e diffrangono il materiale pittorico, dando luogo a figure somiglianti a fiori (nontiscordardime, margherita) o a ramificazioni. Giocando su modulazione, altezze acustiche e mantenimento di toni e picchi, cerca allora di orientare la modellazione materica, assoggettandosi purtuttavia all'avvenimento – di difficile codeterminazione – del dispiegarsi della creazione emergente. L'interazione fra corpo e dispositivo produceva così forme pittoriche, da lei denominate «figure vocali» (*voice-figures*); e quando lastre di vetro cosparse in modo analogo o superfici lisce erano messe a contatto con la membrana, si generavano «figure di vibrazioni incrociate» (*cross-vibration figures*) (Hughes 1891). [5] Le pitture risultanti da questo processo morfodinamico paiono in alcuni casi rappresentare figure del mondo naturale, quali un albero, un serpente, un'alga o una crescita organica. Nella maggior parte dei casi permane però un'ambiguità, in conformità a logiche di distribuzione modulare, di diffusione e a salti di texture, inducendo a una apprensione estetica della loro morfologia al limite tra il figurativo, l'organico e l'astratto.

[5] All'articolo di Margaret Watts Hughes fa seguito un commento ("Comment") di Sophie B. Herrick che mira a fornire spiegazioni fisiche e acustiche, citando in particolare gli esperimenti sulle *figure sonore* di Ernst Chladni, realizzati un secolo prima (Herrick 1891). Si veda anche Hughes 1904.

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Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. Foto: Stefania Caliandro

Estesia e ambiguità catastrofista

In vista di una comprensione semiotica di ciò che avviene nella *percezione* o, più precisamente, nell'apprensione estetica di queste opere, può essere utile ricordare ciò che René Thom scriveva a proposito di certa arte non figurativa, in particolare riguardo alla pittura contemporanea. Come afferma nel primo di due saggi redatti sull'arte (Thom 1990a, 1990b), egli si *avventura* con «estrema prudenza» a esplorare il campo dell'estetica nei termini scientifici da lui teorizzati: «Sarei tentato di dire [...] che, per essenza, ogni arte è catastrofista!» (Thom 1990a, 102-103). [6]

Evitando di trarne la conclusione affrettata che egli intende meramente ridurre l'arte alle strutture di base che ha identificato in matematica e che riflettono la fisica delle catastrofi, è opportuno sottolineare che si sta addentrando in considerazioni estetiche e percettive.

In primo luogo, si noti che, nel trattare dell'opera d'arte, Thom mette in discussione il criterio di stabilità e, in secondo luogo, che ciò si lega, secondo lui, all'«estrema sensibilità dell'effetto estetico rispetto a minime variazioni della forma»:

l'unità dell'opera d'arte dev'essere cercata meno nell'esigenza di stabilità che in quella di ottimalità: l'estrema sensibilità dell'effetto estetico rispetto a minime variazioni della forma dell'oggetto mostra che non è la “robustezza” a essere qui in gioco. (Thom 1990a, 105)

[6] Poiché le versioni italiane si discostano dai saggi originali consultati, tutti gli estratti citati dai saggi di René Thom sono di traduzione dell'autrice.



Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. © Cyfarthfa Castle
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Seppur l'autore non spieghi cosa intenda qui per *ottimalità*, probabilmente si riferisce a come le diverse parti (il *locale*) si relazionino con l'insieme (il *globale*), dal momento che l'obiettivo – come dichiarato nella sua prefazione – è di «delinea[re] un metodo d'interpretazione dell'opera pittorica, basato sulla decomposizione del quadro in regioni dominate da un centro da cui si irradia una gravidanza» (Thom 1990a, 101). [7]

Come afferma in un secondo saggio sull'arte, «questo criterio di ottimalità [...] fa intervenire essenzialmente propagazioni di gravidanze dai centri attanziali che le emanano» (Thom 1990b, 136), ciò in funzione di uno schema di intelligibilità che, per René Thom, si organizza in una struttura globale (Thom 1990a, 114).

Al fine di evitar fraintendimenti, occorre forse precisare che la presente ricerca non intende suggerire che i centri di distribuzione della materia, reperiti dall'artista Margaret Watts Hughes durante la creazione, coincidano o corrispondano in qualche modo con i centri focali e di propagazione delle gravidanze descritti da Thom in estetica; il parallelismo, semmai esiste, dipende piuttosto dalla natura dinamica dell'emergenza delle forme, anche al momento della loro osservazione.

Pur non seguendo l'autore verso una riduzione strutturale dell'opera, che consisterebbe peraltro, come negli esempi linguistici, a pervenire a uno schema di tipo discorsivo (un «*récit*», Thom 1990a, 114), mi pare estremamente interessante considerare quanto egli sostiene a proposito dei dipinti moderni e astratti che giocano sull'«ambiguità» (Thom 1990a,

[7] Indicativo anche il titolo del saggio: «Local et global dans l'œuvre d'art» (Locale e globale nell'opera d'arte). Per la traduzione di *décomposition*, si adotta qui il termine «decomposizione» per il probabile riferimento al linguaggio scientifico-matematico. In accordo con la consuetudine terminologica in materia, i termini *salienza* e *pregnanza* traducono i concetti utilizzati da René Thom di «*saillance*» (salienza percettiva) e «*prégnance*» (rilevanza biologica).



Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. © Cyfarthfa Castle
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112) e rivelano, in definitiva, che «la situazione è più complessa» (Thom 1990b, 137).

Un “centro”, nell’analisi percettiva, è un accidente morfologico che arresta lo sguardo, ad esempio una macchia colorata, ciò che ho chiamato una forma saliente. Di per sé, una tale forma può ammettere di essere investita da diverse pregnanze. La scelta della pregnanza che va a investirla potrà imporsi a ragione di un effetto figurativo immediato [...], ma in quadri più moderni e più astratti potrà esserci dubbio o ambiguità. (Thom 1990a, 112)

L’ambiguità diventa un’occasione per evidenziare che si tratta di una relazione percettiva (*analyse perceptive*), o meglio – per usare un termine preferibile in quanto non presuppone consapevolezza dei processi percettivi – che è questione di *estesìa*. Così, ad esempio, «l’ambiguità di una figura può giocare un ruolo trainante nel dialogo che si instaura tra lo spettatore e il quadro» – e René Thom non esita allora a far riferimento al «modello detto dei punti omoclini di Poincaré in dinamica: quando una curva attrattiva e una curva repulsiva derivanti da un punto fisso si incontrano, avviene un aumento considerevole della complessità della dinamica, che crea un’infinità di cicli vicini» (Thom 1990a, 114). [8]

Pertanto, mentre in linguistica aveva convenuto, seguendo l’ottica strutturalista, che un piccolo numero di grafici di interazione può rappresentare i conflitti relativi a strutture sintattiche, egli sostiene che «la situazione è ben diversa in estetica, dove l’arte mira alla descrizione di una configurazione

[8] Desidero ringraziare Jean Petitot per i chiarimenti riguardo alle dinamiche dei punti omoclini.



Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. Foto: Stefania Caliandro

conflittuale e dinamica infinitamente varia» (Thom 1990b, 134). [9] Ciò vale a maggior ragione per l'arte non figurativa, in particolare di Jackson Pollock e di Mark Tobey, dove la questione della complessità diventa palese:

spesso è difficile identificare le pregnanze antagoniste in centri attanziali chiaramente localizzati. Spesso esse si manifestano mediante forme ramificate e intrecciate (Pollock, Tobey) [...]. A volte sono elementi non localizzati, come le direzioni o i colori, ad essere i vettori delle pregnanze [...]. (Thom 1990b, 137) [10]

[9] Allorché poche righe prima, a proposito dell'arte, Thom aveva concepito l'opera come «la realizzazione spaziale di uno schema intelligibile rappresentato da una frase nucleare», in seguito contrappone chiaramente l'arte alla «rigida canalizzazione delle pregnanze» che rende possibile la concettualizzazione e il linguaggio; l'arte incoraggia «la rottura della canalizzazione concettuale delle pregnanze biologiche primitive» (1990b, 135).

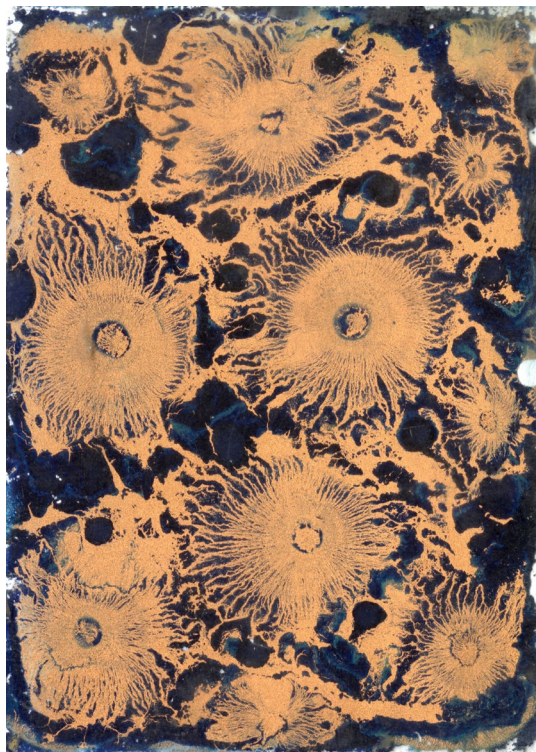
[10] A proposito di queste «forme ramificate intrecciate», Thom avanza esitante la seguente ipotesi: «in cui mi piacerebbe vedere un'evocazione delle mie "catastrofi generalizzate"» (1990b, 137).

René Thom ne conclude che l'arte non figurativa, «discostandosi dallo schema canonico (attanziale)», permette all'artista di liberarsi «dal carattere troppo automatico delle concatenazioni di pregnanza» avvalendosi a tal fine di «forme plastiche» (Thom 1990b, 138).

Arte e instabilità semiotica

Le pitture di Margaret Watts Hughes non solo destabilizzano lo sguardo estetico a causa delle forme non figurative a cui i suoi contemporanei non erano abituati in arte. Non solo inducono dinamiche percettive che, nel tentativo di riprodurle, prolungano le dinamiche che si suppongono essere alla loro origine. Ciò che accresce la capacità di queste pitture di attirare l'attenzione estetica è l'ambiguità o, meglio, l'incertezza riguardo

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Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. © Cyfarthfa Castle
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alla possibile canalizzazione del senso verso significati d'ordine genetico o figurativo. La plasticità non risiede più meramente nella materialità del processo e delle forme che ne scaturiscono, nello *spessore* [11] e nelle pieghe in cui sono inscritte le tracce della creazione, ma nelle dinamiche dell'estesia che, prima ancora che si prenda qualsiasi decisione interpretativa, colgono implicitamente e plasmano la configurazione morfologica del percepito. Nel caso della pittura di Hughes, questa incertezza di disambiguazione semiotica, questa *instabilità* rispetto alla direzionalità che può prendere il senso, ha alimentato sia spiegazioni scientifiche, facenti riferimento alle figure sonore del fisico Ernst Chladni e ad altre sperimentazioni acustiche (Herrick 1891), sia letture esoteriche, come nel libro *Thought-Forms* di Anne Besant e Charles Webster Leadbeater (Besant & Leadbeater 1905, spec. il paragrafo "The Form and its effects"). In linea più generale, ed è quanto ci interessa qui maggiormente, questa sospensione rispetto a percorsi percettivi e cognitivi previamente consolidati potenzia l'attenzione estetica, la quale si approssima infinitesimamente, come in un punto omoclino, alla complessità delle tensioni e dinamiche che l'opera d'arte racchiude.

[11] Per una ripresa del concetto di spessore formulato da Hubert Damisch in teoria dell'arte, si veda Callandro & Mengoni 2022.

Lo sguardo morfogenetico che l'esitante riflessione di René Thom apporta alla semiotica dell'arte non manca di scuotere alcuni dei presupposti strutturalisti di fondo da cui egli muoveva. Come ha recentemente evidenziato Jean Petitot (2023), Thom ha elaborato un approccio fenomenico che mette in rilievo le strutture biologiche e neuropercettive alla base dell'evento osservato, incitando così a «correlare [la] fenomenologia



Margaret Watts Hughes. *Voice Figure*.
Fine XIX sec. © Cyfarthfa Castle
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morfologica “esterna” alla fisica-chimica-biochimica “interna” del sostrato materiale» (Petitot 2023, 18). Il suo approccio scientifico, trasposto all’arte, ci pare lo porti a indagare la fenomenalità dell’apprensione estetica rispetto alla direzionalità – *catastrofica* – del senso dell’oggetto estetico, in particolare relativamente a opere che non possono essere facilmente riconducibili a una ottimalità del senso. Le sue osservazioni si focalizzano non tanto sulla dimensione interpretativa connessa al contenuto veicolato, ma sulla dimensione percettivo-cognitiva insita nell’atto di fruizione, ove disambiguazione e riconoscimento possono essere problematizzati al momento stesso dell’estesia.

Queste riflessioni invitano a riconsiderare le accezioni che il termine *plastico* ricopre in semiotica e in quale misura esso possa prestarsi a includere un tale dinamismo semio-percettivo. Nella tradizione dell’École de Paris sviluppata intorno ad Algirdas Julien Greimas, il termine ha assunto un valore pressoché fondativo della semiotica dell’arte. Nell’articolo “*Sémiotique plastique et sémiotique figurative*”, Greimas articolava plastico e figurativo come due livelli del senso, il primo contribuendo in «profondità» all’organizzazione del secondo e all’eventuale iconizzazione in figure (Greimas 1984, 20, trad. dell’autrice). Oltre all’idea di *formanti figurativi* e di *formanti plastici* – che assecondava la ricerca di un parallelismo con le componenti di presunte unità minimali del senso in linguistica –, l’approccio postulava la naturalizzazione oggettuale del percepito e delle figure risultanti, enfatizzando di fatto l’oggetto a discapito del processo semiotico-percettivo che lo costituisce e a cui veniva persino contrapposto (Greimas 1984, 8). Recenti riletture di teorie post-strutturaliste incoraggiano ormai ad approfondire proprio quelle dinamiche che apparivano mere premesse processuali dell’avvenimento semiotico, cogliendo invece gli aspetti neuro-bio-fisici che forgiavano il semiotico all’interno dell’estesia.

Più prudenti erano gli assunti di partenza del belga Groupe μ che, nell’intento di definire il «segno plastico» in un ormai storico *Traité du signe visuel*, asseriva la necessità di tale nozione «per sviluppare una retorica della rappresentazione visiva che non si limiti alla figurazione», ma riconosceva al contempo la difficoltà di reperire limiti precisi tra il plastico e l’iconico, o tra il figurativo e il non figurativo (Groupe μ 1992, 186). [12] Pur mirando a una strutturazione sistematica di possibili casistiche visive, il Groupe μ conveniva che «il semantismo del plastico scaturisce sempre da un approccio *hic et nunc*, producendo senso a partire dalle relazioni tra gli elementi di un enunciato, piuttosto che a partire dagli elementi stessi, considerati al di fuori di ogni enunciato...» (Groupe μ 1992, 315). Ci pare intendere che si presupponesse una cornice di intellegibilità o enunciato che orientasse e fissasse la comprensione delle relazioni tra gli elementi, congelando allora di fatto le dinamiche estetiche. Tale approccio riapriva nondimeno la dialettica tra segno plastico e segno iconico in seno all’oggetto così costituito, e arrivava finanche a teorizzare una tipologia di *relazioni icono-plastiche* definibili a seconda delle modalità e strategie retoriche messe in gioco dal visivo (Groupe μ 1992, 346ss).

In semiotica come in storia della teoria dell’arte si ritrova la variabilità polisemica del termine *plastico*, che implicitamente porta a rilevare le dinamiche e i processi semio-estesici in atto ai fini della determinazione dell’oggetto, tracciando un accattivante parallelismo con la plasticità delle

[12] In attesa della pubblicazione di *Nouveau traité du signe Visuel* del Groupe μ , l’autrice rinvia e traduce dall’originale della prima edizione.

connessioni neurali di recente formulazione. In arte particolarmente, la tensione costante tra l'apprensione sensibile e la comprensione percettiva incita a cogliere le dinamiche sottese alla co-definizione della forma esperita. Riconsiderare il plastico non più in relazione all'astratto né in opposizione all'iconico o al figurativo, permette forse così di riappropriarsi anche di antiche riflessioni in cui la plasticità è concepita, per via metafisica, in termini di *natura plastica*, [13] principio interno al continuo e, allo stesso tempo, catastrofico divenire tra materia e forma

[13] Si veda la prima delle due voci per *plastico* nell'*Encyclopédie*: "PLASTIQUE, (*Métaphysique*.) *nature plastique*, principe que quelques philosophes prétendent servir à former les corps organisés, & qui est différent de la vie des animaux. On attribue cette opinion à Aristote, Platon, Empédocle, Héraclite, Hippocrate & aux Stoïciens, auxquels on joint les nouveaux Platoniciens, les Péripatéticiens modernes, & même les Paracelsistes qui ont donné dans le corps des animaux le nom d'*archée* à ce principe." [sic] Diderot & D'Alembert, 1751–1772, Vol. XII (1765), 729.

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plasticity

III

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This paper investigates revenge through the interplay of plasticity and imagination. Drawing on C. Malabou's theory, plasticity encapsulates the capacity to receive and bestow form, emphasizing the dual forces of creation and destruction in transformation. This suggests that revenge, often seen as a fixation on the past, can be countered by Nietzsche's concept of active forgetting as a strategy to break cycles of repetition. As a result, Malabou's plasticity aligns with G. Simondon's idea of imagination's transitional potential, challenging postmodern skepticism about facts by viewing their ontology through imagination's transformative work. To explore these considerations, I juxtapose John Wojtowicz's bank robbery and its cinematic adaptation, *Dog Day Afternoon*, with Vladimir Putin's historical manipulations, framing both as efforts to reconstitute true events. This study examines how cultural industries and historical manipulations trap narratives in cycles of schematism. Additionally, I propose my sound work, blending historiography and autobiography to uncover overlooked aspects of history, such as the role of women. Finally, the investigation of revenge through plasticity and imagination, along with the exemplary studies, suggests that imagination can serve as a tool for justice, moving beyond revenge toward creative transformation.

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— REVENGE
— PLASTICITY

— IMAGINATION
— TRUTH

Introduction

The concept of revenge is rarely explored in relation to anthropological essence. In this text, I propose an investigation into the conceptual interplay among revenge, plasticity, and imagination. Defined as the capacity to both receive and bestow form, plasticity, as theorized by Catherine Malabou, underscores the dual forces of creation and destruction that drive transformation. This triple meaning invites us to consider revenge as a rigid fixation on the past and, conversely, to employ Friedrich Nietzsche's proposal of active forgetting as an emancipatory strategy for transcending cycles of repetition. As a result, Malabou's plasticity can be aligned with the transitional potential of imagination (as theorized by Simondon). I argue that while the postmodern skepticism regarding the existence of facts must be confronted, the ontology of facts should be understood through the diligent and transformative work of imagination.

To explore these ideas, I turn to Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory*, a dual-channel installation that revisits the story of John Wojtowicz. His bank robbery and its subsequent cinematic adaptation (*Dog Day Afternoon*) serve as a lens through which to examine the problematic status of the original version of the story. By analyzing Wojtowicz's reenactment of his "true" narrative, I aim to interrogate the void of origin—a condition both produced and augmented by the state of entrapment within cycles of schematism engendered by cultural industries. In this context, I juxtapose Vladimir Putin's project of historical manipulation with Wojtowicz's efforts to resist the cinematographic distortion of truth, framing both as operating within the same drive to reconstitute "real events". Although primordial indeterminateness remains unavoidable, the status of "true facts" is problematized here through the relational structure of justice.

In this light, Malabou's project of plasticity may be seen as a guiding idea that resists both revisionist and reconstitutional intentions regarding the past. As a case analysis, I detail the process of creating the sound work I was invited to produce for the recently restored and reopened Sapieha Palace. In *Radio Vilnius's* show *Feast (Puota)*, I investigate the palace's history by staging a meta-narrative that intertwines historiography and personal autobiography. I propose this approach as a next step in the cycle of interplay between memory and imagination stages, as a paraphrastic extension of Pierre Huyghe's work. I view it as "the fourth memory" — a work that exemplifies a strategy aimed not at restoring the past, but at revealing what was never part of the story, such as the role of women in history.

Facts and Representations Revisited

In 1975, Wojtowicz, an inmate at Pennsylvania's Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary serving a sentence for bank robbery, wrote a letter to *The New York Times* and expressed his frustration with the recently released film *Dog Day Afternoon*. The story, which had initially drawn significant media attention, was adapted into a film starring Al Pacino, whose performance in the lead role received widespread acclaim. The movie won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and presented its protagonist as a

symbol of anti-establishment defiance. However, the prototype hero of this narrative, i.e. Wojtowicz himself, challenged the verisimilitude of this cinematographic interpretation. In his letter, he addressed what he saw as significant inaccuracies in Sidney Lumet's Hollywood adaptation compared to the real events.

My feelings over all on the movie were that it was a good comedy, but I did not think it was funny because it was about me and my loved ones. I felt the movie was in essence a piece of garbage. It did not show the whole truth, and the little it did show was constantly twisted and distorted. So it left you, the viewer with so many unanswered questions. (Wojtowicz 1977)

Wojtowicz further noted that the film failed to adequately portray the events as they occurred, pointing out shortcomings evident in numerous scenes throughout the production. Despite its claim to be based on a true incident that «occurred in Brooklyn, N.Y. on 8/22/72», he estimated that the film is «only 30% true» (Wojtowicz 1977). According to Wojtowicz, the Hollywood production completely ignored both the true motives behind the event and the far less light-hearted circumstances surrounding it. The real story, he argued, was much more complex than the film's frivolous narrative suggested.

The so-called "factual reality" of Wojtowicz's 1972 bank robbery remains ambiguous. Wojtowicz (1977) claimed his motive was funding his partner Liz Eden's gender-affirming surgery, while Bell (1972) suggested Mafia involvement and robbery proceeds for the Gambino family. Wojtowicz also criticized *Dog Day Afternoon* for misrepresenting key events, including the FBI's killing of his partner, Sal Naturale, and falsely portraying him as betraying Sal. Other inaccuracies included exaggerating a fleeing accomplice and fabricating a scene where he spoke with his mother outside the bank (Wojtowicz 1977).

This argumentation did not persuade William H. Honan, the Arts and Leisure editor at *The New York Times*, who declined to publish Wojtowicz's submission, stating that he was not able to «come to grips with the motives for your crime, and the complex relationship between art and reality in this instance» (Wojtowicz 1977).

By interrogating the whole range of biases, recent developments in this problematic may be considered in light of the so-called polemics on post-truth politics (Kalpokas 2018) – often regarded as a direct legacy of postmodern philosophy (D'Ancona 2017). Particular emphasis is placed on Lyotard's (1984) invitation to liberate thought from metanarratives, as well as Baudrillard's (2001) introduction of the concepts of simulacrum and hyperreality – ideas that disqualified originality as the source of reality.

The question here also implies the inaccessible neutrality of the origin, as articulated in the polemical encounter between David Bordwell and Slavoj Žižek. The former, an American film theorist, proposed a schema of three narrative layers in film: the story, the plot, and the narration. This idea, rooted in Russian formalism, invited to conceive of the story as the moment of origin – a chronological sequence of events. The plot, in contrast, is understood as the selection and arrangement of these events, while the narration may be described through poetic expression (Bordwell 2008, 85-134).

However, Žižek criticized Bordwell's three-dimensional model, arguing that the initial assumptions shape the perspective that organizes the plot. These assumptions not only determine the main elements of the narration but also reveal the most significant – albeit often unspoken – implications, such as the interests, goals, and identities of the authors themselves. According to Žižek (2009, 16n13), strictly speaking, there is no story that precedes the plot: «every story is already a “plot”; it involves a minimum of narrative organization, so the distinction between story and plot is internal to the plot “story”».

One could draw a parallel here, observing how the organization of historical narrative often hinges on the manipulation of origin mythology. Prior to launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin published a pseudo-academic essay titled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. This text, grounded in the deliberate falsification of facts (Wilson 2021), targets the complexity of the very moment of beginning, reframing it as a narrative of unity between nations. As has been noted, [1] this attempt imposes an anachronistic projection of identities, recasting imperial and colonial practices into a supposed longing for organic kinship. One must not forget, following the insights of Cornelius Castoriadis (1997, 305), that radical imagining, which lies at the core of every social-historical institution, is always an act of creation *ex nihilo*. Presenting himself as a historian-philosopher, Putin sought to “hijack” the moment of institutional genesis, exploiting the “fundamental void” to justify imperial aggression as restoring historical facticity.

[1] For instance, Timothy Snyder's (2022) irony: «So I could say: Rus' was founded by Vikings, Moscow did not exist at the time, Kyiv was not ruled from Moscow until late in its history, the story of the brotherly nations is recent, as for that matter is national identity in the modern sense. But you can't really engage in historical argument with people who are set on believing a myth, let alone with presidents who believe that the past is just there to confirm their present prejudices».

Putin's essay can be viewed as an attempt to override the complexity of the origin by offering a logic of causality, instituted post-factum. In this sense, the production and control of historical narratives can become a powerful tool of imperial ideology. In this framework, the principle of coexistence – the cornerstone of social organization – is subordinated to succession, the foundational schema of history (Castoriadis 1987, 184). By contrast, as theorized by Castoriadis, the meaning of history emerges not as a mere sequence of fixed, predetermined events but as «the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, and non-trivial novelty» (1987, 184). This perspective allows for the existence of history as a whole, the rise of novel societal forms, and the ongoing transformation of societies. It also presupposes the right of self-determination as project of open identity.

The Third Memory

At this point, it becomes evident that the complex relationship between facts and representations is deeply rooted in the organization of temporality (Castoriadis 1987, 186-187). Confronting time requires establishing criteria for the order of events, introducing selectivity and raising questions of justice. To do justice to stories, even fictional ones, requires recognizing their relationality to truth. Fiction operates through inclusion, exclusion, revelation, and concealment, emphasizing the need for careful reflection on the conditions and frameworks shaping narrative strategies.

The elements of narrativity – even in historical accounts – are fundamentally relational, connecting both to otherness and the self. As Ricoeur encapsulates in *Time and Narrative*: «fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep» (Ricoeur 1990, 187). Accordingly, narrative imagination has an ethical dimension, recognizing the distance between self and otherness while aiming to place them in carefully considered relationalities. Its purpose is the ethical recalibration of the stories told, which carry a threefold meaning: 1) testimonial capacity: the ability to give voice to an untold or suppressed past; 2) analogizing capacity: the power to make present those who are absent, bridging the gap between temporal and spatial distances; 3) utopian possibilities: the projection of futures with the promise of justice (Kearney 1995, 98).

Despite their opposing intentions, both Putin's historical manipulation and Wojtowicz's resistance to cinematographic distortion operate within the same drive for "real events" – the original story. This is why the problem of justice remains as an inextricable element of storytelling strategies. In Honan's response to Wojtowicz, the domain of art was granted the license to reinterpret and modify elements of reality through creative expression. Yet this raises several questions: what are the ethical limits and obligations of this tendency to exploit *licentia poetica*?

As a way to reconsider the problem of the justice of representation, Pierre Huyghe revisited this story by offering John Wojtowicz an opportunity that had not been provided by *The New York Times*. In 1999, several decades later, Huyghe orchestrated the creation of a work entitled *The Third Memory*. [2] The artist recreated the film's set and invited Wojtowicz to reenact what he considered the true version of the robbery. This chance for repetition enticed the former convict to finally reveal what, in his view, truly happened on that day in August 1972.

[2] see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpVoKZeydCg>

However, the dual-channel installation reveals that Wojtowicz's memory had merged the unique events of 1972 with the reality of the 1975 film, making it impossible to disentangle the threads of the original from those of the cinematographic interpretation. This blending becomes evident in the work itself: while attempting to reconstruct "the real events", Wojtowicz gradually began to mimic Al Pacino's behavioral patterns, replicate the actor's lines, and imitate the intersubjective relationships depicted in the film's narrative. Moreover, in telling his story in front of cameras, Wojtowicz confessed that just before the robbery, he and his partners had watched Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, seeking for some sort of inspiration.

It is noteworthy to recall that fundamental social and, at the same time, technological intertwining between memory and imagination became pivotal in the context of Critical Theory, revisiting creative powers of imagination, as formulated in Immanuel Kant's theory transcendental of schematism. Schemata, Kant argues, mediate between the sensible and intellectual realms. Crucially, their defining feature lies in their detachment from empirical content. Kant (2009, B177) describes this mediating representation as one that must be both pure – free from empirical influence – and simultaneously intellectual and sensible in nature, encapsulating the essence of the transcendental schema.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant describes schematism as a «hidden art» Kant (2009, B180-181, A141) within the depths of the human soul, whose operations are difficult to unveil. Hence, schemata do not coincide with determined images; they function as a rule-making process that enables the existence of images in the first place. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) reframe this mystery in the context of the culture industry, where individual creativity is subsumed by mass production. They argue that the relationship between the images generated by cultural media and the schemata of understanding has become reciprocal and toxic: each reinforces the other.

Huyghe's collaboration with Wojtowicz may be situated exactly at the core of this circularity. As researcher Nicole Crescenzi (2017) observes, *The Third Memory* gradually uncovers the fact that «the relationship between life and its representation is not a separate one». This is how «individual histories confront idiosyncratic image-forms creating an amplification of reality» (Crescenzi 2017). This dynamic is evident when Wojtowicz reveals that the FBI was ordered to kill him to prevent coverage of the “gay bank-robber” disrupting President Nixon's speech. Here, image clashes with image, underscoring how the tangled relationships between reality and its representation find expression through the medium of broadcast (Crescenzi 2017).

The Third Memory also uncovers its triadic nature in connection with Bernard Stiegler's concept of inverted tertiaryity. We typically assume that perceptual experience of facts is primary, memory secondary, and imagination third in this cognitive and ontological hierarchy. However, Stiegler (2001) challenges this order by asserting that what is third actually comes first. In *Technics and Time*, he famously reframed the problem of transcendental imagination in technical terms, introducing the concept of tertiary retentions – external memory and mnemonic objects. Unlike Husserl's primary and secondary retentions, tertiary retentions are not rooted in inner experience but take on a material form through technical devices within a temporal framework.

Thus, by taking over the imagination, tertiary retentions sustain the perpetual present on the screen. The expansion of memory, imagination, and information industries results in a profound effect of disconnection and detachment: it creates vast memory voids, severs ties to the past, fosters alienation from the world, and immerses individuals in an excess of information that obliterates the horizons of expectation necessary for sustaining desire (Stiegler 2001, 119).

Justice and Revenge

In several of her texts, Catherine Malabou examines the problem of repetition and justice in relation to the concept of revenge. Observing that «the human is a being who cannot forget offense» (Malabou 2018, 2), she characterizes our species by its inability to erase the past and its fixation on past forms. Conversely, plasticity refers to the dual capacity to both receive and bestow form. As Malabou notes, «plasticity directly contradicts rigidity. It is its exact antonym. In ordinary speech, it designates suppleness, a faculty for adaptation, the ability to evolve» (2008, 5). At the same time, Malabou highlights the destructive dimension of plasticity by pointing to the specific French meaning of the term, emphasizing its

explosive potential. Plasticity, she argues (Malabou 2008, 5), is plastically explosive. As a commentator (Šerpytytė 2015, 167) aptly noted, plasticity «inhabits philosophy precisely as the annihilating power of form».

Interestingly, for Malabou (2011), the concept of form opens the path to thinking about both determination and indeterminacy – essentially, the idea of change in its various modalities. She argues that plasticity can be understood «as a general principle of change», emphasizing that this concept operates «within this movement», functioning both «as a whole and as its parts» (Malabou, Sabolius 2020). Unlike the criticism found in Derrida, who viewed the concepts of *eidos* or *morphè* as perpetually trapped within metaphysics, or in Gilbert Simondon, who sought to reject hylomorphic ontology altogether, Malabou highlights the emancipatory potential of the idea of form: «what saves Kant from being totalitarian, is namely his notion of form. Because a form can always be transformed» (Malabou, Sabolius 2020, 37).

It is exactly the third meaning of plasticity – its destructive potential which designates the problematic domain of novelty – that enables to juxtapose plasticity and revenge. Although the traces of the past remain, they are often unrecognizable in the new form they take. «Revenge, on the contrary, implies rigidity, incapacity to change, and attachment to sameness» (Malabou 2018, 3). In this light, Malabou questions how repetition – which is fundamentally nonplastic, mechanical, and iterative – could be reconciled with the transformative potential of plasticity. «If plasticity implies explosion and forgetfulness, can it be linked with repetition?» (Malabou 2018, 3). Or, otherwise put, how can justice be freed from the fantasies of vengeance?

One might recall that, in response to the restitutorial intentions of juridical thought, Jacques Derrida speaks of justice beyond the law and emphasizes the fundamental asynchronicity of justice. The law, grounded in calculable retribution, cannot achieve justice. It offers only a quantifiable approximation, transforming revenge into mathematical terms and anchoring an irreparable past in measurable balances. True justice remains impossible, as the present cannot heal the past's wounds. Instead, justice can only exist as a promise – a perpetual return, like a phantom of the past (Derrida 1992, 24).

The imagination beyond revenge urges us to move past the drive for repetition grounded in the mathematical restitution of a factual origin. Accordingly, Heidegger (1985, 169) explored justice beyond calculation in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, reinterpreting the Greek goddess Dike. Paul Ricoeur (2008), reflecting on John Rawls' model of social distribution, suggested that the impossibility of justice might be understood in relation to love. Quentin Meillassoux (2008) describes the spectral dilemma as an aporetic tension between atheism and religion, highlighting the absurdity of life without god and a god who justifies inaction in the face of extreme evil as love.

Designed by Repetition, Open to Active Forgetting

Research in magnetic resonance imaging has revealed that dopamine is released merely by the thought of revenge (Chester, DeWall 2015). Taking revenge, therefore, brings humans a sense of pleasure. Malabou reminds

us that Nietzsche, in his project of the *Übermensch*, linked this figure's emergence, among other things, to the renunciation of revenge:

This reconsidering of revenge at the centre of the human has to do something important with the concept of plasticity. What I have in mind here is the idea of substitution or replacement. Of course, thinking on the overman, superhuman and figures like that, brings in the idea of substitution. Namely, who will replace the human, who will come next? (Malabou, Sabolius 2020, 34)

In this sense, the underpinnings of the posthuman framework – or at least the aspiration to overcome the human – would begin with curbing the anthropological impulse for retribution. As Zarathustra eloquently declares: «for that mankind be redeemed from revenge: that to me is the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long thunderstorms» (Nietzsche 2006, 77).

Nietzsche compares those consumed by the desire for revenge to tarantulas. However, as Malabou observes, revenge, for Nietzsche, is an exclusively human pursuit. It differs fundamentally from the punishments of divine transcendence or the horrors and cruelties observed in certain animals. Biologically speaking, tarantulas do not take revenge; they hunt or act defensively to deter threats. While such behavior might be linked to revenge in evolutionary biology, Nietzsche identifies a uniquely different dynamic in humans – rooted in the complex relationship between memory and the excessive exploitation of imagination.

Malabou (2015, 66) argues that humans are the only beings to take revenge for being offended. Drawing on Nietzsche through Heidegger's interpretation, she locates the origins of revenge in our relationship with time: «the human is the only being for whom time *is a spiritual injury*. There is in fact one single thing we are trying to get revenge from: the passage of time. Time is the utmost injury» (Malabou 2015, 67). The anthropomorphic form of revenge embodies the almost infantile offense humanity suffers in confronting its own finitude. We cannot accept the past as a sign of our mortality.

Revenge, as a culturally elevated and sophisticated response to the past, is what defines the human condition. Humans cannot help but take revenge because they seek to reclaim the lost events of the past. This compulsion drives the creation of laws, the writing of history, and the maintenance of cultural memory. Justice, institutionalized and rationalized, becomes a de-individualized form of revenge. Yet, as Malabou (2015, 69) points out, it remains revenge at its core, perhaps even its highest realization: «Nietzsche explains that law and the juridical concept of justice are just repetitions of revenge, a more subtle and refined spirit of revenge». Humans are both unforgetting and unforgiving animals, deriving a peculiar pleasure from the past, especially its bitterness. As Zarathustra declares: «we want to exact revenge and heap insult on all whose equals we are not – thus vow the tarantula hearts» (Nietzsche 2006, 77). Malabou emphasizes that this intricate engineering of revenge reveals the unique relationship humans have with repetition. «[T]he human does not exist prior to repetition, but is designed by it. The human is the product, not the origin, of repetition» (Malabou, 2018). Does this not imply that we are fundamentally subordinated to the culture of revenge, perpetually reliant on vindictive forms?

In this regard, Malabou highlights that Nietzsche's reflections invite a reexamination of memory itself – an active gesture aimed at redefining the contours of our mental life. «Revenge means the incapacity to forget. It is precisely the opposite of “active forgetting”. The human is the kind of being who cannot forget the offense, who cannot erase the past and constantly repeats, ruminates, chews over. This incapacity to put an end to the past would be precisely the end of man, its essence» (Malabou 2015, 67).

But what exactly is this state of *Aktive Vergessenheit*? In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1989, 57) offers an important passage that illuminates the creative and transformative potential of these processes:

Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, that is responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it (one might call the process “inpsychation”) as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment-so-called “incorporation”.

Active forgetfulness requires creative imagination to break free from the vicious cycle of fixed patterns of repetition. Haunting memories are neither to be passively accepted nor entirely erased by new experiences. It is a strategy of remembering that relies on selective incorporation, laying the groundwork for novelty. One must remember in order to choose what to forget. By fulfilling a therapeutic function, *Aktive Vergessenheit* is not merely a prerequisite for happiness and joy; it is, above all, an active reimagining of a new beginning. As Nietzsche writes: «innocence is the child and forgetting, a beginning anew, a play, a self-propelling wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yea-saying» (2005, 24). A revengeful human, chained to the past, cannot be a playful creator.

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The Fourth Memory

In 2024, the restored Baroque Sapieha Palace reopened in Vilnius. Built between 1689 and 1692, the palace was commissioned by the Grand Hetman of Lithuania, Kazimierz Jan Sapieha, and designed by Giovanni Battista Frediani. Political intrigues repeatedly disrupted both its construction and functioning (Jamski 2005, 73). During periods of war and conflict, the palace suffered destruction, reforms, and the loss or transformation of artifacts and architectural elements. For instance, after the Battle of Valkininkai, noblemen who stormed the palace chopped its paintings – particularly portraits of Sapieha family ancestors – into tiny pieces (Janonienė 2007-2008). In 1829, during the Russian Empire's occupation, the governor-general repurposed the palace and its surrounding grounds as a military hospital (Racevičienė 1975, 52). Unlike Trakai Castle or Gediminas Tower, this ambitious project – intended to symbolize royal tradition like Versailles in France – lacks a clear place in Lithuania's collective imaginary today.

There are essentially no reliable sources that can connect the reconstruction project to a coherent historical narrative. Since the palace never fully realized its potential, it is unclear which part of “the original story” should serve as its foundational narrative. This ambiguity becomes apparent in the most intriguing and lesser-known details, which are listed

in inventories compiled during changes in ownership (Purlys, Janonienė 2009; Purlys 2010). These inventories document objects, furnishings, and architectural elements in a descriptive tone, presenting a pseudo-neutral narrative about their functions. However, this falters when unclear functionalities turn the listing into subjective assessment. For instance, a 1795 inventory includes entries such as «one old wardrobe», «two old tin lanterns without glass», and «one lacquered but worthless cabinet», alongside «fourteen glass trays *for entertainment*» and the enigmatic object described as «one (?) – no. 1» (Purlys, Janonienė 2009). Thus, even narratives shaped closer to the palace's origins reveal it as a site of identity ruptures.

Today, the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius has taken on the responsibility of shaping a new vision for Sapieha Palace. I was invited by CAC curator Asta Vaičiulytė to create a sound work that would engage with the palace's history. In this process, I deliberately chose to intertwine and juxtapose my autobiographical narrative with historiography – as if this piece could be titled, in the manner of Pierre Huyghe, “the fourth memory”. This strategy involved a careful analysis and selection of accessible factual material concerning both Sapieha Palace and my own past. In both cases, we encounter a “second memory” intruding: unclear and fragmented historiographic traces of the palace, questionable authorship comments, or a fictional story shaped, as my autoanalysis reveals, by various literary colonial influences – Western and Russian.

Exploring the relationship between geography and history, I discovered that Antakalnis was the setting for my first literary work. In 2003, I published the short story *The Captivity of Sounds* in *Metai* magazine. However, at the very beginning of my literary history, I find a lack of an authentic voice – a self fundamentally colonized, interwoven with the narrative paradigms of Edgar Allan Poe and Fyodor Dostoevsky. The socio-cultural imaginary here does not call for reconstructing origins through repetition – the self-deception of the “third memory” – but for augmenting history: a higher level of fiction where autofiction amplifies, tests, and re-imagines the historical narrative, reshaping the autobiography. I aim to exploit the circular and genetic relation of imaginary interaction, using Simondon's (2022) cyclic genetic imagination as a model to dismantle the schematism of culture industries. [3]

Consequently, this audio work [4] takes the form of a hybrid between fiction and documentality, integrated into regularly broadcasted *Radio Vilnius* show *Feast*, hosted by Deimantė Bulbenkaitė and Audrius Pocius. In this talk show format, the history of Sapieha Palace becomes a staging of my own past, continually leveraging the transitional potential of this format, which merges fiction and documentality, effectively performing the role of a transitional object (Winnicott 2005). [5]

As Wolfgang Iser (1993, 30) noted, works of art may serve this transitional function as they «hover between the real and the imaginary, linking the two together» (Iser 1993, 30). By housing all the processes of interchange, they lack ontological value as discrete entities – their significance emerges

[3] See my analysis of Simondon's theory of imagination in Sabolius 2019.

[4] The sound work, as well as the radio show, is titled *Puota*, a word that signifies both *Feast* and *Symposium* (along the lines of Plato's dialogue). Curator: Asta Vaičiulytė, Concept, script: Kristupas Sabolius, Sound design: Vytas Rasimavičius, Radio hosts: Deimantė Bulbenkaitė and Audrius Pocius. <https://sapiegurumai.lt/en/exhibitions/sound-works-for-the-sapieha-palace/>.

[5] Winnicott (2005) argued that toys and various other items – such as pacifiers, bibs, plush toys, or even body parts – function as semi-fictional, semi-real objects, offering the child a means to accept reality in a less chaotic and frightening manner.

through these “transformational processes” (1993, 30). These processes are inherently open-ended; the cycle of transformation continues indefinitely. Gilbert Simondon refers to the genetic motion of imagination, where the mental image anticipates (1st stage) and perceives (2nd stage) a real encounter with the milieu. Passing through symbolization and recollection (3rd stage), it culminates in invention (4th stage), transforming the real by solving problems through structural change. External invention aligns with the first stage: mental anticipation.

Indebted to the real in a relational manner, the tactic of this audio work employed the movement of imagination as described by Simondon, connecting carefully selected, factually relevant fragments into a joint meta-narrative of autobiography and historiography. However, this process of selection generated a surplus that led to the reorganization of both narratives. While the palace’s name is traditionally associated with a male figure – Kazimierz Jan Sapieha – the central figure in the new narrative becomes Teresa Korvin Gosievska, a previously underrepresented Lithuanian noblewoman and a significant figure in the palace’s history.

Puota, as the paraphrastic “fourth memory”, does not seek to restore the past but accepts that the original history contains elements – such as male figures – that should be less remembered, aiming to reveal what is truly forgotten, like the role of women in history. In parallel, this composite narrative becomes a form of self-critical dialectics, highlighting the attempt to decolonize the literary narrative I found myself in. Active forgetting, perhaps, emerges here as a flexible proposal for critical and creative revision, raising the question of what it means to be authentic to one’s own story-telling. In this light, it becomes increasingly clear how both unexperienced and experienced pasts demand not restoration and repetition, but constant reconsideration and reinvention.

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Conclusions

As illustrated in Pierre Huyghe’s *The Third Memory*, the human condition is driven by a desire for representation tied to the illusion of repetition and the promise of justice. The screen and information industries, producing tertiary retentions in Stiegler’s sense, immerse us in a perpetual present dominated by images, creating memory voids and reshaping identities. This complicates the notion of “true facts”, disconnecting representations from their original coordinates.

Plasticity, as theorized by Malabou, may be seen a path to transcend rigid cultural patterns and critically engage with repetition in personal and historical narratives. In my analysis that experiments on the possibility of “the fourth memory”, imagination becomes a relational tool for justice, using fiction to move beyond revenge and toward creative transformations. This strategy employs active forgetting – not as resignation but as a deliberate act to transcend restitution and uncover what was truly forgotten, forging new relationships with the past.

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“Be My Plasticity for Me”. Gloopiness in Nicole Eisenman’s Phantom Body

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In the spirit of Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler’s co-authored essay, *You Be My Body for Me. Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, this speculative and experimental text examines Malabou’s concept of plasticity through the work of American artist Nicole Eisenman. Expanding on Malabou and Butler’s notion of the body as a product and agent of transformation, the paper initiates a dialogue between Eisenman’s artworks and Malabou’s writing on plasticity – particularly regarding the phantom limb. Taking up Malabou’s call to invent plasticity, the authors adapt co-authoring and create a collaborative writing style that merges visual and philosophical analysis. Enacting plasticity’s dynamic exchanges of “substitution”, “delegation”, “passing” and “becoming”, they emphasise the slipperiness in Malabou’s plasticity and the gloopiness in Eisenman’s work. Beginning with a glossary of these terms supports visualising the mirroring of plasticity and gloopiness, demonstrated through the visual analysis of Eisenman’s installation *Maker’s Muck* (2022) as the introduction. The latent ouroboros in this work – of *muck making muck* – mirrors plasticity’s *form forming itself* and introduces the structural ouroboros of this paper, which asks: is Malabou’s plasticity gloopy? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness plastic? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness queer? It concludes with a final question: can we call Malabou’s plasticity queer?

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Glossary

– Gloop

The term gloop used in this paper means viscous materiality that resists fluidity and solidness, often evoking the sticky haptic qualities of touch. [1] Adding the suffix “-iness” (as in gloopiness) denotes embodying these qualities. Although uncommon in academic discourse, gloopiness

[1] *Gloop* as a noun informally describing any messy sticky fluid or substance is sourced from: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/gloop>

effectively describes entangled experiences or phenomena that resist definition – whether affective, intellectual or ethical. In this philosophical context, gloopiness is a metaphor for concepts and experiences that elude precise categorisation.

– Plasticity

Derived from the Greek *plastos* (“moulded”), Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity is dynamic, referring to the capacity for change, adaptation and self-formation, particularly about the brain and identity. Plasticity denotes the ability to shape and be shaped—for instance, the co-presence of active and passive transformations from external and internal forces. Plasticity thus reveals an ontological tension

between what is mouldable and what remains un-moulded – between the potential for transformation and irreversible, sometimes traumatic, modifications of being. As an operation of radical transformation, destructive plasticity takes on a gloopiness quality owing to the rupture of normative clarity and the ambiguity of recovery – a process of reshaping into a new, unfamiliar form that is often non-linear and slippery.

– Slipperiness

Gloopiness symbolises the inherent slipperiness of plasticity’s transformation, a dynamic condition never fully reducible to categorisation. Just as gloopiness represents the materiality of experience that resists categorisation, plasticity’s slipperiness represents subjectivity’s evasiveness of definition: what it means to have an identity amidst a continuous process of becoming. Slipperiness is an apt metaphor for plasticity’s

destabilisation of patriarchal concepts of traditional philosophy like trace and difference (Malabou 2011a). Plasticity and slipperiness relate to queerness, in the way queer embodies a multiplicity as a noun and verb – both an identity and a movement – resisting heteropatriarchal categorisation while embodying the abjection of homoerotic sexuality within such discourse (Foucault 1978).

– Nicole Eisenman

American artist Nicole Eisenman employs inventive bodily substitution and delegation techniques in her oil paintings and sculptures, destabilising traditional heteropatriarchal representation in art and philosophy. By utilising traditional and diverse materials such as expanding foam, motor oil, resin, plaster, and found objects, Eisenman’s work activates the materiality of gloopiness to reinterpret the body in visual and conceptual

ways. Connecting the gloopiness in Eisenman’s work to the slipperiness in Malabou’s plasticity, Eisenman’s work reveals the ambiguous nature of plasticity’s transformation and expands the representation of its dynamic process in artistic and philosophical contexts.

Introduction

Eisenman's 2022 installation *Maker's Muck* [FIG. 1] serves as a foundation for this experimental analysis of Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity, illustrating *form forming itself* through the process of *Muck making Muck*. Considering Malabou once suggested that she would have been a sculptor given the choice, it is fun to imagine her as the artist in Eisenman's installation, engaged in a philosophical method: «everything that counts is related to this process of formation, sculpting» (Malabou 2022a, 319). While Malabou identifies the arts as plasticity's «native land» (2005, 8) Eisenman's potter's touch diverges from Malabou's; Malabou evades touching plasticity's surface, which this paper examines more closely. First, however, we must look at how *Maker's Muck* exemplifies Malabou's plasticity to see what Malabou's touch is missing. *Maker's Muck* depicts an artist as a potter at their wheel with bulbous hands rotating over a perpetually unformed lump. The lump shares the same material qualities as the potter, indicating the exchange embodies the materiality. The surrounding unfinished works also share this materiality, which expands and forms the studio environment. The expansion of materiality across all the forms emphasises the materiality's gloopiness, suggesting that gloopiness makes the materials expansion possible. Significantly, the gloopiness projected as the surface materiality of *Muck* is plural and shared across the potter, objects, and environment, suggesting that the gloopiness is exchanged between them and might make the exchanges possible. By presenting the entities with the same materiality, Eisenman

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[FIG. 1] *Maker's Muck*, 2022 (detail).
Mixed media, 262,3 × 304,8 × 394,3 cm.
Photo: Thomas Barratt
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth



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reveals that the exchanges themselves are gloopy and create the materiality they are making. Operating outside Malabou’s philosophy, *Maker’s Muck* illuminates the bodily nature of exchanges and the ambiguous nature of materiality transforming and becoming a new form – the artwork. *Maker’s Muck* illustrates plasticity’s giving and receiving of form as a gloopy materiality exchanged during the potter’s hands interpreting and the manifestation of interpretation.

Visually analysing *Maker’s Muck* presents how plasticity’s surface, which Malabou describes as the «contact point» (2016, 58), can be analysed as the site of transformation. Similarly, in *Maker’s Muck*, the contact point between the potter’s hands and the sculpted mass is the point of exchange for artistic transformation. While in *The Ontology of the Accident. An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* Malabou determines destructive plasticity’s psychic and bodily transformations as never disrupting identity but «fixing it» (2012a, 1), creative plasticity’s transformations are less clear. *Maker’s Muck* exemplifies the tactility of creative plasticity’s psychic and bodily transformations, emphasising the unfixed mode of becoming through the continuous rotation of the wheel that noisily grinds the contact between the bulbous hands and creviced grey mass. The lack of analysis on the tactility and viscosity of plasticity’s surface is intriguing, especially given its dynamic, transformative nature. Tracing the term *surface* through Malabou’s work reveals it is haptically numb, except during destructive plasticity’s explosions and accidents. A perceptive surface is found in both Malabou’s *The New Wounded. From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2012b, 43) and Judith Butler’s *Melancholy Gender* (1995, 165), which similarly recall Freud’s *The Ego and the Id* to emphasise the bodily-ness of the ego as being a «projection of a surface» rather than a «surface entity» (2000, 3960). In the spirit of Freud’s bodily ego as a projection of a surface, this paper presents the intersection of Malabou’s plasticity and the gloopiness in Eisenman’s work through a projected ouroboros. Like plasticity’s *form forming itself* and *Maker’s Muck making Muck*, the paper creates a circular method to ask: is Malabou’s plasticity gloopy? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness plastic? Is Eisenman’s gloopiness queer? Can we call Malabou’s plasticity queer? The terms *projection* and *project*, not exclusive to psychoanalysis, also extend to the visual arts as a process of illuminating images and transforming concepts into artworks. The paper’s first projection examines Malabou’s concept of plasticity particular to phantom limbs, revealing its inherent slippery surface akin to Eisenman’s gloopiness. Secondly, Eisenman’s bodily representation of gloopiness is compared to phantom surfaces, revealing her methodology as plastic. Within the context of Eisenman’s work being «decidedly queer» (Godfrey 2023, 21), the third projection examines queerness as necessarily gloopy, before connecting Malabou’s idea of innate plasticity to the concept of gloopiness and questioning whether Malabou’s plasticity can be considered queer.

Is Malabou's Plasticity Gloopy?

— Malabou's missing tactile surface

In *Before Tomorrow, Epigenesis and Rationality*, Malabou urges us to «remain on the surface», not superficially but «between the ground and underground», and we shall (2016, 58). This concept of surface between ground and underground assumes a thickness, but Malabou's multifaceted surface diverges from a haptic haecceity. In Malabou's works, the surface appears like a synaptic constellation. In *Changing Difference. The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* Malabou posits surface as an event that conceals or reveals a trace (2011a, 47). In *The Ontology of the Accident*, this event is the asyndeton, which dents the surface (2012a, 61). In *The Heidegger Change. On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, a surface is clung to after boredom arises, and its descent signals that a transformation has changed the surface (2011b, 258). A visible surface obscures invisible dynamite in *The Ontology of the Accident* (2012a, 1) and *Plasticity. The Promise of Explosion*; the visibility of this surface is obscured by its dynamite, as the surface, which is now epigenesis, is written about only once (2022a, 296). The most references to surface are in *Before Tomorrow*, owing to its proximity to Kant's deduction of transcendence where the «surface structure» is found constituting the «transcendental itself as an object of experience» (2016, 272). This object of experience for Malabou is plasticity's tendency toward transformation as Malabou does not believe in transcendence similarly to how she does not believe in the absence of form.

Tracing the absence of plasticity's surface emphasises its slipperiness as it evades being touched and is grasped by its very absence. Preoccupied with forms that embody transformation without a trace, such as the salamander, trauma sufferers, people living with dementia and Alzheimer's, and epigenesis, Malabou distinguishes them by their characteristic strangeness. [2] Malabou's strange evasion of inscription and tactility is examined through James Martell's analysis, *Malabouian Plasticity Beyond Surfaces*. Martell reductively misreads Malabou's deliberate conflation of «residuality» and «rest», which erases the distinction between a surface inscription and the inscription itself. Martell claims this erasure allows Malabou to ignore any investigation of surfaces that support traces, but Malabou is performing a slippery exchange here that invests in the disinvestment of the trace (Martell 2021, 101). Martell's own translation of Malabou is helpful: «By residuality, we must understand simultaneously *that which remains*—the rest—and that in which *we remain enclosed*» (2021, 101). It orientates towards Malabou's withdrawal into indifference in *The Retreat of the Metaphor* (Malabou 2014), where she explores a form of withdrawal as a contemporary form of retreat into «indifference». Malabou signals an exclusionary trace through an inclusionary desire; «nobody reads our books, nobody listens to us, we will remain in the shade of oblivion» (2014, 41). Malabou argues that our answer to the world's indifference towards us is indifference to ourselves – which she distinguishes as «strange» (2014, 41). Analysing Eisenman's work will explore this strangeness further. Of

[2] *Strange* is referred to significantly in *The Ontology of the Accident*, particularly 2-21 and 50-53. It is also mentioned in *The Retreat of Metaphor*, 36, 38 and 41.

importance here is Malabou’s attempts to invest in erasure through disinvestment of trace, mimicking a phantom limb.

— Phantom limbs

Malabou’s concept of phantom substitution highlights the slippery nature of plasticity’s exchanges. It is precisely why she defines the act of exchange as playing «slippery eels with bodies to pass among them» (2011a, 134-135). Malabou’s analysis of phantom limbs examines what is mouldable as phenomenally present and physically absent, suggesting that transformations can produce sensations beyond normalcy while resisting the clarity that normalcy demands of them. In the essay *Phantom Limbs and Plasticity. Merleau-Ponty and Current Neurobiology*, Malabou explores the phantom limb phenomenon as a neural pathology (2022a, 297-307). Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the phantom limb is a disavowal of a patient’s mutilation (Merleau-Ponty 2012), Malabou determines that the refusal of the deficiency enables the body to «maintain its integrity through negation» (2022a, 299). Continuing to explore the missing part that sustains the wholeness of the body leads Malabou to claim that plasticity is innate and «subjective identity is erasable and replaceable from the start» (2022a, 307). To reach the concept of innate plasticity by appealing to neurologists Shaun Gallagher and V. S. Ramachandran, Malabou conjures a phantom of a phantom (2022a, 306). Malabou achieves this by highlighting the compensatory nature of phantom limbs and questioning «What is compensation for Merleau-Ponty?», which repairs the loss that «always comes after the originary one» (2022a, 302). Malabou refers to Merleau-Ponty’s perception of the phantom limb as a quasi-presence and merely a replacement, substituting the missing original limb to argue that this compensatory plasticity is non-hierarchical, neither superior nor inferior. Malabou elevates the virtuality of phantoms to the contemporaneity of the creative moment by asking, «What if creation and substitution, originary movement and reorganisation were to become synonymous?» (2022a, 304). Malabou refers to neurological findings by Gallagher and Ramachandran to illustrate the brain’s plasticity, particularly of in-utero aplasia (the condition of being born without organs or tissues). Gallagher’s findings on the neural possibility of reshaping in-utero prompts Malabou’s assertion of prenatal plasticity (Ramachandran & Blakeslee 1998, 29-33, qtd. in Malabou 2022a, 305). Malabou proclaims that «phantom limbs are not phantoms of a lost limb, but phantoms of a phantom, phantoms of a compensation» (2022a, 304), which posits plasticity as an innate possibility, albeit a slippery one.

Supposing that plasticity is an innate possibility suggests that the slipperiness that makes in-utero phantom exchange possible would also be innate. Malabou further claims, citing Ramachandran, that «your own body is a phantom, one that your brain has temporarily constructed purely for convenience» (2022a, 305). This notion of convenience implies that bodies – phantom or real – can be purposefully exchanged based on their environment. While Malabou does not directly refer to Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality. The Finding of An Object*, the bodily substitution of phantom replacement in *Phantom Limbs and Plasticity* aligns

with Freud's notion of bodily substitution. When Freud explains that the infant forms a «total idea of the person» to whom the nourishing «object-breast» belongs, he claims it occurs through the loss of the «object-breast», which prompts a bodily substitution of satisfaction from the thumb (2000, 1535). This process of bodily substitution highlights how negation can prompt bodily replacement, similar to how a body maintains its integrity through a phantom limb. Freud's concept of the object-breast as an original body not belonging to the infant's body supports Malabou's idea of an originary body as a phantom (Malabou 2022a). The loss of this original phantom leading to a compensatory substitute supports Malabou's idea of a phantom substituting a phantom. Connecting Malabou's concept of phantom substitution to Freud's *The Finding of an Object* is helpful to our argument as it draws attention to the exchange of nourishment for satisfaction, where Freud believes sexuality is formed (Freud 2000, 2555). An analysis of Eisenman's queer representations will explore this exchange later.

Before we shift to Eisenman's gloopy surface, we should notice that a particularly slippery concept of Malabou's plasticity, relevant to Eisenman's bodily substitution and delegation technique, appears in *Changing Difference*. Malabou describes an «ontic-ontological exchange» (2011a, 36-39) where different modes of «Being and being» exchange with one another, which enacts a passing of identity «inscribed at the heart of gender» (40). Malabou's concept reflects a paradox by blending the ontic (the woman) and the ontological (the feminine). Malabou evades the confessional demand defining gender – as if queer. Strengthening this non-binary position Malabou claims: «The transvestitism of Being as the being and the being as Being takes on an entirely different meaning: they point at one another, show one another to each other, lose their identity even as they gain it in this game of the unfamiliar, the strange, the queer» (2011, 38). To illustrate the potential of Malabou's slippery exchange, Eisenman's work is examined to show how representations of painted and sculpted bodies exchange and pass – at once. The variables of presence and phantasmic absence populating Eisenman's bodily representations reflect the dynamic slipperiness of plasticity in Malabou's concept. Eisenman's work illustrates this slipperiness underlying plasticity's schema as the materiality of subjectivity, identity, becoming, and the mutable locus of desire. Rather than depicting bodies with absent limbs, Eisenman activates a gloopiness like Malabou's slippery plasticity that provides the surface for ontological exchanges – that we might call «reciprocal metamorphosis» (36-39). These exchanges allow for a strange otherness to emerge, which offers nuances to Malabou's withdrawal as indifference (Malabou 2014). This analysis highlights the haptic gloopiness in Eisenman's exchanges, which is missing from Malabou's slippery plasticity.

Is Eisenman's gloopiness plastic?

Eisenman's exhibition, *Nicole Eisenman: What Happened* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London (2023-2024), presented the body in different painted and sculpted modalities. All manner of isolated bodily disruptions were represented: sore noses and heat mottle; blood drifting through

flesh or sensation moving a knuckle; skin rubbed raw by straps; stiff muscles and chemical desire; turkey stubble and gooseflesh; smiles straight from the tube. Other bodies appeared, too, as crowds and sheer matter: bodies of water, muck and shit. Across multiple renderings of bodily forms, it was possible to discern a sense of plasticity, ceaseless becoming, and gestures of internal substitution and external delegation, which are countless manifestations of the body not belonging to you anymore. Occurring on different scales – from modulations of flesh to isolated gazes, crowd masses and coagulated interiors – Eisenman's rendering of bodily experience as both belonging to and alien is captured as identifiable and simultaneously at risk (or in the process) of becoming other. The body disrupted and completed by its absence compelled a connection with Malabou's concept of plasticity and the phantom limb. These connections resonate in Eisenman's exhibition titles also, such as *Giant Without a Body* (Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, 2021), presenting a wry overlay of the oversized and the absent, indicating the conceptual importance of the phantasmic body in Eisenman's work. The title's oxymoronic blur highlights her engagement within the representational qualities of bodies concerning visible presence and absence, raising questions as to whether and how the body is there or not, who it belongs to, and how such ambivalence is achieved.

The quality of othering in phantoms is shown to manifest in various identifications embodying unpredictable intensity. The manifestations are activated by an oscillating frequency between what is supposed to be there, what is and what might soon (not) be. These disruptions are performed across singular, plural and collective bodies, either as the physical, viscous accumulation of paint or illusory gloopy surfaces. Eisenman's gloopiness shares the impetus with Malabou's plasticity to become the forms they create, establishing themselves through plastic formation (Malabou 2022a, 315). The plastic sensibilities underpinning Eisenman's gestures include substitution and delegation, as bodily experience is more or less substituted by or delegated to another, representing plastic ruptures within a bodily schema. These bodily substitutions and delegated identifications can evoke the materiality of an entire phantom body, as will be shown. Key to recognising the haptics on offer in Eisenman's work is to distinguish the identity from its identifications. In Eisenman's work, identity does not appear as the actual artist and is instead the condition that remains consistent while it endures multiple identifications (Freud 2000). As in *Maker's Muck*, the entities made of plaster, clay, wood, metal, resin, expanding foam, and found objects are sculpted to appear as objects, figures, and forms, which constitute a distinct gloopy condition.

— Phantom Identity

The sense of being inhabited, surrounded, or even imposed upon by potential bodies that are not one's own is a consistent theme in Eisenman's work. In *From Success to Obscurity* (2004) [FIG. 2], the artist humorously depicts herself as *The Thing* from *The Fantastic Four* comics, illustrating individual disassociation through bodily delegation and identity substitution. The painting's title reflects a transformation prompted by art world trends, while the portrait depicts identity as alien to itself.



[FIG. 2] *From Success to Obscurity*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 129,5 × 101,6 cm.
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

[FIG. 3] *The Drawing Class*, 2011. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 165,1 × 208,2 cm.
Photo: Robert Wedemeyer
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

From Success to Obscurity embodies pathos and humour by substituting one bodily schema for another entirely: thingified as Dr. Jekyll stoically persisting beneath Mr. Hyde. Notably, substituting Eisenman's characteristic gloopy surface, *The Thing* has smoothly painted stone-like skin, redolent of its superpower of endurance. Eisenman's metamorphosis as *The Thing* echoes that in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which echoes Malabou's notion of «identity abandoned» and assuming a «form of flight» (2012a, 11). Malabou claims that when the possibility of fleeing is impossible – where «no transcendence, flight or escape is left» – the only option left is «being other to the self» (10-11). *From Success to Obscurity* humorously captures, through a popular fantasy entertainment figure, how otherness can result from experiencing cycles of othering that require superhuman endurance.

— Phantom Crowds

Eisenman's *The Drawing Class* (2010) [FIG. 3] stages another kind of plural substitution of identity with the gaze. This time, Eisenman's painted partial hands signify her presence and align her gaze with the viewer's. The life model's inchoate body and face exude a powerful gaze back at the viewer, suggesting a powerful exchange. As the hands draw the model, the gaze becomes synonymous with that of the viewer, indicating the two gazes are reciprocated. This sophisticated substitution of gazes places the viewer in a position to shape the model's gaze and identity through *their* gaze. The manoeuvres are intentionally subversive and slippery. Expanding on Eisenman's evocation of substitution and delegation, her series of Biergarten paintings, such as *Brooklyn Biergarten*

(2008) [FIG. 4], stages a plural phantasmagoria through the scene of a crowd. Edvard Munch-like trees are strapped with bulbs; a face is flayed by an iPhone glow; a sea of diverse bodies with George Grosz suits decamped from Wall Street. There is a whiff of a Weimar pandemic, of flash mobs and superhero masks. Bodies and faces intermingle with white outlines of beer glasses floating like phantoms towards distant purple gardens. The scenes reflect gatherings of mutual identification of diverse characters in fantasy celebratory commiserations of the Global Financial Crisis (Godfrey 2023, 19).

Fellow American queer artist Amy Sillman suggests that Eisenman portrays crowds as a paradoxical struggle with Western European painting, a medium of inspiration simultaneously marked by the historic heteropatric exclusion of female and queer artists. [3] Sillman’s description of Eisenman’s crowd scenarios as oscillating between the «simple blur to the stack to the picnic, and on to the riot, the clusterfuck, the cataclysm» (Sillman 2006, 9) emphasises the dynamic paradoxical nature of Eisenman’s references. However, what Sillman calls Eisenman’s «great and terrible workings of crowds and power» also concerns its plastic and ductile nature (9). Implicit in Eisenman’s crowds is the plasticity of individuals who, through material and textural transformations, merge into a collective identity while maintaining individuality. Eisenman’s rendering of a plastic, phantasmic scene of individual othered bodies becoming one crowd is reminiscent of Malabou’s notion of playing «slippery eels with bodies to pass among them» (Malabou 2011a, 134-135). The crowd for Malabou is also a scene of formative plasticity capable of «drastic and enigmatic modification» encompassing the «very possibility of change», whereas solitude or isolation is heavy with the «inability to transform» (Malabou 2022a, 118), illustrating the dynamic potential of collective experience.

[3] Nicole Eisenman identifies as queer with pronouns she, her and they, them.

— Coping as Gloop

Sillman describes the desire in Eisenman’s crowd as something that «oozes from gutters, clings like filth or flows like lava» (Sillman 2006, 9), reflecting its gloopy materiality explicit in *Coping* (2008) [FIG. 5]. Reminiscent of a Balthus-like, post-Bush street scene, the figures trudge through a river of muck, each absorbed in its own world, indifferent to the gaze of others and the shitty situation that connects and surrounds them. *Coping* represents the plasticity of societal issues bleeding into subjectivity. The term coping refers to a persistent condition the body endures of its situation, which Eisenman relates to depression (Sholis 2008). However, the molasses-like sludge separating and connecting bodies in *Coping* also symbolises the tension between stagnant solitude and active sociality. The gloopiness embodies a permeating experience, surrounding and overhanging bodies, ready to descend at any moment. Drawing from the visual analysis of *Maker’s Muck*, aligning the gloopiness with the slippiness of plasticity offers a nuance to Malabou’s concept of indifference as a contemporary form of ontological retreat as «undecided, involuntary, non-chosen» (2014, 41). Eisenman’s gloopy depictions of such dissociation, in turn suggests that plasticity’s slipperiness is also a «form of flight» (Malabou 2012a, 11).



[FIG. 4] *Brooklyn Biergarten II*, 2008.
Oil on canvas, 157,5 × 208,3 cm.
Photo: Jens Ziehe
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth

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[FIG. 5] *Coping*, 2008. Oil on canvas,
165,1 × 208,3 cm.
Photo: Jens Ziehe
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist
and Hauser & Wirth



The title of Eisenman’s 2014 painting, *Achilles Heel* [FIG. 6], both refers to a person’s weak spot and the eponymous Brooklyn bar whose interior is carved out in a thick, dark palette of paint. A distinctive arched window frames a view of lower Manhattan in the distance. The heavy, gloopy appearance is heightened by scraped impasto figures with neon edges, with pink fingers poking a lump of muck. This is echoed by a motley-brown figure whose acidic yellow-orange hands sink into another greenish-grey lump that their jaundiced eyes inspect. The viscous muck constitutes the same gloopiness as the scene and figures in *Maker’s Muck*. This bar scene depicts figures distinguishable by their gloopiness, similar to how the muck oozing from the beer tap appears marginally gloopier than the vessel it pours. Suspended globular planets evoke the condition of universal gloopiness that permeates the scene. The bar is populated by characters that exemplify this condition: an entwined solace and vulnerability that co-opted in the name of the painting. Amidst the melancholic black bile, humour emerges from a grubby portrait of a pale potato head hanging on the wall.

All these expansive manifestations of gloopiness are Eisenman’s evocations of a bodily schema, which is to say, a surface sensitive to bodily experience. Whether it be the recurrent motif of a blank stare or simple details of fingers becoming stone-like, these bodies are all subject to the phantom quality of otherness. While Malabou relates othering to the appearance of «coolness» and «disaffection» (2012b, 49), Eisenman’s «strange answer to the world’s indifference» embodies humour (2014, 41). This might reflect Eisenman’s solace depicted in *Achilles Heel* and *Brooklyn Biergarten*, whose figures derive from the imagery of friends and art history. While Malabou’s ontological retreat reveals an ache of recognition within philosophy’s heteropatric discourse (Malabou 2014), Eisenman’s crowd paintings acknowledge this paradoxically absurd desire, serving as homages to heteropatric art history and celebratory commiserations of normalcy, inviting a contemplation on queerness.

Is Eisenman’s gloopiness queer?

Thus far, analysing Eisenman’s artwork has shown how an ontological gloopiness is represented in *Maker’s Muck*, *From Success to Obscurity*, *The Drawing Class*, *Brooklyn Biergarten*, *Coping* and *Achilles Heel*, which highlights the slipperiness of Malabou’s ontological plasticity. Representing Malabou’s ontic-ontological exchange, gloopiness manifests in tactile transformations oozing. *The Thing* as a phantom identity of Eisenman has been punctured, revealing how phantoms shelter plural modes of being appearing as identity, subjectivity and desire (Malabou 2022b). Returning to Freud’s claim that sexuality forms from the infant exchange of the object-breast’s nourishment to the auto-erotic’s satisfaction, we can consider sexuality’s form first in the context of Malabou’s concept of a phantom of a phantom and secondly in the context of Eisenman’s work that she calls «decidedly queer» (Godfrey 2023, 21). If we suppose that a phantom is a form of caesura that can rupture and reveal the multiplicity hidden within other phantoms (Malabou 2022a), would that mean that a queer phantom can rupture the heteropatric phantom to uncover

its multiplicities? To consider this question, we will appeal to the queerness in Eisenman's sculptural work.

— A sculpted queer phantom

Where Merleau-Ponty in *The Primacy of Perception* regarded the excess of presence of phantom limbs as a quasi-presence, he regards the same excess in painting as «complete when it is yet only partial», owing to it being «vision itself» that sees at a distance (1964, 166). Merleau-Ponty considers the voracity of vision that is whole in its partialness to be superior to the original in art owing to the way painting can «open upon a texture of Being» (1964, 166). This will be the lens through which Eisenman's sculpture *Prince of Swords* (2013) [FIG. 7] is analysed. Placed in the Carnegie Museum of Art Neoclassical Hall of Sculpture, *Prince of Swords* opens upon Eisenman's texture of queer being to explore plasticity's slipperiness within Western ideals of bodily appearance. Eisenman remarks on the pleasure of seeing her «big queer bodies» sitting alongside the «standard bearers of the Western form» (Godfrey 2023, 21) – a setting that emphasises queer presence as an excess within the partial view of hetero-patriarchal bodily norms. Written in response to Eisenman's Carnegie International installation, William J. Simmons's article *Notes on Queer Formalism* describes queer formalism as a «paradox» (2013) in that queerness needs bodies and also rejects their «solidified nature» (2013), which Eisenman's Carnegie installation exemplifies. By inserting

[FIG. 6] *Achilles Heel*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 208,3 × 165,1 cm.
Photo: John Berens
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

[FIG. 7] *Prince of Swords*, 2013 (detail).
Plaster, graphite and quartz. Variable size.
© Nicole Eisenman. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

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her sculpted «all-inclusive gender» bodies into the collection of Classical casts that have represented Western ideals of bodily beauty for some two thousand years, Eisenman disrupts the smooth, white, idealised bodies, and takes them «down a notch» (Pifer 2013). Eisenman’s sculpted bodies replicate the paradoxical «clunky heroicness» of her painted bodies, appearing as sculptural phantoms of the painted phantoms (Pifer 2013). The sculptures differ in a bodily sense, which Eisenman clarifies as being part of their making: wrapping arms around them to massage them into being, compared to the paintings occurring «above the neckline», in the head «with a stick between you and the material» (Pifer 2013). Eisenman’s further description of the process of sculpting the figures as embodying an «act of rubbing» (Simmons 2013) remains evident in the finger marks on the sculptures and in their presence of rubbing queer bodies against binary bodies in the Carnegie Museum.

Eisenman’s sculptures challenge the Western idealised body by their proximity, rubbing the two bodily forms against each other, one exclusive and idealised and the other inclusive, which she describes as «distant relatives» (Pifer 2013). This rubbing of bodies echoes again Malabou’s concept of bodies playing slippery eels. If, as Malabou claims, bodies are phantoms of phantoms, these relatives might be seen as distant phantom cousins synonymous in their original creation. If, as Freud claims, sexuality arises out of the infant exchange from nourishment to satisfaction, we might imagine different phantoms arising orientated by different desires. Furthermore, Freud’s notion of auto-erotic thumb-sucking resonates in Eisenman’s rubbing, reflected by her self-satisfactory pleasure of disrupting the Western bodily ideals with an all-inclusive alternative that is both publicly and readily available.

– Strange

As distant relatives displayed in the Carnegie Museum, Eisenman’s sculpted bodies may have seemed like strangers to visitors, appearing like an unfamiliar trait following an accident (Malabou 2012a). The term *strange*, etymologically dating to the 14th century, derives from the unfamiliar and not belonging to where something is found. [4] By 1660, *strange* is associated with the terms *queer*, *surprising* and *wonder*. Eisenman’s *Prince of Swords* wonderfully appears in an everyday contemporary pose staring into a smartphone, making them more familiar to visitors than the idealised bodies. Surprisingly, this transforms the idealised bodies into strangers. Seated on a balustrade flanked by two classical figures, the context of *Prince of Swords* evokes comparison. The classical relatives balanced dancing on the balustrade have raised arms draping imaginary cloth that exposes and frames their plump white smooth genitalia. *Prince of Swords* presents a contrast to their cousins in the way sexuality is not advertised and is irrelevant to their all-inclusive gender identity as «clunky heroes» (Pifer 2013). Instead, Eisenman’s *Prince* is posed with a giant crystal through their throat chakra, symbolising the futility of vocal cords amid silent screen interactions. Eisenman describes this posture as «the way we have of being alone in the crowd» (Pifer 2013), which is also reflective of being with a crowd who is not your crowd, especially

[4] Etymology of the term *strange* can be further sourced at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/strange>

when they are relatives. With feet dangling over the balcony, the head drooped toward blackened hands as if burnt out by inaudible communication, the sculpture subverts the exhibited artificiality of idealised bodies and prioritises contemporary identity over superficial aesthetics. Eisenman's all-inclusive sculpture paradoxically employs the same heteropatric exclusion that marginalises queer bodies to portray the Western idealised body as other, making the imposition of such bodies a phantom gesture. Relating to Eisenman's Carnegie installation is Sillman's observation that Eisenman's crowd representations illustrate a «transformation from other to self and back again» (Sillman 2006, 9). Situating *Prince of Swords* among a crowd of idealised bodies, Eisenman evokes an othering embodied by a nuanced indifference reminiscent of Malabou's concept of «cool indifference» that is synonymous with trauma (Malabou 2012b). Eisenman's figures represent a voluntary disidentification from the idealised body as dictated by heteropatric discourse, including that of *The Museum*. This recontextualising of othering as voluntary recontextualises Malabou's notion of «becoming someone else at every moment as a constant existential possibility» (Malabou qtd. in 2008, 9) as a positive transformation. Eisenman's queering of the heteropatric idealised bodies reveals the potential of Malabou's slippery disinvestment in inscription as a form of *creative destructive* plasticity.

In *Notes on Queer Formalism*, Simmons outlines another paradoxical queer quality as an «unsure mixture of singular embodiment and a passionate ownership of one's identity with the refusal of singularity» (2013). This «unsure» quality will be shown as a necessary evasion of the confessional demand on heterogeneous sexuality, which controls what forms of sexuality are standard and, thus, what modes of being are standard (Foucault 1978). When Simmons critiques the terms «androgyny» and «fluid» as advancing a «monolithic vision of queerness» used for the «illusion of progressive scholarship», he also argues that «for some queer people, gender roles are central to their sexual experience» and that «queer formalism is not about scrambled gender roles» (Simmons 2013). Eisenman's artworks comprised of multiple bodies, supports Simmons further claim that queer formalism «insists on specificities even as it acts as an ever-expansive force» (Simmons 2013). The intentionally absurd paradoxes introduced in Simmons' essay insist on absurdity's importance in rendering queerness' unsure quality for evading definition, like Malabou's intentional evasion of inscription within her concept of plasticity.

— Absurd traces of slugs

Some traces are vital forms of communication, and absurdity is no exception. The powerful use of absurdity within queer discourse is discussed in Matthew Mason's online article *The Slug Gaze. Discourse, Discipline, and the Live Slug Reaction Meme* (Mason 2022). The term "slug gaze", coined in 2022, symbolises the recognition of queer moments in heteronormative discourse (Mason 2022). Its origins can be traced to the 2019 film *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, in which the character, Klaud, an alien slug with a unique gloopy body resembling one of Eisenman's figures, appears immediately after a scene featuring two same-sex characters kissing. Mason discusses how Klaud, as the Live Slug Reaction Meme,

signals queerness on X (formerly Twitter) within heteronormative spaces. The slug’s subversive actions parallel Eisenman’s critique of idealized bodies in the Carnegie Museum. The slug’s ability to appear in multiple contexts while leaving a significant discursive trace of slug appearances reflects the synaptic constellation of Malabou’s surface. Klaud’s absurd expression, both complex to define and distinctly recognisable, prompts Mason’s appeal to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, to explain how the slug gaze substitutes what Foucault names «whatever is most difficult to tell» (1978, 59). The humour and its «unsure» quality are tools for navigating the confessional risks that heterogeneous sexuality demands (1978, 61).

Additionally, the *Live Slug Reaction Meme* gained notoriety for encapsulating an absurd multitude of disciplinary queer constraints, left behind as an online trail of slug appearances. One such constraint is the paradoxical signalling of the homoerotic act and the repressive counterparts that still render it taboo and transgressive of heterogeneous sexuality. For Mason, the slug gaze exemplifies how queer identities are regulated within the community, fostering both discourse and self-policing expressions (Mason 2022), which offers insight into why Malabou might go to such an absurd effort to leave a trace of erasures. Consequently, each slug’s appearance as self-expression risks exclusion from the queer community. As an alien in Disney’s heteronormative discourse, we might call Klaud a phantom within a phantasmagorical environment. Thus, Klaud’s trace as the Live Slug Reaction Meme manifests a phantom in the most phantasmagorical environment – the internet. Underscoring Klaud’s absurd, plural phantomising is the bodily reveal of Eisenman’s *Prince of Swords*, which exposes the phantoms invested in heteropatric metaphors. In addition to its behavioural trace that attracts other like-minded slugs, the slug, as a hermaphrodite species housing both male and female sexual organs, has understandably become a queer icon for the plurality of non-binary sexuality. The leopard slug’s unique mating behaviours, further attest to their behavioural queerness. [5] The leopard slug mates whilst suspended, entwined with its partner on a thread of self-made mucus, symbolising queer sexual desire. This gloopy, mucoid procreation conceptually resembles Eisenman’s discarded paint tubes in *Makers Muck*, signalling productivities *remains*. When Simmons describes queer as being simultaneously «messy» and «wonderful» in the way it exposes the «abjection inherent in both the paintbrush and the body» (2013), we can recognise the materiality from which Eisenman’s gloopy multiple phantom bodies are produced, and which also forms their shamelessly absurd existence.

[5] Leopard slug mating video. BBC David Attenborough. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C-6_GNgjkU

Can we call Malabou’s plasticity queer?

Key to Judith Butler’s argument in *Melancholy Gender* for a same-sex ego as projected surface, is how the «unfinished process» of grieving the lost object of same-sex desire is the mode in which identifications are preserved in and as the ego (Butler 1995, 166). Similarly, *Maker’s Muck* illustrates an unfinished process between the artist, their work, and their environment. As previously described, Eisenman’s potter is depicted with hands in perpetual motion. The movement of the potter’s wheel

simultaneously moves the potter's fingers, making the touch between the potter and gloop reciprocal, highlighting an endless co-presence of interpretation and manifestation in the gloop, which everything in the installation – and Eisenman's work analysed in this paper – is made. *Maker's Muck* presents the ongoing exchange of interpretation and manifestation of gloop that remains indefinitely unfinished. Another unfinished exchange in *Maker's Muck* is that of identity. Eisenman creates and depicts an artist at work, producing a loop between Eisenman-the-artist and a substituted identity made by Eisenman. Not without humour, the sculpted discarded paint tubes labelled *Maker's Muck* lying amongst unfinished artworks resemble the grey-green residue at the bottom of a painter's turpentine jar, symbolising the essential remains of a painting. Butler's bodily sedimentation as a surface projection resonates in these remains (Butler 1995, 167). [6]

These remains recall Malabou's withdrawal into the trace of erasure that illustrates a nuanced relationship between surface inscriptions and transformation, countering Martell's interpretation. Rather than merely ignoring these inscriptions, Malabou's approach, akin to Eisenman's, allows for reconfiguring exclusion from heteropatric discourses as a form of othering into agency and inclusion. The image of «burning, plastic remains» in *Changing Difference*, which results from «woman's overexposure to dual exploitation» (2011a 93), highlights violence against women and against bodies threatening traditional idealised heteropatric categories. Despite declaring that it is a plasticity that «we must explore» (93), Malabou's burning remains that offer transformation akin to the pace of Eisenman's gloopiness have not reappeared and remain as a *remain*. [7] It seems apt that *Changing Difference* is where Malabou's surface conceals a trace as, in every chapter, Malabou's rigorous, clear articulation of woman's impossibility as a woman philosopher leads to their inclusion in Women's Studies, a discipline that developed in the late twentieth century (5). What is this place called Women's Studies? Who created it? The presence of Women's Studies alludes to the absence of women philosophers on library shelves under Philosophy, in the syllabuses of philosophical education programmes, and academic citations. Malabou's argument that «the term woman has a meaning outside the heterosexual matrix» suggests a connection with queerness (135) that might prompt calling plasticity queer.

Conclusion

Plasticity, like Eisenman's gloopiness, can «reveal the metaphors with which things are ontologically invested» (Malabou 2011a, 135) and exchange them for phantoms. In bringing Nicole Eisenman's gloopiness and Catherine Malabou's plasticity into contact, this paper highlights how Eisenman's gloopy, haptic, queer surface enhances the slipperiness of Malabou's plasticity while simultaneously offering plasticity a gloopy inclusiveness, subversiveness, and absurdity. Eisenman's gloopiness does not merely reflect Malabou's slippery plasticity; it extends it by offering plasticity new metaphorical investments. By defining gloopiness as an ontological surface,

[6] In *Melancholy Gender*, Butler's bodily ego as a projected surface appears as sedimentary and as an «archaeological remainder» of same-sex desired «objects loved and lost» under prevalent conditions of compulsory heterosexuality.

[7] The *remains* refer to Derrida's «remains» in *Glas* that are not a residue but a «kernel of strength of a new beginning».

this paper attempts to think of Eisenman's queer aesthetic as a horizon of knowledge embodied by a materiality capable of sculpting our immediate and contemporary condition. Eisenman's acts of everyday queer sculpting that transform traditional heteropatriarchal forms suggest that plasticity's slipperiness embodies further possibilities for equally radical transformation that will not appear as explosions or accidents.

It is no accident that Malabou likens the clitoris to «grit lodged deep on the shoe of fantasy» in *Pleasure Erased* (2022b, 1). When Malabou considers touching this *gritty clit*, she aligns it with experiencing a caesura that can rupture the «paradoxical identity of difference while revealing the multiplicity it shelters» (7). As a clitoral caesura, this opening concerns visibility in its fullness, like Merleau-Ponty believes painting as a caesura makes possible. Malabou's metaphor of a clitoris is a determined deformation of traditional philosophy that asserts a discourse inhabited by a desire beyond penetration which, owing to its feminine associations, consistently suffers multiple erasures despite it not exclusively belonging to women (Malabou 2022b). This is why Malabou appeals to Paul B. Preciado in *Pleasure Erased* as she does in *Changing Difference*, to propose the clitoris as «an organ for thought» (Malabou 2022b, 13; 2011a, 94). Citing an organ that responds positively to rubbing might suggest an insistence on haptic thinking, however, Malabou, despite likening herself to a sculptor does not share Eisenman's slug-like, bodily embrace, self-lubricating to bring a gloopy manifestation into being. What Eisenman does freely, Malabou seems reluctant to commit to – a total abandonment of an identity inscribed by the heteropatriarchy.

Methodological note

The collaborative writing process bringing together Eisenman's gloopiness and Malabou's plasticity has been challenging, reflecting plastic and gloopy characteristics along the way. Various formations and deformations of structure, intensity, and meaning have emerged, with images and concepts informing and leading to others. This indicates that the method has an expansive force of gloopiness capable of subverting metaphorical investments by substituting individual specificities. This multi-voiced approach required embracing plasticity's destructive and creative qualities and involved the authors frequently exchanging texts, enhancing malleability whilst navigating academic expectations. This served to reaffirm the risks of the approach and its vibrant potential. Ultimately, the paper self-consciously situates itself within the heteropatric context of academic philosophy, challenging the boundaries of traditional conventions of knowledge production, as plasticity and gloopiness do.

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Memory Activism. Plasticity of Digital Sculptures

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Memory culture, aesthetic resistance, and reconstruction – these are critical topics explored by various contemporary sculptural positions. Referring mainly to the (digital) sculptures of Juan Covelli's *Speculative Treasures* (2020-2022) but also to Nora Al-Badri's *Babylonian Vision* (2020) and Morehshin Allahyari's *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-2016), this paper deals with the technological and artistic potential of restoring and reinterpreting collective social and cultural memories within a meta(speculative)-archaeological framework. These works oscillate between cultural, translocated heritage, colonial history, and algorithm-based art in the post-digital era, claiming the digital space as a decolonial space. I propose an extended concept of plasticity, which encompasses both computer-supported, screen-based and thus coded and imagined plasticity, as well as haptic plasticity experienced via 3D printing, thereby enabling the memorial aspect of digital sculptures. Neuronal, algorithmic, and sculptural plasticity generate memory in different ways. Speculation is here considered as an artistic strategy, complemented by speculative fabulation (SF) in the sense articulated by Donna Haraway. Drawing on Wüstenberg and Gutman's concept of memory activism as an artistic mobilization or strategy, which might be more precisely termed "memory artivism", the paper further elaborates on memory as both a means and an end, being in constant flux such as mirrored in the aesthetics of digital morphing.

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1. Introduction

Memory culture, aesthetic resistance, and reconstruction – these are critical topics explored by various contemporary sculptural positions. Artistic and speculative forms of sculptural reconstruction aim to preserve cultural heritage that is threatened, inaccessible, destroyed, or lost due to war, colonialism, or ecological catastrophes. In this text, I will discuss the technological possibilities for preserving the collective memory of historical events and artifacts through digital sculpture. I propose an extended concept of plasticity, which encompasses both computer-supported, screen-based – and thus coded and imagined plasticity –, as well as haptic plasticity experienced via 3D printing, thereby enabling the memorial aspect of digital sculptures. Neuronal, algorithmic, and sculptural plasticity generate memory in different ways. Here, plasticity is understood as something that generates form, which in turn produces memory through perception. But when modeling with software, such as the “memory” of a learning algorithm, how can we make sense of a work’s plasticity, and which modes of perception are being engaged? Furthermore, I will analyze speculation as an artistic strategy and memory activism (Gutmann & Wüstenberg 2021) as artistic mobilization or strategy, within this genre-specific notion of plasticity. The focus will be on one exemplary case study: Juan Covelli’s *Speculative Treasures* (2020-2022), contextualized alongside other artistic positions, such as Nora Al-Badri’s *Babylonian Vision* (2020) and Morehshin Allahyari’s *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-2016). Covelli’s work oscillates between cultural, translocated heritage, colonial history, and algorithm-based art in the post-digital era. My text primarily deals with the plasticity of digital sculpture, which I will explore more closely through the aforementioned artistic positions. It examines how speculative digital reconstructions can act as tools for symbolic repatriation and aesthetic resistance, highlighting their ethical, historical, and philosophical implications.

Historically, aside from the metric-physical aspects, three-dimensional plastic space is essential for a comprehensive understanding of sculpture. According to Rosalind Krauss (1977) and Gottfried Boehm (2009), sculptural space tangibly manifests on the surface of each specific object – a place of communication with the environment and a kind of membrane for external exchange. In relation to 20th-century phenomenological concepts, Johann Gottfried Herder’s understanding of sculpture (1778) as a physical experience, emphasizing the growing relevance of plasticity, hints at a new status of subjectivity surrounding the artistic artifact. The reversal of the genre hierarchy that he formulated, favoring a revaluation of the sense of touch, underscores the plasticity of the sculptural three-dimensional «*Bildsäule*» (image columns) (Herder 1994, 243-326). By (optically) touching the surface of the sculptural body, recipients experience their own physical presences as both subject and object; the perception of the other person becomes an existential experience. Thus, the understanding of a sculptural object is not primarily determined by our visual perception but rather by our «binocular-stereoscopic, motion-sensitive, haptic, and kinetic view» (Dobbe 2006, 117).

The nature of the surface has a decisive influence on how a sculpture «behaves» or appears, determining whether it opens up to its surroundings

or closes itself off hermetically. In addition to Boehm's pictorial-theoretical approach, Kurt Badt understands the epoch-spanning plastic process as a «basic method» in the sense of an organic-evolutionary surface design. According to Badt, plasticity is formulated in the «*Eindringlichkeit*» (forcefulness), in the «*Auf-uns-Eindringen*» (intrusion) of phenomena, in their «*Von-innen-nach-außen-Drängen*» (pushing from the inside outwards) (Badt 1963, 136). He summarizes: «A form is called plastic when life is perceptibly displayed in a way that shapes the body» (Badt 1963, 137), [1] i.e., entities whose power is expressed at the limits of their appearance – plasticity as a characteristic of the physical with growth processes. In conjunction with the evolving interest in the aesthetics and iconology of materials, the notion of plasticity is experiencing a Renaissance – for example, in Dietmar Rübel's seminal publication *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen*, published in 2012. As an antithesis to the sculpture-typical semantics of the eternal, the author examines the characteristics of the current principle of a plasticity based on the metabolism of non-durable substances and their capacity for metamorphosis (Rübel 2012).

[1] The quotes in the text are translated by the author.

However, with the development of digital and virtual sculptures, it is necessary to examine whether the bipolar duality of the plastic-haptic and the optic-visual still holds relevance. How are media-specific parameters, such as scalability and site-specificity, altered when sculptures circulate as files online and can be printed in different sizes at any time, thus regaining their physical corporeality and plasticity? How can the associated hierarchies and canon formations be critically reflected upon? Elisabeth von Samsonow points out that the 3D printer, insofar as it becomes the apparatus of virtual sculpture, brings back into play not only a long-abandoned idea of printing in the sense of historical reproduction techniques, but also a seemingly outdated concept of sculpture (Samsonow 2007, 280). With a data set as a transcription of a physical object, one can print a sculpture.

Etymologically, the term “plasticity” derives from the Greek *plassein*, meaning “to model”. Originally, it referred to something that is easily malleable, but it also encompassed the ideas of being shaped through education and practice, as well as the notions of invention and deceit. The term entered the German language in the 18th century as «*Einbildungskraft*» (imagination) and/or «*anschauende Erkenntnis*» (visual cognition), and it was Hegel, among others, who attributed it with philosophical significance (Dongowski 2002, 818). In this way, “plastic” and “plasticity” became fundamental aesthetic concepts in German aesthetics and art theory.

The French philosopher Catherine Malabou has extensively explored the concept of plasticity, drawing from medicine, psychology, and philosophy, in addition to her critical reading of Hegel. According to Malabou, plasticity does not adhere to any form-preserving principle: rather, it can both take shape and give form. She describes it as «a sort of natural sculpting that forms our identity, an identity modeled by experience» (Malabou 2012, 3). Malabou identifies three types of cerebral plasticity: the modeling of neuronal connections, their modification, and the brain's ability to heal (Malabou 2008, 17–29). She also introduces the concept of destructive plasticity, which occurs during accidents, surgical interventions, and trauma, arguing that destruction is a crucial aspect of cerebral plasticity, which restores its dialectical nature. Malabou conceives of form as movement,

considering living materials that give birth to their own form and also shapes itself through external influences (see also Malabou 2017). In her opinion, form and essence are intertwined, with the biological merging with the social. We are open to change while also resisting deformation. Plasticity, therefore, signifies openness, adaptability, and resistance; just as the brain is shaped by interactions, history inscribes itself upon it (see also Ströbele 2018, 154-156). Plasticity thus «denotes both what is *gestaltend* and what is *gestaltet*, both *Bildung* and *Bildbarkeit*» (Iacobone 2025, 7). Malabou speaks of an experience shaping the body and existence of people, leaving its traces. In this context, cerebral plasticity corresponds to the ability to shape memory and form a narrative, which is crucial here. This capacity is reflected in our lifelong ability to create new experiences and memories, leading Malabou to question what we want to do with our brain and its synaptic plasticity (Malabou 2008, 7). However, she cautions against equating plasticity with flexibility, which she views as the ideological form of plasticity – flexibility being «plasticity minus its genius» (Malabou 2008, 12). Therefore, the question should not be «To what point are we flexible?» but rather «To what extent are we plastic?» (Malabou 2008, 14). The plastic art of the brain, she argues, creates a «statue capable of self-repair» (Malabou 2008, 27-28). Malabou frequently employs artistic metaphors, especially relating to sculpture, and refers to the cerebral system as a self-sculptured structure. The self, in her view, is defined by the synthesis of all the brain's plastic processes. Referring to Malabou, plasticity is related to the digital medium and to collective memory.

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2. Juan Covelli's *Speculative Treasures*

In the series *Speculative Treasures* (2020-2022), Juan Covelli focuses on translocated sculptures from Colombia's archaeological heritage, working to restore their visibility against oblivion [FIG. 1]. After studying philosophy and photography at Central Saint Martin's School in London, he is now living in Bogotá as an artist and curator. *Speculative Treasures* is based on a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) trained to reconstruct the archaeological artifacts of the pre-Columbian *Quimbaya Treasure* in 2D. The treasure is currently housed in the Museo de América in Madrid. Covelli selected twelve sculptures from this treasure, which dates back from the 6th century BC to the Spanish conquest, and includes over one hundred burial objects from the Quimbaya people, who lived in the Cauca Valley of present-day Colombia. In 1892, the then Colombian president ceded the treasure to the Spanish Queen Maria Cristina, as a «thank you» for the support of the Spanish crown in the arbitration award on the borders between Colombia and Venezuela (Perea et al. 2013). Despite years of discussions about possible restitution, the objects remain in the Spanish museum. Covelli thus describes the intention of his artistic work as follows: «the purpose of this project is to find alternatives for the symbolic repatriation of this precious treasure using artificial intelligence as a radical tool for creation» (Covelli 2022).

For this symbolic speculative form of artistic reconstruction and virtual repatriation, Covelli trained a machine-learning algorithm using around 15,000 images of similar artifacts from the Museo del Oro in Bogotá [FIG. 2]. He utilized this data pool because he was not permitted to



[FIG. 1] Detail of brass-filled filament 3D-printed sculptures, part of the *Speculative Treasures* installation, displayed in a vitrine at the Museum of America, alongside replicas of the Quimbaya Treasure. This piece is part of the Espejito exhibition, curated by Grandeza Studio at the Museum of America, Madrid, 2024. Image credit: Marina Navarro.

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[FIG. 2] Selection tables of objects from the Gold Museum collection in Bogotá, provided by the museum's curator and anthropologist, Héctor García Botero. 2020, courtesy of the artist Juan Covelli.

Banco de la República. Bogotá D.C., Colombia		Selección inicial proyecto Juan Carlos Covelli 13/10/2020		Página
13/10/2020				1
Registro:	O00015			
Función:	Recipiente para cal			
Forma:				
Componentes:	1			
Fecha:	500 a.C. - 700 d.C.			
Dimensiones:	23,5 x 11,4 cm			
Peso:	777,7 gramos			
Categoría:	Excepcional			
Técnica manuf. 1:	Fundición a la cera perdida con núcleo en varias fundiciones			
Técnica manuf. 2:				
Unidad Cultural:	Cauca Medio - Quimbaya Periodo Temprano			
				
Registro:	O00156			
Función:	Colgante			
Forma:				
Componentes:	1			
Fecha:	500 a.C. - 700 d.C.			
Dimensiones:	3,2 x 1,2 cm			
Peso:	9,35 gramos			
Categoría:	2			
Técnica manuf. 1:	Fundición a la cera perdida			
Técnica manuf. 2:				
Unidad Cultural:	Cauca Medio - Quimbaya Periodo Temprano			
				
Registro:	O00314			
Función:	Colgante			
Forma:				
Componentes:	4			
Fecha:	500 a.C. - 700 d.C.			
Dimensiones:	6 x 5,5 cm			
Peso:	28,74 gramos			
Categoría:	1			
Técnica manuf. 1:	Fundición a la cera perdida			
Técnica manuf. 2:	Martillado			
Unidad Cultural:	Cauca Medio - Quimbaya Periodo Temprano			
				
Registro:	O00338			
Función:	Recipiente para cal			
Forma:				
Componentes:	2			
Fecha:	500 a.C. - 700 d.C.			
Dimensiones:	11 x 9,5 cm			
Peso:	415,9 gramos			
Categoría:	Excepcional			
Técnica manuf. 1:	Fundición a la cera perdida con núcleo cerrado y tabiques			
Técnica manuf. 2:				
Unidad Cultural:	Cauca Medio - Quimbaya Periodo Temprano			
				

Banco de la República. Bogotá D.C., Colombia		Covelli 3		Página			
17/11/2020				1			
Registro:	O00026						
Función:	Palillo para cal						
Forma:	Con remate						
Representación:	Antropomorfo						
Aditamentos:	Con figura zoomorfa						
Unidad Cultural:	Calima Valle - Periodo Yotoco						
Fecha:	200 a.C. - 1300 d.C.						
Procedencia:	Restrepo (Colombia, Valle del Cauca)						
Dimensiones:	30 x 2,2 cm						
Técnica manuf. 1:	Fundición a la cera perdida						
Técnica manuf. 2:							
Técnica manuf. 3:							
Registro:	O00029						
Función:	Recipiente para cal						
Forma:	Zoomorfo						
Representación:	En forma de felino						
Aditamentos:							
Unidad Cultural:	Calima Valle - Periodo Yotoco						
Fecha:	200 a.C. - 1300 d.C.						
Procedencia:	Restrepo (Colombia, Valle del Cauca)						
Dimensiones:	6,5 x 13,3 x 6,5 cm						
Técnica manuf. 1:							
Técnica manuf. 2:	Martillado sobre modelo						
Técnica manuf. 3:	Ensamblado con clavos						
Registro:	O00080						
Función:	Colgante						
Forma:	Antropozoomorfo						
Representación:	Tipo Darién						
Aditamentos:							
Unidad Cultural:	Chocó - Chocó						
Fecha:	500 d.C. - 1600 d.C.						
Procedencia:	Quindío (Colombia)						
Dimensiones:	9,1 x 6,6 cm						
Técnica manuf. 1:							
Técnica manuf. 2:							
Técnica manuf. 3:							

scan the original sculptures in Madrid and, according to the artist, was also denied free access to image material.

Monetary paywalls in commercial image production are also a relevant topic of Nora Al-Badri, who used a neural network based on Mesopotamian, Neo-Sumerian, and Assyrian artifacts to create a kind of speculative archaeology (*Babylonian Vision*, 2020) [FIG. 3]. Her neural network was trained with 10,000 images from various mu-

seum collections, some obtained without permission. [2] Similarly, Morehshin Allahyari emphasized the lack of in-

[2] <https://www.nora-al-badri.de/works-index> [6.9.2024].

formation and the problem of limited access to relevant data due to commercial image politics: «I want to protect them not only from ISIS, but from Silicon Valley, from Google, from all the tech companies in the West, from all the white men and their colonialist technologies» (Allahyari 2019). In her sculptural series *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-2016), Allahyari reconstructed 12 artifacts from the Mosul Museum in Iraq that were destroyed by ISIS, using digital modeling and 3D printing. In her research, Allahyari explored the concept of digital colonialism and viewed these reconstructed sculptures as time capsules that attempt to resist the destruction of history and protect memories

in their «digital exile» for future societies. [3] Each figurative sculpture contains a USB drive and a memory card with text information about this endangered cultural her-

[3] <https://morehshin.com/material-speculation-isis/> [06.09.2024].

itage (see e.g. Ströbele 2023, 97-98). Covelli approaches translocated historical heritage speculatively through its virtual simulation to support its visibility and commemoration. In the context of the Spanish museum the treasure is somehow uprooted twice.

All three artists raise institution-critical problems of accessibility and (free) availability of image material. Today, data sets are trained with millions of images, primarily controlled by large corporations from the global North; much of the visual content also originates from these regions – a hegemonic distribution that these artists counter with aesthetic resistance in the form of synthetic, plastic images.

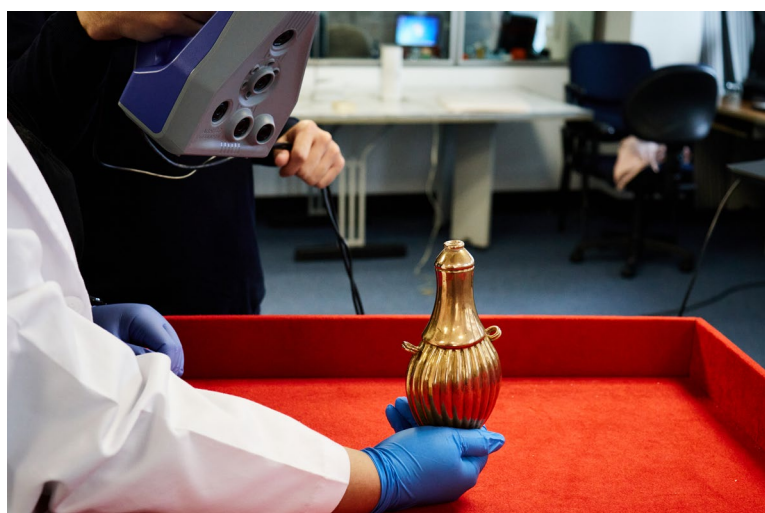
In the first phase, Covelli's GAN was trained to learn how to create new sculptures whose aesthetic qualities and stylistic forms were similar to those of the original objects in Madrid [FIG. 4]. The results are twelve videos, which were acquired by the same institution for the contemporary art collection, as well as 3D scans of 30 objects from the Museo del Oro. This «speculative process», as Covelli calls it, reflects a seemingly common interest and resulted in four sculptures printed in brass filament (2023-2024) in the second phase of the project [FIG. 5]. In this phase, Covelli used a different AI architecture:

it was the artist and engineer Daniel Jiménez who offered the technological solution through a model called Transformer2NeRF. [...] First, the input image is fed into a Transformer encoder, which extracts a set of features that capture the spatial and contextual relationships within the image. These features are then passed through a 3D dense neural layer or network, which produces an initial 3D model. This model is later refined using a NeRF architecture, which takes the 2D image and the initial 3D model as inputs and generates a more detailed 3D representation with considerable computational efficiency, without requiring information from all sides of the object. (Peña et al. 2024)



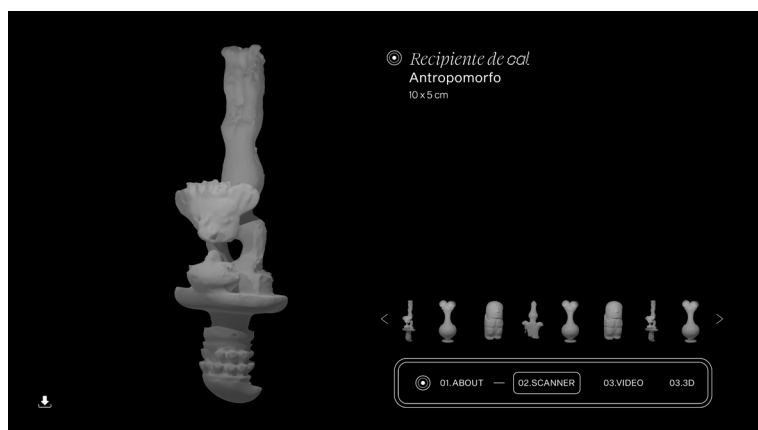
[FIG. 3] Nora Al-Badri, Video Stills
Babylonian Vision, 2020, courtesy of
the artist.

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[FIG. 4] Scanning process of the
Quimbaya Poporo at the Gold Museum,
Bogotá, 2022, courtesy of the artist
Juan Covelli.

[FIG. 5] Detail of the *Speculative
Treasures* project website, which can
be viewed at [https://www.tesoro-
sespeculativos.xyz/](https://www.tesoro-sespeculativos.xyz/) (2024), courtesy of
the artist Juan Covelli.



According to the artist, the advantage of using a Transformer encoder is that the high-resolution images can be processed efficiently, leading to more accurate 3D models that better reflect complex spatial – and one might add, plastic – relationships within the scene, favoring a more realistic and detailed figurative representation. The current plan is to make six exhibits available for download on a website, allowing them to be printed individually and thus circulate digitally on the Internet. [4] With each download to a hard drive, the narrative will be rewritten.

[4] <https://www.tesorosespeculativos.xyz/> [6.9.2024].

Speculation comes from the Latin *speculari*, meaning «to observe». It describes a hypothetical train of thoughts that extends beyond tangible reality. «Speculation», according to Rosalyn Diprose, «is futural: it keeps open (past and present) worlds to potentiality, possibility, and the unknown» (Diprose 2017, 40). Referring to Alfred North Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, Diprose emphasizes the contrast between practical thinking, abstract reflection, and empirical evidence, favoring instead introspection and prediction (futural, without a predictable outcome). Speculating, according to Naomi (now Noam) Gramlich, is a linguistic-material assemblage *with, through, and in* bodies (Gramlich 2020, 21). Gramlich suggests that «long before the speculative turn, thinking in *futurum II* and the visionary design of other pasts, presents, and futures were constitutive components of feminist, post, and decolonial theories as well as gender and queer studies» (Gramlich 2020, 9). Feminist speculation – the term stands here as a counter-program to supposedly firmly established and objective knowledge – takes the reality-constituting power and significance of fictions and narratives seriously and claims them for itself through reconfiguration. Speculation, as an ontological endeavor also characterizes Covelli's *Speculative Treasures*.

In the summer of 2024, an exhibition opened at the Museo de América in Madrid, where Covelli exhibited a 3D-printed brass sculpture in a vitrine, displayed alongside seven replicas of the original sculptures, which were created in Spain in the 1970s [FIG. 6]. The impression of physical plasticity is further emphasized by leaving the print grooves and a rough surface, the machine-produced *modelé*, suggesting traces of artificial patina. The material accumulation of the printer still refers to the original production method of a *Plastik* (from the Greek *platto*, meaning «to form», «to shape») as opposed to sculpture, which is created using a subtractive process (*sculper* meaning «to cut», «to engrave», «to carve»). The questions are: do these speculative sculptures function as metaphorical references to the historical treasure? Is this attempt at mechanical representability and describability an artistic strategy for memory research?

Additionally, the artist personally placed a small sign with a dedication to the (so far unsuccessful) restitution attempts – without agreement, as a subversive gesture of artistic-memorial resistance. Together with additional information, the viewers might have reclaimed this sculpture in a specific historical-political context. The question remains how their memory is affected by this simultaneously preservative and subversive artistic practice?

Digital morphing – a fundamental characteristic of GAN-based art and contemporary visual culture, such as in Covelli's work – embodies the future world of ontological mobility [FIG. 7]. Unlike museums and excavation sites, these digital sculptures are neither titled nor classified. Instead,



[FIG. 6] View of the *Speculative Treasures* installation in a vitrine at the Museum of America, along with replicas of the Quimbaya Treasure. Part of the *Espejito, Espejito* exhibition, curated by Grandeza Studio at the Museum of America, Madrid, 2024. Image credit: Asier Rua, courtesy of the artist Juan Covelli.

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[FIG. 7] Still image from one of the videos produced in the first phase of *Speculative Treasures* (2022), courtesy of the artist Juan Covelli.

they are strung together as an artistic-speculative archaeology. These visual worlds represent traces of memory and potentially infinite archives of objects of remembrance. The computer-generated special effects in image processing make transitions and object contours – specifically the figures' physiognomy, body shapes, and plasticity – appear fluid in a seamless transformation. This stylistic feature underscores the imagined post-humanist paradigm of fluid body boundaries rather than integral, bounded beings, as proposed by Donna Haraway and others, leading to a visualization of "becoming".

Norah Campbell and Mike Saren argue that «the concept of morphing, or flow, is almost universally regarded as positive, or at least apolitical, in poststructural theory» (Campbell & Saren 2010, 162). They use the term «morphing» to «describe the feats of an imagined technological posthumanism which cruises effortlessly and seamlessly through ontologies. [...] It can have a distinctly uncanny effect» (Campbell & Saren 2010, 163). Thus, digital morphing demonstrates that technology does not oppose nature but simulates it. It leads to simulacra in Covelli's artistic research using artificial intelligence with vague references to the heritage's reality taken from a data pool without the presence of a stable referent. These alienated digital simulacra are detached from material substance and represent mainly themselves, similar to the Baudrillardian understanding (Baudrillard 1978, see also Quéau 1995, Hinterwaldner 2010,

33-41). [5] Computer-assisted data mining creates new images that express a knowledge of the heritage and encompass a fictional, sculptural aesthetic of digital plasticity in today's (post-)digital age. [6]

This specific aesthetics of digital morphing allows for new intermediate images (*Zwischenbilder*), following a plasticity of alienation (*Verfremdung*) [FIG. 8]. Their fluid, sometimes distorted contours, however, give them an uncanny quality; as deforming intermediate beings, they embody a vague idea of what the original artifacts might have looked like. But how important is the specific shape, and what is the significance of each figurative distortion produced by artificial intelligence? In Covelli's case, this characterization of uncanniness may reflect a kind of artistic, metaphorical sadness, which is the result of the denied access to the original artifacts.

A material is plastic if it cannot return to its original form and resists infinite polymorphism (see e.g. Malabou 2008, 15). While the morphing sculptural image is characterized by an imagined plasticity encoded through computer programming, the printed figure is defined by its physical facticity, and thus its material, touchable plasticity. This can be experienced kinetically and succinctly through its all-pervasiveness. The contours of the digital, morphing (intermediate) images themselves are attempted to be grasped by the eyes in favor of their imagined physicality (only) evoked on the screen – as if they wanted to bring their fluidity to a brief standstill in order to see them in their entirety. The plasticity of the algorithmically generated shape visible on the screen (that is, the

[5] Maybe these screen-based, sculptural images could be related to the simulacra of Baudrillard's third order, in which the real functions as an alibi for the model and cannot exceed the model (see e.g. Hinterwaldner 2010, 36-37).

[6] Thanks are due to Mara-Johanna Kölmel, who drew my attention to her blog text "Digital plasticity. From an art historical phenomenon to contemporary architectures of power" (Kölmel 2022) after I had submitted this paper. Her dissertation *Sculpture in the Augmented Sphere. Reflections at the Intersection of Corporeality, Plasticity and Monumentality* will be published in 2025.



[FIG. 8] *Speculative Treasures*, installation view of *Futures Past* (2022), arebyte Gallery, London. Image by Max Colson.

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spatiality and corporeality of the virtual artifact) is enhanced by the process of morphing. Scanned three-dimensional images translated into binary codes, as seen in Covelli's *Speculative Treasure*, are retranslated into their sculptural dimension when they can be haptically experienced again through printing. This process allows the image to be accessed ubiquitously in digital form with a suitable apparatus, making its data available for download.

Covelli's digital and printable monuments address ethical, philosophical, and historical challenges through an artistic strategy of speculative archaeology. The artist approaches the original historical artifacts by utilizing fed-in image material, allowing the algorithm to evoke a virtual form of memory from this data pool; the plasticity of the brain functions in a similar way, since individual memory is often composed of fragments. Referring to Malabou, plasticity is here related to the digital medium and to collective memory at the same time.

Drawing on theories of memory research, Gutman and Wüstenberg have formulated their concept of «memory activism» (2021), which sits at the intersection of memory studies and social movement research. The two authors, who edited *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* in 2022, aim to define the often loosely-used term «memory activism» more precisely. According to them, memory activism presupposes a clear memorial goal; it can manifest as a public appearance by an individual or collective action, usually emerging from grassroots movements rather than state organization. «Memory activists use memory as *the* crucial way of transforming society from below», they explain, emphasizing the belief in the transformative power of memory as central to the concept (Gutman & Wüstenberg 2021, 4). For Gutman & Wüstenberg,

it is essential to maintain a terminological and semantic value-neutrality, encompassing both democratic and anti-democratic actions. Here, I propose understanding the term as an artistic mobilization or strategy, which might be more precisely termed «memory activism». [7] *Memory activism* thus refers to memory as both a means and an end. Memory cultures and practices are never static; they are always in flux. Four different roles or types of relationships to the object of memory – Victims, Pragmatists, Resisters and Heroes, and Entangled Agents – determine the behavior of the respective actors. In the case of Covelli, biographical factors particularly contribute to why he could be considered a «Resistor»: someone «whose interpretations of the past have been contested in the past or are being contested in the present» (Gutman & Wüstenberg 2021, 7). Memory activists pursue the mnemonic goal of fixing memories or resisting change, for example in opposition to forgetting or a particular culture of remembrance.

[7] Referring to Stéphanie Lemoine and Samiar Ouadi's publication *Artivisme. Art, action politique et résistance culturelle* (2010), Dominique Berthet (2018) further elaborates on this transdisciplinary form of art. «Artivism» (a blend of art and activism) encompasses artistic actions that address social and political issues, reviving agitational practices in resistance to neoliberal capitalism. Using examples such as Pussy Riot and the Guerilla Girls, Berthet explains that activism spans a wide range of approaches, from traditional techniques to ephemeral, situation-based aesthetic practices realized in public spaces or on the Internet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although computers became an artistic medium in the 1950s and digital technologies such as CNC, augmented reality, virtual reality, and 3D scanning and printing processes have been utilized by artists since the 1980s, there has been a noticeable lack of comprehensive reflection on plasticity within sculptural discourse (see e.g. Kölmel & Ströbele 2023). While the projects by Juan Covelli, Morehshin Allahyari, and Nora Al-Badri pursue different goals, they all employ digital and sculptural media to preserve cultural heritage against oblivion through speculation, imagination, and fabulation. By doing so, they demonstrate the technological and artistic potential of restoring and reinterpreting collective social and cultural memories within a meta(speculative)-archaeological framework. These artists claim the digital space as a decolonial space. The extent to which artistic rethinking through computers and machine learning can contribute to the renewed and greater visibility of endangered, inaccessible, or destroyed historical artifacts – in the form of expanded memory activism – is to be examined on a case-by-case basis. In this context, memory culture, aesthetic resistance, reconstruction, and canon reflection are essential characteristics, perhaps complemented by speculative fabulation (SF) in the sense articulated by Donna Haraway as a mode of attention, care and a practice of worlding where the lines between realism and fantasy are blurred (Haraway 2011; 2016, 213-218). Here, scientific, historic facts and speculative fabulation intertwine and are reconfigured in techno-based surrogates with a digital plasticity. SF traces and follows a metaphorical, technocultural thread, as seen in the digital sculptures aimed at countering forgetting. These artists are engaging in protective efforts against the loss of cultural property or the absence of restitution, while criticizing colonizing hierarchies. From an extensive pool of images, algorithm-supported digital sculptures are created via morphing, stretching the canon to the point of absurdity, ultimately leading to a cultural dead end and thus opening new perspectives.

Plasticity refers to both the physicality (or virtually perceived three-dimensionality) and the malleability of a material. In the latter sense, it also refers to the malleability of one's memory as a process of becoming – thereby circling back to Malabou's neuronal concept. The memory image and the digital image are characterized by an imagined plasticity that is imprinted in our imagination. Technologically, the algorithm encodes, models, or plasticizes the digital memory sculpture. Just as the learning process of the brain is described as its plasticity, the algorithm learns through further programming and development. In Gestalt psychology, plasticity is the intelligence factor that allows perceptions and experiences to be placed in entirely new contexts, similar to assembling a form in the mind's eye: «because with the sheer mass of data, cultural big data, [...] structures and patterns can be made visible that would otherwise remain invisible and very abstract, or that are not talked about in a society» (Al-Badri 2024). Nora Al-Badri refers to this process as *technoheritage* and questions whether artificial intelligence can process and stimulate our collective memory of the past. While «heritage» or legacy typically focuses on the past, Covelli, along with Al-Badri and Allahyari, emphasizes a speculative, more collective, and inclusive future, aiming to conceive sculptures as a means of countering forgetting. 3D processing, publication, and distribution of the files function as a tool of artistic resistance – memory activism – against the translocation and iconoclasm of historical statues, in favor of the traditional-historical task of sculptural *memoria*. Digital sculptures demand an expanded understanding of plasticity: a coded, screen-based, and imagined plasticity, but also a haptic plasticity that manifests through 3D printing. Plasticity, in this context, is understood as something that generates memory.

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plasticity

IV

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The present text on the plasticity of art and brain was presented by Horst Bredekamp at the symposium *Brain Roads. Exploring Neuroplasticity Through Art and Science*. This event, held in Berlin on November 2, 2023 as part of the Berlin Science Week 2023 and supported by the Cluster of Excellence "Matters of Activity. Image Space Material" of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and by the Ambassade de France en Allemagne, was organized by Patricia Ribault and Olaf Avenati with the aim of fostering a dialogue between the arts (especially graphic arts and design) and neurosurgery.

Featuring a keynote lecture by Hugues Duffau (Professor and Chairman of the Neurosurgery Department in the Montpellier University Medical Center and Head of the team "Plasticity of the central nervous system, human stem cells and glial tumors" at the Institute for Neurosciences of Montpellier), the symposium also invited artists and scholars from the humanities to reflect on the unique aspects of the neurosurgical procedures performed by Duffau and his team, during which the patient remains awake throughout the entire operation and actively participates in it by engaging in an actual dialogue.

More information about the event is available at the following link: <https://www.matters-of-activity.de/en/activities/11943/brain-roads>. A volume collecting the results of the various editions of the symposium and the activities related to this project is forthcoming (in English).

A heartfelt thank you goes to Patricia Ribault and Olaf Avenati, not only for organizing and making the *Brain Roads* events possible, but also for the opportunity to reproduce this contribution in the 22nd issue of *Philosophy Kitchen*. Finally, sincere thanks to Professor Horst Bredekamp for his generosity in making his text available to the readers of *Philosophy Kitchen*.

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Zwei Werke zur Plastizität

Im Jahr 2016 erschien jenes Buch, das Hugues Duffau weltweit berühmt machte, *L'erreur de Broca* (Duffau 2016). Es handelte von der schier unglaublichen, bislang nicht genutzte Areale des Gehirns zu aktivieren oder zerstörte Bereiche an anderen Stellen wieder herzustellen. Jene entscheidende Qualität beschrieb der Autor als *Plastizität* des Gehirnes. Mit diesem Begriff bezog er sich auf dessen Möglichkeit, auf Veränderungen und Verletzungen elastisch zu reagieren, also eine Plastizität zu entwickeln und nicht starr und stabil, sondern fluid und beweglich zu sein.

Vor diesem Hintergrund ist das Titelbild nicht ohne Hintersinn. [1] Auf den ersten Blick fällt die Silhouette eines Kopfes auf, in dem sich von unten her Stränge nach oben ziehen, um dort im Sinne eines festgelegten Schaltkreises die Funktionsfähigkeit des Gehirns symbolisch anzudeuten. In Form eines stabilen Schaltkreises, wie es in Computern angelegt ist, wird hier das Innere eines Kopfes ausgewiesen, das in all seiner Starrheit eher einer Karte von U-Bahnen denn einem beweglichen Organismus gleicht.

Worum es dem Autor stattdessen geht, bildet der Hintergrund ab, der im Stile einer ovalen Weltkarte verschiedene Zentren ausweist, von denen aus unregelmäßige Stränge ausgehen und sich auch wieder verbinden, teils geometrisch, teils regulär. Die linke und die rechte Hälfte könnten gespiegelt sein, aber die drei zur Kalotte gehenden, von rechts oben kommenden Stränge weisen aus, dass eine spiegelbildliche Symmetrie nicht angelegt ist. Es ist der Hinter- und Untergrund, der dem entspricht, was die Philosophie des Gehirns Duffau zufolge ausmacht.

Fünf Jahre zuvor, 2011, war eine der wichtigsten Publikationen von Duffau erschienen, der von ihm herausgegebene Sammelband *Brain Mapping* (2011a). In

Due opere sulla plasticità

Nel 2016 venne pubblicato il libro che rese Hugues Duffau famoso in tutto il mondo, *L'erreur de Broca* (Duffau 2016). Il testo trattava dell'incredibile capacità del cervello di attivare aree fino a quel momento inutilizzate o, in caso di lesioni, di ripristinare alcune funzioni attivandole in altre zone. Questa fondamentale qualità venne definita dall'autore come *plasticità cerebrale*. Con questo concetto Duffau indicava la capacità del cervello di reagire elasticamente alle alterazioni e alle lesioni, cioè la capacità di sviluppare una plasticità: divenire fluido e dinamico invece di rimanere rigido e statico.

In questo contesto, l'immagine che venne scelta per la copertina del libro di Duffau non è priva di significato. [1] A un primo sguardo, si nota la silhouette di una testa dentro cui alcune linee procedono dal basso verso l'alto, come filamenti elettrici atti a simboleggiare la funzionalità del cervello nel senso di un circuito pre-stabilito. L'interno della testa viene quindi descritto come un circuito stabile, simile a quello di un computer, che nella sua rigidità somiglia più a una mappa della metropolitana che a un organismo dinamico.

Ciò che realmente sta a cuore all'autore è rappresentato invece dallo sfondo, che, come un planisfero, mostra diversi centri da cui partono linee irregolari che si collegano tra loro, in parte in maniera geometrica e in parte in maniera più organica. La metà sinistra e quella destra potrebbero sembrare speculari, ma i tre filamenti che si dirigono verso la calotta cranica, provenienti dall'angolo in alto a destra, indicano che non c'è intenzione di simmetria. È proprio questo sfondo che rappresenta al meglio la filosofia cerebrale elaborata da Duffau.

Cinque anni prima, nel 2011, era stata pubblicata una delle opere più importanti di Duffau, un volume da lui

[1] Das Titelbild ist unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: http://www.michel-lafon.fr/livre/1678-L_erreur_de_Broca.html

[1] L'immagine di copertina è visibile al seguente link: http://www.michel-lafon.fr/livre/1678-L_erreur_de_Broca.html

seinem programmatischen Artikel: *Brain plasticity: A new concept in neuroscience*, hat Duffau in einer Reihe von Illustrationen ausgewiesen, wie die durch Analyse und Training erreichte Veränderungsmöglichkeit realisiert wird (2011b, 352). In einer weiteren Darstellung im selben Aufsatz (356) ist in den farbigen Aufnahmen der Wölbungen des Gehirnes, die nun mit Nummern versehen werden, die Plastizität dieses Organs auch in seiner Formung besonders deutlich und einprägsam hervorgehoben.

Ein Jahr später, 2012, erschien ein voluminöser Band mit dem Titel: *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen* seitens des an der Kunsthochschule von Dresden lehrenden Kunsthistorikers Dietmar Rübel (2012). Es ist zu fragen, ob der Umstand, dass ein Kunsthistoriker und ein Neurochirurg etwa zur selben Zeit den Begriff der *Plastizität* zur Bestimmung sowohl der Kunst wie auch des Gehirns verwendeten, dem Zufall verdankt ist oder einer inneren Logik folgt.

Rübel bezog sich in seinem Buch vor allem auf alle Formen der beweglichen Kunst, wie sie etwa von Auguste Rodin und dessen Interpreten Georg Simmel, dem zeitgenössischen Berliner Philosophen, formuliert worden war. Von besonderer Bedeutung war die Skulptur aus der Berliner Nationalgalerie, *L'homme et sa pensée* von 1896-1900 (Rübel 2012, 39-43). [2] Aus dem Marmorblock entsteht scheinbar von innen her ein Paar, bei dem sich ein Mann auf ein ephemeres Wesen, vermutlich einem noch vorpubertären Mädchen, zubewegt und sie auf das Brustbein küsst. Das Paar kommt aus dem Stein, suggeriert aber, dass es in seiner Unfertigkeit in diesen auch wieder zurücksinken kann. Die Bewegung innerhalb des Marmorblockes geht vor- und zurück. Das denkende, und hier das Unbewusstsein ausdrückende Gehirn gestaltet Rodin als

curato intitolato *Brain Mapping* (2011a). In un suo articolo programmatico, *Brain plasticity: A new concept in neuroscience*, attraverso una serie di immagini (2011b, 352) Duffau illustrava la possibilità di modificare il cervello attraverso analisi ed allenamento. In un'altra rappresentazione riprodotta all'interno dello stesso saggio (356), le immagini colorate e numerate delle circonvoluzioni del cervello mettevano in evidenza come la plasticità di questo organo ne riguardasse anche la conformazione stessa.

Un anno dopo, nel 2012, veniva pubblicato un ampio volume intitolato *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen* (*Plasticità. Una storia dell'arte del mutevole*) dello storico dell'arte Dietmar Rübel, allora docente presso l'Accademia d'arte di Dresda (Rübel 2012). Viene da chiedersi se il fatto che uno storico dell'arte e un neurochirurgo abbiano utilizzato all'incirca nello stesso periodo il concetto di plasticità per descrivere l'uno l'arte e l'altro il cervello sia dovuto al caso, o se questo fatto non risponda forse a ragioni intrinseche.

Nel suo libro, Rübel si riferiva principalmente a forme d'arte dinamiche, come quelle realizzate da Auguste Rodin e commentate dal filosofo berlinese Georg Simmel. Di particolare importanza è la scultura di Rodin *L'homme et sa pensée* (1896-1900) conservata alla Nationalgalerie di Berlino (Rübel 2012, 39-43). [2] Dall'interno del blocco di marmo pare emergere una coppia, un uomo che si avvicina a un essere effimero, probabilmente una ragazza in età prepuberale, e ne bacia lo sterno. La coppia sembra emergere dalla pietra, ma la sua incompletezza suggerisce che potrebbe anche riaffondarvi. Il movimento all'interno del blocco di marmo oscilla avanti e indietro. Il cervello

[2] Auguste Rodin, *L'homme et sa pensée* (1896-1900). Marmor. 46 x 77 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie. Unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/man-and-his-thought-auguste-rodin/8gEWHK9iK0mc6A?hl=fr>

[2] Auguste Rodin, *L'homme et sa pensée* (1896-1900). Marmo. 46 x 77 cm. Berlino, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie. Visibile al seguente link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/man-and-his-thought-auguste-rodin/8gEWHK9iK0mc6A?hl=fr>

ein fluides Wechselspiel zwischen Festigkeit und Beweglichkeit.

Der Ausgangspunkt von Rübels Publikation waren jene sechs von Albrecht Dürer gezeichneten Kissen, in deren spontan sich bildenden Gestaltformen die Beobachter figürliche Elemente erkennen oder hineinprojizieren können (Dürer 1971, 51; vgl. Didi-Huberman 2024, 207-212) [ABB. 1]. Wie von Geisterhand bewegt, zeigen diese sechs Kissen ein Prinzip des inneren Movens, das als *active matter* bezeichnet werden kann. Es verkörpert auch jenes Prinzip der Plastizität, das Duffau im Gehirn erkennt.

Albrecht Dürers innere Beweglichkeit

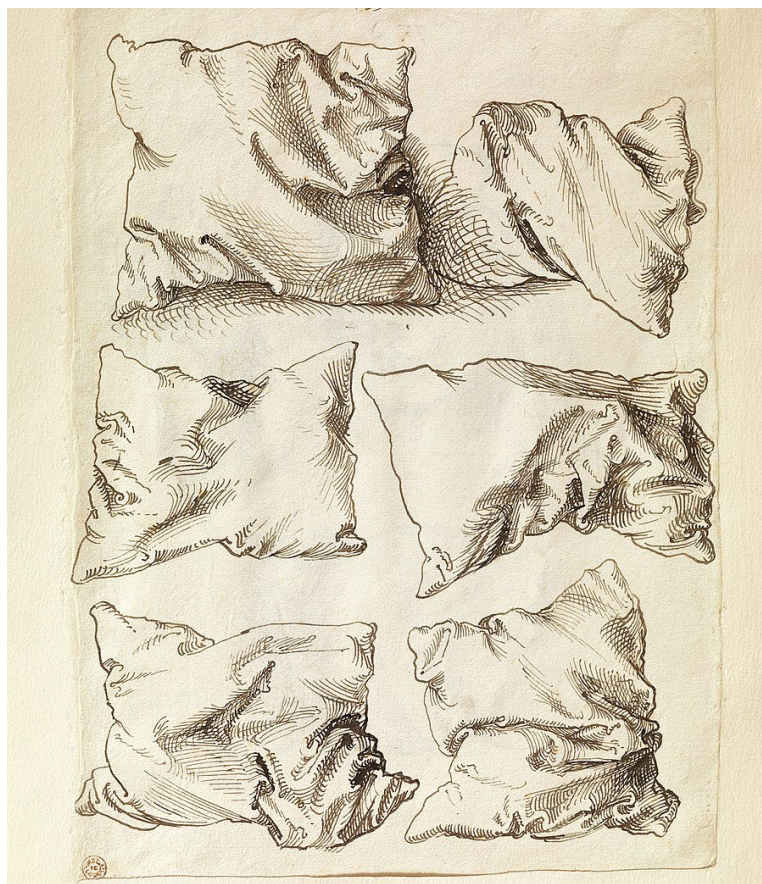
Diesem Motiv möchte ich mit Blick auf Dürer und Michelangelo als dem Vorbild von Rodin nachgehen, um strukturelle Parallelen zwischen dem Prinzip der

che pensa, e che qui esprime l'inconscio, viene rappresentato da Rodin nella forma di un alternarsi di stabilità e mobilità.

Punto di partenza della pubblicazione di Rübels erano i sei cuscini disegnati da Albrecht Dürer, nelle cui forme mutevoli si possono riconoscere o proiettare elementi figurativi (Dürer 1971, 51; cf. Didi-Huberman 2024, 207-212) [FIG. 1]. Come mossi da una mano fantasma, questi sei cuscini mostrano un principio di movimento ad essi intrinseco, quel che può essere definito come *materia attiva*. Ciò incarna anche lo stesso principio di plasticità che Duffau riconosce nel cervello.

Albrecht Dürer e il dinamismo intrinseco delle forme

Considerando Dürer e Michelangelo, che fu il riferimento di Rodin, desidero



[ABB. 1] Albrecht Dürer, *Sechs Kissen*, Rückseite (1493). Feder und braune Tinte, 27.8 x 20.2 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.

[FIG. 1] Albrecht Dürer, *Sei studi di cuscini*, lato posteriore di un autoritratto (1493). Penna e inchiostro marrone, 27.8 x 20.2 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.

Gestaltung und dem Wesen von Duffaus Verständnis des Gehirns zu verfolgen.

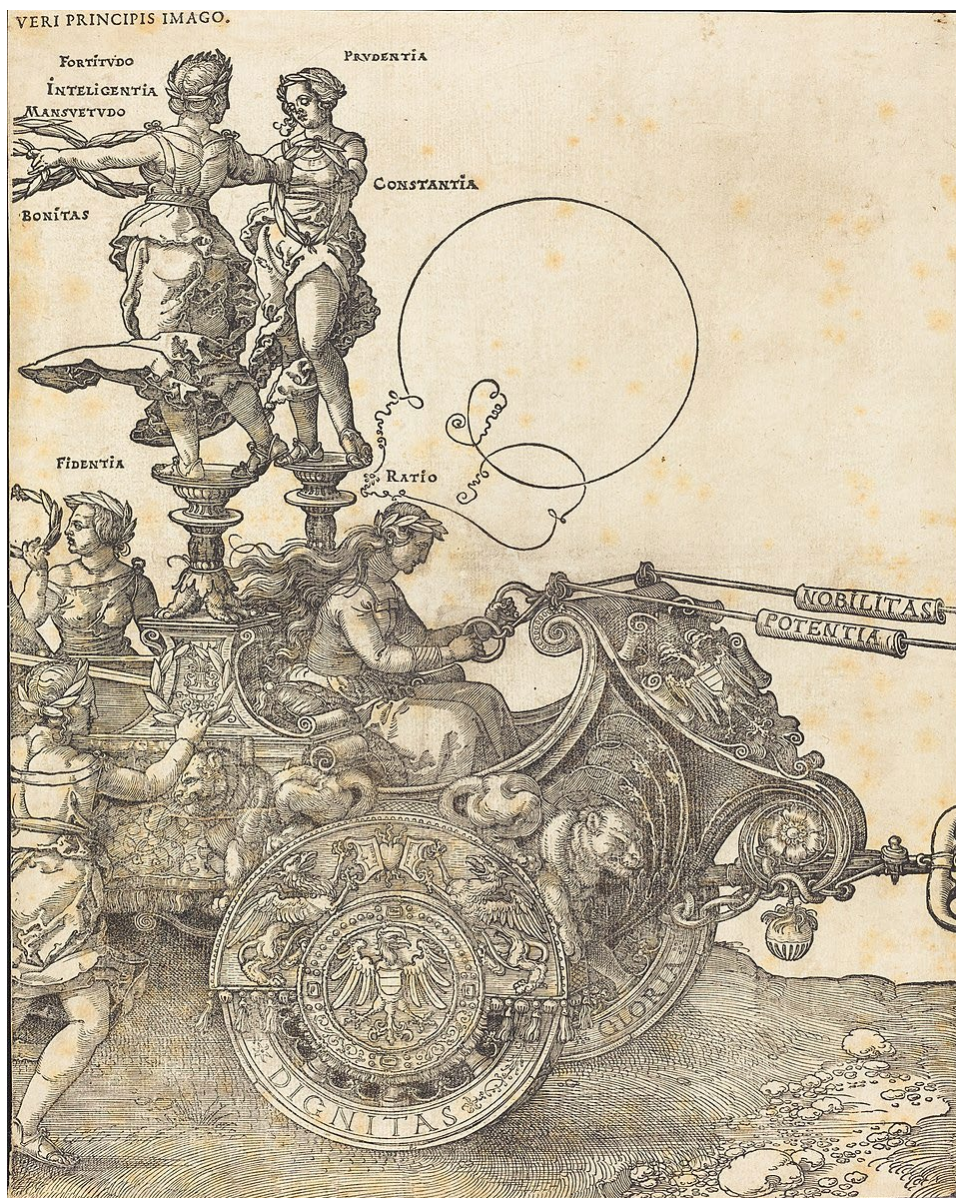
Vor allem auf seiner Italien-Reise hat Dürer zahlreiche Proportionsstudien durchgeführt, die zu der bis heute aufwändigsten Suche nach dem Kanon der Schönheit geführt haben (Hinz 2020, 52). Dürer hat mehr als 200 Konstruktionen mit variablen Größen vorgenommen, bis hin zu sowohl schwergewichtigen wie auch übermäßig schlanken Männern und Frauen (Dürer 2011, 151). Seine Erkenntnis hat er in Form einer wie ein Violschlüssel wirkenden Schlangenlinie als Diagramm zusammengefasst, die das Titelblatt ziert (19). Als Inkarnation der Vielfalt und der schöpferischen Fantasie hat er sie nochmals als eine Art Summe aufgenommen (199), um jenen Charakter der Schönheit anzuzeigen, der sich allein als Bewegung und als ein Kreisel von Symmetrie und Abweichung begreifen lässt (2020, 70).

Die Holzschnitte für den Triumphwagen Kaiser Maximilians von 1522 stellen die prägnanteste Formulierung dieser Art Elastizität dar (Dürer 1971, 1668-1678; Roth 2023, 46-49) [ABB. 2]. Sie visualisieren die Tugenden der weisen Herrschaft, beginnend mit dem *Verstand*, der *Ratio* [ABB. 2A]. Sie wird durch einen Kreis symbolisiert, der zunächst eine vollendete Rundung bildet, um dann über eine S-Linie in Spiralen auszuweichen. Die *Vorausschau* beginnt von einem Punkt aus in regelmäßigem Drehschwung, um dann wieder über eine S-Linie in unregelmäßige Schlaufenformen weiterzutanzeln [ABB. 2B]. Auch die *Erfahrung* ist in einem Kreis gefasst, dessen Enden umknicken und mäandrierend auslaufen [ABB. 2C]. Auch in den weiteren Gebilden der Tugenden thematisiert Dürer die Stochastik von Phantasieformen, die bei jedem Umschlag der Linienführung S-Linien einbauen. Diese bilden die Scharniere dieser Metamorphosen. Hinter all diesen Formen steht die S-Linie. In seiner *Unterweisung der Messung* von 1525 hat Dürer bekräftigt, dass die Schlangenlinie die Doppelbestimmung der Zeichnung, sowohl auf die Natur zuzuführen, als auch die Innenbewegung des Gehirns zu offenbaren, vollendet repräsentiert, weil sie hin- und

approfondire questo tema per individuare alcuni parallelismi strutturali tra il principio della creazione artistica e la concezione del cervello proposta da Duffau.

Soprattutto durante il suo viaggio in Italia, Dürer condusse numerosi studi sulle proporzioni, che portarono alla più approfondita ricerca mai realizzata sul canone della bellezza (Hinz 2020, 52). Nell'ambito di questi studi, Dürer aveva realizzato più di duecento modelli costruiti secondo dimensioni variabili; essi includevano uomini e donne dalla struttura sia robusta che estremamente magra (Dürer 2011, 151). Le sue conclusioni vennero sintetizzate in un diagramma rappresentato da una linea serpentina, simile a una chiave di violino, che compare sulla copertina del suo trattato (19). Come incarnazione della diversità e della fantasia creativa, questa linea venne riproposta come una sorta di summa (199) per indicare quel carattere della bellezza che può essere compreso solo come movimento, e come un equilibrio dinamico tra simmetria e variazione (2020, 70).

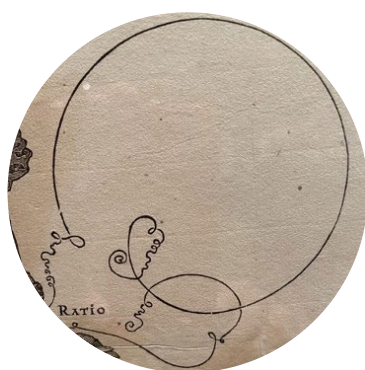
Le xilografie del grande carro trionfale dell'imperatore Massimiliano, del 1522, rappresentano la formulazione più pregnante di questo tipo di elasticità (Dürer 1971, 1668-1678; Roth 2023, 46-49) [FIG. 2]. Esse illustrano le virtù del buon governo, a partire dall'*Intelletto*, la *Ratio* [FIG. 2A]. Quest'ultima viene simboleggiata da un cerchio che inizialmente forma una curva perfettamente rotonda e che poi sfocia in spirali attraverso una linea a forma di S. La *Providenza*, a sua volta, prende avvio da un punto con un movimento rotatorio regolare e prosegue poi in una linea a S che si traduce in anelli irregolari [FIG. 2B]. Anche l'*Esperienza* viene rappresentata per mezzo di un cerchio le cui estremità si ripiegano e si sviluppano in diverse volute [FIG. 2C]. Anche nelle altre figure che rappresentano le virtù Dürer tematizza la stocastica delle forme della fantasia, inserendo delle linee a S a ogni cambio di direzione. Queste linee a S costituiscono i cardini delle metamorfosi. Dietro tutte queste forme vi è sempre la linea serpentina. Come Dürer aveva ribadito nel suo *Trattato sulle misurazioni* del



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[ABB. 2] Albrecht Dürer, *Der große Triumphwagen Kaiser Maximilians* (1522), Holzschnitt, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, Geschenk von Dr. und Frau Harold P. Morris

[FIG. 2] Albrecht Dürer, *Der große Triumphwagen Kaiser Maximilians* [Grande carrozza trionfale] (1522). Xilografia. Dono del Dott. e della Sig.ra Harold P. Morris. Rosenwald Collection. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



[ABB. 2A, 2B, 2C] Albrecht Dürer, *Der große Triumphwagen Kaiser Maximilians* (1522). Ausschnitt.

[FIGG. 2A, 2B, 2C] Albrecht Dürer, *Der große Triumphwagen Kaiser Maximilians* (1522). Dettaglio.

hergezogen werden könne „wie man will“ (Dürer 1983, A2).

Die Überzeugung, dass die S-Linie alle nur möglichen Bewegungen und Formen latent enthielte (Bredekamp 2001, 205-208), kam im 18. Jahrhundert zu einem bis heute nachwirkenden Höhepunkt. Der englische Künstler und Satiriker William Hogarth machte die Schlangenlinie des S zum Inbegriff der schöpferischen Schönheitsformen in Kunst und Natur. *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) lautete sein epochales Werk, in dem er bereits auf der Titelseite die Vielfalt (*Variety*) als Bedingung der Schönheit (*Beauty*) definierte (siehe Bindman 1997, 168f.).

Um seiner Idee den gebührenden Nachdruck zu geben, fasste er sie im Symbol der Unsterblichkeit, der Pyramide. In ihrer gläsernen Gestalt wird die als S-Form gebildete Schlange als Essenz der *Variety* und damit als Bedingung von *Beauty* sichtbar wie in einem transparenten Reliquienkasten. Ohne Variation als Abweichung oder auch Störung, wie dies Hogarth in zahlreichen Diagrammen verdeutlicht hat, ist Schönheit nicht zu denken: dies ist die Summe der Suche nach dem Prinzip der Schönheit vom 15. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert. Die Plastizität ist als Funktion permanenter Wandelbarkeit eine Fortsetzung dieses Grundgedankens, der als ein Kernelement eines *tiefen Wissens der Kunst* bezeichnet werden kann.

Michelangelos Kritik des Neoplatonismus

Vor diesem Hintergrund war ich beeindruckt, als Patricia Ribault im Exzellenzcluster *Matters of Activity* den Anspruchsrahmen von Hugues Duffaus Neurochirurgie in einem Vortrag beschrieb und kontextualisierte. Sie nutzte fast wörtlich dieselben Begriffe, mit denen ich das Vorgehen von Michelangelo in Bezug auf den Marmor zu beschreiben versucht hatte (Bredekamp 2021, 69-71 und *passim*). Diese Koinzidenz geschah auf Grund des gemeinsam empfundenen Ungenügens an den gewohnten Definitionen sowohl des Marmors wie auch des Gehirns (siehe Ribault 2022, 7-11).

1525, questa linea rappresenta perfettamente la duplice funzione del disegno: ricondurre alla natura e al tempo stesso rivelare il movimento interno del cervello, poiché essa può essere tirata avanti e indietro “a piacimento” (Dürer 1983, A2).

La convinzione che nella linea a S convergano tutti i movimenti e le forme possibili (Bredekamp 2001, 205-208) raggiunse il proprio apice nel diciottesimo secolo, con effetti che risuonano fino al giorno d'oggi. L'artista e satirico inglese William Hogarth fece della linea serpentina il simbolo delle forme di bellezza creativa nell'arte e nella natura. La sua importantissima opera *L'analisi della bellezza* (1753) definiva già dalla pagina di copertina la varietà (*Variety*) come condizione della bellezza (*Beauty*).

Per dare il giusto risalto alla propria idea, Hogarth racchiuse la linea serpentina nel simbolo dell'immortalità, la piramide. In questa struttura trasparente, la linea serpentina appare come essenza della varietà e quindi come condizione della bellezza, divenendo visibile come se fosse contenuta in un reliquiario trasparente. Senza variazione, intesa anche come deviazione o disturbo, come Hogarth chiarì in numerosi diagrammi, la bellezza non può esistere: questa è la conclusione della ricerca sul principio della bellezza dal quindicesimo al diciottesimo secolo. La plasticità, intesa come funzione di una costante trasformabilità, rappresenta una continuazione di questo pensiero fondamentale, che può essere considerato un elemento chiave di una *conoscenza profonda dell'arte*.

Michelangelo e la critica al Neoplatonismo

Stando così le cose, rimasi colpito quando, ad una conferenza del cluster di eccellenza *Matters of Activity*, Patricia Ribault descrisse e contestualizzò il quadro concettuale della neurochirurgia di Hugues Duffau. Nel suo intervento, infatti, Ribault utilizzò quasi alla lettera gli stessi concetti con cui avevo tentato di descrivere l'approccio di Michelangelo al marmo (Bredekamp 2021, 69-71 e *passim*). Questa coincidenza

In der Regel werden das weiche Organ des Gehirns wie auch der besonders harte Stoff des Marmors gleichermaßen als passive Sphären eingeschätzt, aus denen die geglückte Form herauszuschneiden ist: bei der Neurochirurgie ein neu geformtes Gehirn, und beim Marmor die erwünschte Figur, in der Regel eine figurative Gestalt. In beiden Fällen werden der gewohnten Vorstellung zufolge Bereiche des Materials entfernt, um eine neue, intakte Form zu erzeugen.

Dem ist jedoch nicht oder nicht nur so. In einer geradezu mystisch anmutenden Weise versenkt sich Duffau nach den langen Voruntersuchungen in das zu operierende Gehirn, um dann mit dem Prozess des tastenden Schneidens zu beginnen. Es geht um die Einstimmung auf die Resonanz mit dem vorgegebenen Stoff, bei dem Teile des Materials gelöst oder befreit werden. Nicht ohne Grund ist aus dem Studienkurs von Ribault zur Visualisierung von Duffaus Methode eine Zeichnung des Kopfes von Michelangelos *David* hervorgegangen. Es war diese Figur, an der die Parallelen zwischen einem schöpferischen Skulptieren und einer reflexiven Hirnchirurgie zuerst diskutiert wurde.

Der *David* [3] galt als Inkarnation der Bildhauerei insofern, als im Marmorblock die Idee eines vollendeten Menschen realisiert worden sei: in Form der Wiedergeburt einer nackten Freiheit. Vergleicht man jedoch diese als ideal empfundene Figur mit einer Mustergestalt der Antike, dem sogenannten *Apollo von Belvedere*, [4] so springen die Unterschiede ins Auge. Die Figur des

derivava dal comune senso di insoddisfazione verso i discorsi abitualmente condotti sia rispetto al marmo che rispetto al cervello (si veda Ribault 2022, 7-11).

Di solito sia al cervello, organo morbido, sia al marmo, materiale estremamente duro, viene attribuita passività; entrambi vengono considerati come enti da cui tirar fuori una forma compiuta: in neurochirurgia, un cervello con una nuova forma; in scultura, la figura desiderata, generalmente una forma figurativa. Secondo questa concezione, in entrambi i casi si tratta di rimuovere porzioni di materiale per ottenere una nuova forma ben definita.

Eppure le cose non stanno esattamente così, o perlomeno non solo. Con atteggiamento quasi mistico e dopo lunghe riflessioni preliminari, Duffau si immerge nel cervello da operare per poi iniziare a incidere in maniera esplorativa. Si tratta di sintonizzarsi con la materia data, entrare in risonanza con essa eliminando o liberando parti del materiale. Non a caso nel corso tenuto da Ribault viene proposto un disegno della testa del *David* di Michelangelo per visualizzare il metodo di Duffau. Era stato proprio in relazione a questa figura che si era inizialmente discusso il parallelismo tra processo creativo in scultura e neurochirurgia "riflessiva".

Il *David* [3] è considerato l'incarnazione della scultura stessa poiché nel blocco di marmo si realizzerebbe l'idea dell'uomo perfetto: in forma di rinascita di una nuda libertà. Tuttavia, se si confronta questa scultura come figura ideale

[3] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David* (1501-1504). Marmor. 520 cm hoch. Florenz, Galleria dell'Accademia. Unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU04.JPG

[4] *Apollo von Belvedere* (um 350-325 v. Chr., römische Kopie eines griechischen Bronzewerkes). Marmor. 224 cm hoch. Vatikan, Vatikanische Museen, Antikensammlung. Unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ce/Apollo_del_Belvedere_.jpg

[3] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David* (1501-1504). Marmo. 520 cm d'altezza. Firenze, Galleria dell'Accademia. Visibile al seguente link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU04.JPG

[4] *Apollo del Belvedere* (350-325 a.C., copia romana di un bronzo greco). Marmo. 224 cm d'altezza. Vaticano, Musei Vaticani, Reparto Antichità Greche e Romane. Visibile al seguente link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ce/Apollo_del_Belvedere_.jpg
[commons/6/6f/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU04.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU04.JPG)

Apollo entspricht dem antiken Kanon der Verhältnisse der einzelnen Körperglieder zueinander, während bei der Skulptur des *David*s kein Körperdetail zu dem jeweils anderen zu passen scheint, aber gerade dies macht seine Qualität aus. Der Oberkörper ist gegenüber dem Unterkörper zu groß, die rechte Hand scheint einem Riesen zu gehören, und auch der Kopf ist zu mächtig, um dem Rumpf entsprechen zu können. Erst diese Unstimmigkeiten entfernen den *David* jedoch von der kühlen Idealität des *Apollo*s. In seiner Mischung aus Vollendung und Störung erweckt er den Eindruck eines lebendigen Wesens, das noch jedem den Atem verschlägt, der diese Figur betrachtet hat (Bredekamp 2021, 132-137).

Der Grund liegt darin, dass Michelangelo so wenig als irgend möglich von dem vorhandenen Marmor zu entfernen suchte. Sein Vorgehen diente dem bewahrenden Gestalten; sein Wegnehmen ist eine Antwort auf den Widerstand des Marmors, der sich dem Meißel entgegenstellt und in jedem Meißelschlag ein „Nein!“ zu sagen scheint. Jede Gestaltung Michelangelos ist eine Reaktion auf die Beschaffenheit des Marmors und keinesfalls das Einstanzen einer vorhandenen Idee in den passiven Stein. Der Stein redet, während er bearbeitet wird.

Der drei Jahre nach dem *David* entstandene, weit über zwei Meter hohe *Heilige Matthäus* aus der Accademia in Florenz [5] verdeutlicht dies in besonderer Weise. In der liegenden Position seiner Bearbeitung wird deutlich, dass viele Bereiche, so der Block unterhalb des rechten Beines, nur grob behandelt sind, während das Knie bereits in eine vollendete, polierte Form gebracht worden ist.

Dieses Vorgehen hat zu einem berühmten Vergleich geführt, den Giorgio

con un modello dell'antichità quale l'*Apollo del Belvedere*, [4] le differenze saltano all'occhio. La figura dell'*Apollo* rispetta il canone classico delle proporzioni tra le varie parti del corpo, mentre nella scultura del *David* nessun dettaglio corporeo sembra adattarsi agli altri – ma proprio in questo sta la sua qualità. Il busto è troppo grande rispetto alla parte inferiore del corpo, la mano destra sembra appartenere a un gigante, e anche la testa pare enorme rispetto al torso. Queste incongruenze differenziano il *David* dall'*Apollo* e dalla sua fredda idealità. Nella sua combinazione di perfezione compiuta e di disordine, il *David* dà un'impressione di vitalità tale da togliere il fiato a chiunque lo osservi (Bredekamp 2021, 132-137).

La ragione sta nel fatto che Michelangelo cercava di rimuovere la minor quantità possibile di materiale dal blocco di marmo. Il suo approccio era basato su un metodo prudente di elaborazione della forma; la rimozione si presentava allora come risposta alla resistenza del marmo, il quale si oppone allo scalpello e pare dire “no!” a ogni colpo. Ogni creazione di Michelangelo è una reazione alle caratteristiche del marmo, mai l'imposizione di un'idea preesistente alla pietra passiva. La pietra parla mentre viene lavorata.

Il *San Matteo*, scolpito tre anni dopo il *David* e alto più di due metri, conservato all'Accademia di Firenze, [5] illustra in modo particolare questo approccio. Se lo si osserva nella posizione distesa in cui fu scolpito, si nota come molte aree, ad esempio il blocco sotto la gamba destra, siano appena sborzate, mentre invece il ginocchio è modellato in maniera perfettamente finita e levigata.

Questo metodo ha ispirato un famoso paragone, formulato per la prima volta da Giorgio Vasari nel suo *Vita di*

[5] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Heilige Matthäus* (1504-1508). Marmor. 271 cm hoch. Florenz, Galleria dell'Accademia. Unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Saint_Matthew_by_Michelangelo_Buonarroti#/media/File:'St_Matthew'_by_Michelangelo_-_JBU_02.jpg

[5] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *San Matteo* (1504-1508). Marmo. 271 cm d'altezza. Firenze, Galleria dell'Accademia. Visibile al seguente link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Saint_Matthew_by_Michelangelo_Buonarroti#/media/File:'St_Matthew'_by_Michelangelo_-_JBU_02.jpg

Vasari 1550 in seiner *Vita Michelangelos* geprägt hat. Der Bildhauer habe jeweils gearbeitet, als läge die Figur in einer Wanne, aus der das Wasser abgelassen würde (Vasari 2006, 82; Bredekamp 2021, 196f.). Diese Beschreibung folgt jedoch eher der Technik des Kopierens [6] als dem originären Gestaltungsprozess. Sie hat den Zugang zum Vorgehen Michelangelos über lange Zeit verstellt.

Ihm wurde fast durchweg unterstellt, dass der Bildhauer die Form bereits vollständig im Block erkannt habe, sodass sie dort gleichsam befreit werden müsse. In diesem Sinn war jede Herausarbeitung der Figur eine Freilegung der Idee, die der Kopie eines bereits vorhandenen Werkes gleichkam. Nur den besten Bildhauern könne es gelingen, diese als Vorbild im Stein bereits vorhandene Form herauszuholen. Passiv musste der Marmor erdulden, von seiner gleichsam schmutzigen Hülle, welche die Idee als Ideal verbarg, befreit zu werden. Diese hier wirksame, der Dominanz der Idee verpflichtete Philosophie ist wesentlich als Neuplatonismus aufgetreten. Er hat im Einklang mit dem dualistischen Konzept von René Descartes eine schier undurchdringliche Wand gebildet, hinter der die Passivität der Materie behauptet und verteidigt wurde.

Kaum stärker jedoch könnte das Vorgehen Michelangelos missverstanden sein. Michelangelo geht in die Tiefe, um die Möglichkeiten, solange es nur irgend geht, offen zu halten. Bei dem Oberkörper des *Matthäus* wird dieser Prozess im Kontrast zwischen dem Antlitz und den kaum bearbeiteten Partien vor und hinter dem Gesicht besonders deutlich. Im Prinzip galt, dass jedes Werk Michelangelos einem Flugzeug glich, das aufstieg, ohne zu wissen, wo genau es landen könne.

Der Kopf des *Matthäus*, um ein weiteres Mal Patricia Ribaults Modell zu zitieren, scheint Zwiesprache mit seiner Umgebung halten zu wollen, fragend, fast befürchtend, dass er weiter herausgeholt

Michelangelo del 1550. Secondo Vasari, lo scultore lavorava come se la figura giacesse in una vasca da cui l'acqua veniva drenata (Vasari 2006, 82; Bredekamp 2021, 196ss). Tuttavia, questa descrizione si riferisce più alla tecnica del copiare [6] che al processo originale di elaborazione della forma. Per lungo tempo, questa descrizione ha dunque distorto la comprensione del metodo di Michelangelo.

Si è quasi sempre attribuito a Michelangelo l'intuizione della forma già completa all'interno del blocco di marmo, come se si trattasse di una forma che andava semplicemente liberata. In questo senso, ogni colpo di scalpello che individuava la figura diveniva qualcosa come la rivelazione di un'idea, quasi la copia di un'opera preesistente. Solo i migliori scultori riuscivano a estrarre questa forma ideale già latente nella pietra. Il marmo doveva sopportare passivamente di essere liberato dal proprio involucro grezzo, il quale avrebbe celato l'idea come ideale. La filosofia che qui agisce e che attribuisce un privilegio esclusivo alla dimensione dell'idea si è espressa essenzialmente nella tradizione neoplatonica. In sintonia con il dualismo promosso da René Descartes, questa filosofia ha eretto un muro pressoché impenetrabile a difesa di una concezione passiva della materia.

Eppure, difficilmente si sarebbe potuto fraintendere il metodo di Michelangelo in maniera più grave. Michelangelo va in profondità per mantenere aperte le possibilità della materia il più a lungo possibile. Nella parte superiore del *San Matteo*, questo processo diventa particolarmente evidente nel contrasto tra il volto e le parti appena lavorate davanti e dietro al viso. In linea di principio, ogni opera di Michelangelo pare un aereo che decolla senza sapere esattamente dove atterrerà.

La testa del *San Matteo*, per citare ancora una volta il modello di Patricia Ribault, sembra dialogare con il suo ambiente, interrogandosi, quasi temendo

[6] Siehe: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85950915/f60.item#>

[6] Si veda: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85950915/f60.item#>

wird, sich der scheinbaren Passivität seines Seins widersetzend. Die Materie bleibt niemals ein passives, sondern ein aktives Gegenüber der Gestaltung: hierin liegt das tiefe Wissen der Künstler in Bezug auf das, was als Resonanz mit der aktiven Materie zu bezeichnen ist (Bredekamp 2021, 195-198).

Michelangelos Non-Finito als Festhalten der Innenbewegung

Dieses Prinzip hatte unweigerlich und schon sehr früh die Wertschätzung des Unvollendeten zur Folge, jenes *Non-Finito*, das später als Prinzip des Fragments durch den Michelangelo-Verehrer Rodin zu einem Signum der Moderne geworden ist (Wohlrab 2016). Von den zahlreichen Beispielen des *Non-Finito* der Skulpturen Michelangelos gehört der *Tondo Taddei* der Academy of Arts in London [7] zu den eindrucksvollsten. Das Rundrelief zeigt Maria mit dem Jesuskind, das sich erschreckt von dem Johannesknaben, der ihm spielerisch einen Vogel entgegenhält, abwendet. In der Umgebung des Johannes entsteht eine sprühende Atmosphäre des Steins, die eher an das Schwirren von Atomen als an die Festigkeit des harten Materials denken lässt. Zwischen dem Johannesknaben und dem Jesuskind wuchern Steinformen, die wie blasenartig ausgreifende Gischt wirken, während der Leib des Christuskindes bereits in eine Form latenter Lebendigkeit des geglätteten Marmors im Sinne einer gleichsam atmenden Korporalität des Fleisches überführt ist. Hier zeigt sich die Variabilität der Materie als ein aktives Gegenüber des Bildhauers wie in einem Lehrstück (Bredekamp 2021, 156-158).

Duffau bricht bei bestimmten Antworten des Gehirnes die Operation ab, um solcherart die Form in einem

di essere ulteriormente estratta dalla materia, opponendo resistenza all'apparente passività del proprio essere. La materia non rimane mai passiva, ma è un interlocutore attivo dell'elaborazione della forma: qui risiede la conoscenza profonda degli artisti di ciò che si può definire come risonanza con la materia attiva (Bredekamp 2021, 195-198).

Il non finito di Michelangelo come mantenimento del dinamismo intrinseco della forma

Fin da molto presto questo principio aveva portato inevitabilmente a una particolare valorizzazione dell'incompiuto, quel *non finito* che successivamente sarebbe diventato uno dei tratti distintivi della modernità grazie al lavoro di Rodin, appassionato ammiratore di Michelangelo, che lo avrebbe trasfigurato in principio del frammento (Wohlrab 2016). Tra i numerosi esempi di *non finito* nelle sculture di Michelangelo spicca il *Tondo Taddei* della Royal Academy of Arts di Londra. [7] Il rilievo circolare raffigura Maria con Gesù Bambino, che si ritrae spaventato dal piccolo Giovanni Battista, il quale con fare giocoso pare tendergli un uccello. Nell'area intorno a Giovanni il marmo crea un'atmosfera vibrante, che fa pensare più al pulsare degli atomi che alla solidità di un materiale duro. Tra il piccolo Giovanni e il Gesù Bambino si sviluppano forme marmoree che paiono schiuma, bolle in espansione, mentre il corpo del Gesù Bambino già risulta trasformato in una forma che lascia trasparire la latente vitalità del marmo levigato, il quale traduce una corporeità della carne che quasi respira. Qui si rivela la variabilità della materia in quanto interlocutore attivo dello scultore, come in una

[7] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tondo Taddei* (1504-1505). Marmor. 106,6 cm hoch. London, Royal Academy of Arts. Unter dem folgenden Link sichtbar: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Michelangelo%2C_tondo_taddei%2C_1504-05_ca._01.JPG

[7] Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tondo Taddei* (1504-1505). Marmo. 106,6 cm d'altezza. Londra, Royal Academy of Arts. Visibile al seguente link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Michelangelo%2C_tondo_taddei%2C_1504-05_ca._01.JPG

Non-Finito im Vertrauen darauf zu belassen, dass dieses ein aktives, plastisch sich reorganisierendes Gebilde ist, das trotz seiner Verletztheit eine neue Intaktheit finden wird. Dies entspricht der Sicherheit, in der Michelangelo im Wegnehmen des Marmors in der Gewissheit innehält, dass die latente Aktivität der Materie gewahrt bleiben muss.

Um zum Beginn zurückzukehren: ich hoffe, gezeigt zu haben, dass es der Hintergrund und nicht der Vordergrund des Titelbildes von Duffaus zentraler Publikation ist, der gegenüber Rodins und Michelangelos *Non-Finito* und Dürers Variationslinien zu vergleichen ist. In diesen Zonen liegt die *aktive Materie* sowohl der Kunst wie des Gehirns.

lezione (Bredekamp 2021, 156-158).

Di fronte a determinate risposte del cervello, Duffau interrompe l'operazione neurochirurgica, lasciando così intenzionalmente la forma in uno stato di *non finito* e confidando nel fatto che si tratti di una forma attiva, plastica, in grado di riorganizzarsi e di trovare una nuova completezza nonostante la propria vulnerabilità. Ciò corrisponde alla certezza con cui Michelangelo, nel rimuovere il marmo, si interrompe consapevolmente, assicurandosi che l'attività latente della materia sia preservata.

Per tornare alle considerazioni iniziali, spero di aver dimostrato che è lo sfondo e non il primo piano dell'immagine di copertina del libro di Duffau a poter essere paragonato al *non finito* di Rodin e Michelangelo, nonché alle linee di variazione di Dürer. È in queste zone che si trova la *materia attiva*, la quale caratterizza l'arte così come il cervello.

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Bildquellen

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- [ABB. 2A] Siehe [ABB. 2]
- [ABB. 2B] Siehe [ABB. 2]
- [ABB. 2C] Siehe [ABB. 2]

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- [FIG. 2A] Si veda [FIG. 2]
- [FIG. 2B] Si veda [FIG. 2]
- [FIG. 2C] Si veda [FIG. 2]

Plasticity, Plastics, Architecture. An Interview*

Niccolò Casas

Founder of Niccolò Casas Architecture
/ The Bartlett, UCL London)

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* Interview by Alice Iacobone,
September-December 2024

1

AI ALICE IACOBONE: Niccolò Casas, you are an Italian multidisciplinary architect, working at the intersection between several fields – from couture and fashion-tech to art and engineering, from design to data visualization, just to mention a few. Your work has been exhibited worldwide and has been realized in collaboration with a variety of remarkable companies and personalities, such as the fashion designer Iris Van Herpen, the fashion-tech designer Anouk Wipprecht, the multinational software and electronic corporations Intel and Autodesk, the 3D-printing companies Materialise and 3D Systems, the MIT research team. Could you tell us more about your practice and about the path that led you where you are today?

NC NICCOLÒ CASAS: I am an Italian architect and professor, principal and founder of Niccolò Casas Architecture, [1] and a PhD candidate at The Bartlett, UCL London. I lead a multidisciplinary practice dedicated to research and architecture, combining expertise across diverse fields to offer a unique vision of the discipline and profession. My career has been shaped by the interplay of design, ecology, and innovation, continually expanding the boundaries of architectural practice.

[1] <https://www.niccolocasas.com/>.

The early 2010s marked a significant turning point in my career, transitioning from local to global and from disciplinary to multidisciplinary. This transformative period was driven by three key developments: the rise

of social networks, the proliferation of high-speed internet, and the increasing accessibility of additive manufacturing technologies. These innovations opened unprecedented pathways for collaboration, enabling ideas and data to transcend geographic and disciplinary boundaries.

Global connectivity allowed me to engage with a diverse spectrum of thinkers and creators, regardless of their physical location. Simultaneously, the rapid integration of 3D printing technologies into various industries became a crucial medium for exploring interdisciplinary innovation.

Architects of my generation were uniquely positioned to embrace the additive manufacturing revolution. Having experimented with 3D printing as students and educators, we were already attuned to its potential. This foundation made us ideal collaborators in applying 3D printing to fields ranging from fashion and product design to art and medicine.

Not only did these interdisciplinary collaborations broaden the scope of my projects but they also reshaped my conceptual frameworks. They encouraged me to approach research and design through an integrative lens that bridges diverse scales, disciplines, and perspectives.

This evolution ultimately led to the development of my theoretical discourse, which examines the dynamics of context integration. This exploration forms the foundation of my PhD research at The Bartlett, [2] UCL, titled *Hypersection*. “Hypersection” is both a concept and a methodology that investigates how patterns, knowledge, and materialities can coexist and integrate without requiring adaptation or compromise, preserving their distinctiveness while creating new forms of synthesis.

[2] <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/>.

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2

(AI) Beside your architectural and professional practice, you are also an academic scholar. Do theory and practice interact, in your work, or do they proceed in parallel without really influencing each other? To say it otherwise, is the relation between theoretical and artistic research happening in the form of a transformative dialogue or rather as a juxtaposition? Could you tell us more about your doctoral research and the ways in which it interacts (or not) with your activities as an architect?

(NC) My PhD focuses on a specific type of transition that I define as *hypersection*. Broadly speaking, a transition refers to the process through which a context—in space, time, or meaning—shifts into a new one. In architectural terms, this can be understood as the movement from one space—with a defined program, aesthetic, and materiality—to another, with the threshold or medium acting as the interface between the two contexts.

I propose three primary modes through which such transitions occur:

1. Continuous transitions: In these, two spaces or contexts are interconnected and dependent, with the transition occurring through a gradual transformation. Zaha Hadid’s architectures exemplify this, showcasing fluidity and continuity.
2. Discontinuous transitions: These involve unrelated spaces or contexts, resulting in a radical and abrupt shift. Anish Kapoor’s works, which often juxtapose stark contrasts between interior and exterior, provide a pertinent example.

3. Combinative transitions, which I define as *hypersections*: Here, spaces or contexts are interconnected yet retain their independence. A compelling illustration is the window, a unique space of coexistence, where "inside" and "outside" exist simultaneously while remaining distinct, independent, and different.

To address your question, the concept of hypersection transcends the discipline of architecture and finds particular relevance in communication, where it can be envisioned as a form of dialogue rooted in juxtaposition rather than compromise.

Conventional methods of communication often require adaptation or mediation between differing viewpoints, but this approach is not always conducive to innovation. In my collaborative work, I endeavor to apply a method where diverse perspectives coexist without compromise, fostering outcomes that surpass the limitations of individual viewpoints.

This iterative process—where my multidisciplinary experiences inform my PhD research, which in turn shapes my approach to collaboration—continues to influence both my theoretical framework and professional practice.

3

AI Let us focus on *Plasticity*, the installation that you presented at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture in Venice [FIG. 1, FIG. 2]. Realized in collaboration with 3D-printing company Nagami and with environmental organization Parley for the Oceans, the installation is realized with recycled marine plastic litter. Can you tell us more on the initial ideas behind this work and on its cross-sectoral implementation?

NC When Alessandro Melis [3] invited me to present an installation for the 17th Biennale of Architecture, I found myself deeply immersed in two profoundly interrelated texts: Greta Thunberg's *Our House Is on Fire* [4] and Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology*. [5] These works continue to exert a significant influence on my thinking, shaping both my practical and theoretical endeavors.

In her 2018 TED Talk [6] Greta Thunberg, in response to critics questioning her decision to leave school, says: «Why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future?». Her words forced me to confront the urgency of the ecological crisis and its implications for creative practice. For the first time in history, humanity cannot take the future for granted—not due to divine will but as a direct consequence of our collective actions. Since the advent of modern science, no generation has faced the potential

[3] Italian architect Alessandro Melis founded Heliopolis 21, a multi-awarded architecture practice based in Italy, Germany, and the UK. He was the curator of the Italian National Pavilion at the 17th Venice Biennale. He is also currently a professor of architecture and the inaugural endowed chair of the New York Institute of Technology.

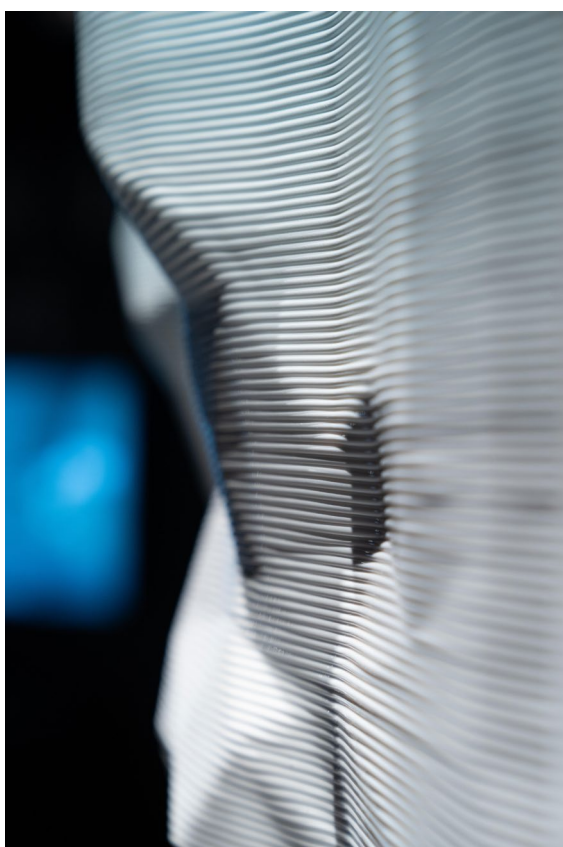
[4] Ernman, M. & Thunberg, G. & Ernman B. & Thunberg S. (2020). *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis*. Penguin Books.

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[6] Thunberg, G. (2018). The disarming case to act right now on climate change. *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*. https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate_change?subtitle=en&geo=it.



[FIG. 1] Plasticity (detail) Niccolò Casas, Parley for the Oceans, and Nagami, 17th Biennale of Architecture, Venice, 2021
Photo: Tommaso Biondo



[FIG. 2] Plasticity (detail) Niccolò Casas, Parley for the Oceans, and Nagami, 17th Biennale of Architecture, Venice, 2021
Photo: Tommaso Biondo

extinction of civilization in the way ours does today. This realization led me to conclude that no work or research can hold genuine meaning unless it begins with sustainability as a fundamental premise.

Morton's *Dark Ecology* offers a complementary and equally provocative perspective. His concept of "dark coexistence" invites us to embrace the strange, entangled relationships between the human and the non-human. Morton writes: «Sense must coexist with nonsense, its shadow. A thing is shadowed by another thing because it's shadowed by itself. Recursion points to coexistence in a nonholistic, not-all (which is to say *ecological*) possibility space» (2016, 91).

This poetic articulation illuminates a profound ecological truth: the recognition that humans are irrevocably enmeshed with non-human entities, ranging from the bacteria within our bodies to the toxic materials we create. Morton suggests that creativity lies not in rejecting or erasing these "dark" realities but in reimagining coexistence. He challenges us to perceive beauty within the shadowy, paradoxical interplay of oppositional forces and to transform toxicity into sustainability.

This intellectual convergence became the foundation for *Plasticity*, my installation for the Biennale. *Plasticity* emerged from two intertwined realizations: first, that we must coexist with the plastics we have produced and continue to produce; and second, that it is vital to create symbols of hope for future generations.

4

AI The description of *Plasticity* on your website tells us that the installation is made from «Parley Ocean Plastic®, a catalyst material created from upcycled marine plastic waste» [FIG. 3]. In this sense, the plasticity of your *Plasticity* refers first and foremost to plastics. Plastics are at once an incredible opportunity and a threat to the health of the planet. You also mention that *Plasticity* could be seen as «the syncretism of plastic and sustainability». What are your thoughts on this Janus-faced material? How do you see plastics and architecture interact, given the complexity of this material that is "good" and "bad" at once? Do recycling and upcycling stabilize once and for all this constant shift in meaning, immobilizing such an oscillation on the good side and therefore redeeming plastics for good, or is the oscillation here to stay?

NC Cyrill Gutsch [7] founded Parley for the Oceans [8] in 2012 – a global environmental organization and network that unites creators, thinkers, and leaders to take action for the oceans. His mission was to highlight the beauty and fragility of marine ecosystems while collaborating on projects to halt their destruction. Gutsch envisioned transforming plastics into products that could serve as powerful symbols of hope. In a famous Adidas campaign, *Impossible is Nothing*, Gutsch declared: «I want plastics to be gone». [9]

However, as Timothy Morton reminds us, we cannot simply make plastics "be gone",

[8] <https://parley.tv>.

[7] Cyrill Gutsch is a German-born designer and brand developer based in New York. After working as a designer for companies including Lufthansa, BMW, and Adidas, a 2012 meeting with Paul Watson prompted Gutsch to found Parley for the Oceans.

[9] <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/OqPe/adidas-impossible-is-nothing-cyrill-gutsch-song-by-emily-wells>.



[FIG. 3] Plasticity (detail) Niccolò Casas, Parley for the Oceans, and Nagami, 17th Biennale of Architecture, Venice, 2021
Photo: Niccolò Casas

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we are entangled with them. Plastics persist – they reappear in strange and insidious ways, such as microplastics in the water we drink and the food we consume. Morton warns: «We entail one another and are not one another. Plants, specters, and hallucinations return more vividly when you try to prune them» (2016, 91). In other words, the toxic cannot be erased; it is entangled with us, continually shaping and reshaping our ecological reality.

This unavoidable entanglement underscores the paradox of plastics: there is no such thing as “away” on our planet. Plastics endure, taking between 20 and 500 years to decompose depending on their composition. The oceans, which produce more than half of the world’s oxygen and absorb fifty times more carbon dioxide than our atmosphere, are choked by these Janus-faced materials.

Morton offers a provocative perspective: «Let’s put these structures in the middle of every town square in the land. One day there will be pilgrimages to them and circumambulations. A whole spirituality of care will arise around them» (2016, 161). Similarly, Cyrill Gutsch’s ethos aligns with this idea – bringing plastic waste into plain sight as a way to transform its narrative and cultural significance.

Plasticity is an architectural embodiment of this philosophy. It transforms a toxic substance into an ecological and symbolic initiative that transcends its physicality. *Plasticity* begins by supporting efforts to intercept plastics from rivers, mangroves, and coastal areas – 200 kilograms of plastic waste, primarily from bottles and fishing nets. It educates audiences about the environmental damage caused by toxic substances, fosters communities that care for our oceans and planet, and demonstrates the potential of novel fabrication technologies.

At its core, *Plasticity* embodies the coexistence central to my concept of *hypersection* and Morton's *dark ecology*. Plastics, as you describe, are a Janus-faced material: simultaneously a problem and an opportunity. *Plasticity* encapsulates this duality, existing as both a symbol of unsustainability and sustainability – a syncretism. It challenges us to rethink the boundaries between these opposites, showing that their coexistence can generate new possibilities rather than erasure.

5

AI *Plasticity* was displayed in the context of the 2021 Biennale of Architecture in Venice, a unique place where *urbanscape* and *waterscape* cannot be disentangled from one another. Does this architectural work of yours interact with this complex city? If so, in which ways? Would it be possible to consider it *site-specific*? And, are there any possible ties between the architecture in Venice and your architecture *Plasticity*?

AI *Plasticity* can be seen as a metaphor for Venice, a city whose beauty emerges from the coexistence and tension between nature and human intervention. These forces exist together yet remain somehow independent, encapsulating the paradoxical relationship that defines the city's identity.

Formally, *Plasticity* draws from two oppositional lexicons: an organic one, evocative of natural, free-form structures, and a linear, geometric one. This duality serves as a metaphor for the interplay between humanity and nature. Importantly, there is no compromise between these elements; instead, they coexist in their pure forms, neither altering nor subsuming the other.

In designing *Plasticity*, I sought to create a work that embodies the aesthetic principles of my concept of *hypersection*. Using boolean operations, I achieved a seamless continuity between the two distinct patterns. The boundary between them becomes a point of continuous transition, enabling aesthetic and conceptual information to flow between the two lexicons while maintaining their independence and distinction.

Materially, *Plasticity* critiques the unbalanced relationship between humankind and its environment. At least 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic currently float in the oceans, wreaking havoc on marine ecosystems, contributing to climate change, and ultimately affecting human health. This interconnectedness underscores the necessity of control over plastics, envisioning them as active, integrated parts of our cities rather than pollutants in our waters.

The idea of integrated distinction – where neither the linear nor the organic submits or adapts to the other – serves as a metaphor for ecological coexistence. This makes *Plasticity* an ideal representation of Venice itself: a city that exists only in the delicate balance between water and construction, where coexistence is both uncompromising and essential.

6

AI Being printed out with 3D-printing techniques, *Plasticity* is both a material object and a digital file. From a theoretical point of view,

there are good reasons to associate plasticity and casting; 3D-printing, in turn, seems to function pretty much as casting in the post-digital era: it allows for artworks' reproduction, scalability, changes in material, and more. You often resort to 3D-printing in your work; what are your thoughts on this technique, from both a practical and a theoretical perspective? Do you see a connection with the plasticity of casting, translated in the post-digital scenario?

(NC) 3D printing processes are fundamentally continuous, operating through an additive method where material is deposited layer by layer. The versatility of additive manufacturing varies significantly depending on scale: at smaller scales, it offers higher definition and the possibility of removable support structures, while at larger scales, resolution decreases and the distinct layering becomes more visible. At these larger scales, support material is often impractical, meaning objects must be self-supporting – a constraint that aligns the process with traditional clay modeling, where structural integrity is essential during fabrication.

As you point out, I am particularly drawn to 3D printing for several reasons. First, it enables production on demand, making additive manufacturing a sustainable fabrication process aligned with environmentally conscious design principles. This adaptability makes it an ideal tool for both design research and artistic experimentation. Second, it facilitates the exploration of new sustainable materials, ranging from upcycled plastics to highly biodegradable substances like oyster shells, cork, olives, algae, and coffee-based materials. Finally, 3D printing embodies what

I refer to as the *phygital* [10] quality of contemporary fabrication – a seamless hybrid of physical and digital realities.

A pivotal example of this emerged in March 2022 during the first Decentraland Metaverse Fashion Week, [11] when Brytehall Gallery invited me to create a *phygital* NFT collection titled *Crystalline*. This collection included a dress and bracelet designed to exist both as digital code and as physical objects, producible via 3D printing. The pieces were honed from bio-recycled resin, and collectors could purchase the NFT, a video animation of the dress created in collaboration with artist Franknitty3000, [12] and physical artifacts at varying scales: the bracelet, the 10-inch miniature of the dress, or the full 1/1 dress.

While the project required me to prepare distinct files tailored to the scale and technical specifications of different 3D printing machines, it highlighted a critical limitation of current additive manufacturing: its dependence on scale-specific adaptations. However, I foresee a future where advances in artificial intelligence eliminate this need for manual adjustments, enabling 3D printing to fully realize its *phygital* potential.

[10] Phygital, a combination of physical and digital worlds, is an emerging concept and a current trend in several industries. The term was

initially coined by Chris Weil in 2007 to describe this integration from a holistic point of view. In order to bridge the physical and digital worlds, several technologies play a key role, including

robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and extended reality (XR). See

the blog entry "What is phygital? Uncover its real meaning", *Vection Technologies Blog*. <https://vection-technologies.com/blog/What-Is-Phygital-Uncover-Its-Real-Meaning/>.

[11] See the blog entry "Tradition and innovation collide: Decentraland metaverse fashion week 2023", *Decentraland Blog*. <https://decentraland.org/blog/announcements/tradition-and-innovation-collide-decentraland-metaverse-fashion-week-2023>.

[12] Frank Nitty 3000 is a multi-faceted artist with a career spanning over ten years and three continents which saw him work as an art director in fashion, creative director in the advertising industry and as a music video director. Since the 2010s Frank has been a pioneer exploring the boundaries between digital art and otherwise commercial purpose imagery under the moniker "FrankNitty3000". <https://www.franknitty3000.com/about>.

Recent advances in AI have already begun to diminish the need for design adaptation in 3D printing. AI now enables the rapid translation of 2D images into 3D geometric shapes, which can be directly printed. This capability further dissolves the boundaries between physical and digital realms, allowing objects to exist almost simultaneously as digital designs and tangible artifacts. In this sense, additive manufacturing transcends its role as a mere fabrication technique, becoming a metaphor for the interconnectedness of our post-digital society, where distinctions between the virtual and material are continuously renegotiated.

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AI Your work unfolds at the crossroads between different disciplines and artistic genres. For instance, you alternatively refer to your work *Plasticity* as an *installation*, as an instance of eco-innovative *architecture*, as a *sculpture*. Your engagement, as an architect, with fashion and design is also revelatory of this. Do you think that your ability in smoothly transitioning from, say, architecture to sculpture is due to an underlying, inherent plasticity at work in your practice? Do you have a “plastic approach” to the arts?

NC Architecture is fundamentally about transitions – between spaces, times, and meanings: here and there, before and after, this and that. These transitions shape the program, aesthetics and materiality, of an architectural project. If we replace “space” with “discipline”, the same types of transitions apply: continuous, discontinuous, and combinative. My work transitions between disciplines through deliberate, non-mediated coexistence. Rather than merging disciplines into a compromise, I aim to force their distinct perspectives to coexist and even conflict. This tension generates dialogues and insights that would not emerge otherwise. In my teaching and practice, I cultivate this approach by creating conditions where diverse knowledge and backgrounds interact without mediation. Such a method contrasts with how collaborations are often rooted in compromise, where differing perspectives adapt and bend toward one another to form a shared informational pattern. However, I believe in the potential of non-mediated transitions, where adaptation isn’t required. This perspective can lead to innovation by allowing each discipline to retain its distinct identity while engaging with others. Take, for example, my collaboration with haute couture designer Iris Van Herpen on the Magnetic Motion dress [FIG. 4]. Is it a dress? Not entirely – it’s rigid and doesn’t adapt to bodily movements. Is it architecture? Not in a conventional sense. The dress eludes established definitions, carving out a new, undefined space that transcends traditional categories. It represents the creation of objects that generate new fields or artistic genres by existing in a state of indeterminacy.

Such objects resist precise definitions – they are intentionally ambiguous. This is why I describe my Biennale project *Plasticity* variously as an installation, an instance of eco-innovative architecture, or a sculpture. It doesn’t conform to predefined functions or aesthetics; instead, it challenges expectations, creating something open and full of potential. In this sense, it’s “plastic”.

AI In presenting *Plasticity*, you provide a definition. You say: «*Plasticity* intends to highlight the notions of transformation and conversion. The term refers to the scientific property of a material to deform by undergoing permanent changes and acquiring new forms and properties. In architecture, as in art, it is the quality of a work to freely articulate in space. Therefore, *Plasticity* could be interpreted as the capability of a material to transform itself by acquiring new spacial characteristics and dimensions through a process of identity redefinition». In this sense, plasticity, as a concept, is equated to permanent transformation. Is this transformation, in your work and in your view, necessarily a transformation that goes for the best? Have you ever explored negative plasticity, the possibility of this «process of identity redefinition» to take on a disruptive connotation – to “go for the worst”?

NC This is truly one of the best questions I’ve ever received, and I’m delighted to answer it.

In my theoretical approach, adaptation and bending could indeed be considered forms of “going for the worst”. My interest lies in hypersection and in hypersecting objects – objects that emerge from non-mediated collaborations. These objects, as I’ve explained above, are undefined and resist classification, existing instead in a state of openness.

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When these objects are required to adapt to a specific field, they become less compelling to me; they fall into pre-existing definitions. This loss of ambiguity and adaptability diminishes their potential for generating new insights and dialogues.

For example, take my third collaboration with Van Herpen: the *Hacking Infinity* dress [FIG. 5]. To imbue a rigid 3D-printed material with dynamic properties, we invented a knitting system reminiscent of old medieval coats of mail. This ecosystem, made of 6556 intricately intertwined parts, gave the dress a unique kind of flexibility—remaining physically rigid while moving harmoniously with the body.

While this solution was successful and elegant, the dress begins to look more like a conventional dress compared to the *Magnetic Motion* dress I discussed earlier. It starts to fit within a field, a definition. From the perspective of hypersection, it becomes less interesting because it is the result of mediated transitions.

What you call “negative plasticity” could be understood as its adaptation to a specific purpose or a defined field. Such adaptation reduces the openness of the object, restricting its potential for permanent transformation.

AI To conclude, let us circle back to a more general topic. Among the arts, architecture is the one whose social role is most immediate to grasp. You say that «to have a true impact on the redefinition of future inhabitation, architecture must reinvent itself as a new discipline focusing on the construction of collaborative environments». Could you please elaborate on this? What do you think about the future of architecture in



[FIG. 4] Magnetic Motion
Dress Niccolò Casas and Iris van
Herpen, Magnetic Motion dress, Iris
van Herpen Magnetic Motion col-
lection, Spring/Summer 2015
Ready-to-Wear, Paris Fashion Week,
Paris, September 2014Photo: Team
Peter Stigter

Plasticity, Plastics, Architecture. An Interview
Niccolò Casas



[FIG. 5] Hacking Infinity Dress Niccolò
Casas and Iris van Herpen, Hacking
Infinity dress, Iris van Herpen Hacking
Infinity collection, Fall/Winter 2015–16
Ready-to-Wear, Paris Fashion Week,
Paris, March 2015Photo: Niccolò Casas

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relation to the inhabitation of the future? What could be the social and political role of architecture in the face of the widespread housing crisis that we are witnessing at different rates and in different ways across the global North and South?

NC

As a visiting professor at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), I co-directed the BodyScapes program alongside Catherine Andreozzi and Ludovico Lombardi (Zaha Hadid Architects), bringing together students from the Digital + Media, Architecture, and Apparel departments. The program created a collaborative environment where diverse backgrounds and experiences converged, challenging preconceived notions and uncovering unexpected visions. I believe architecture should function in a similar way, fostering multidisciplinary dialogues that explore new forms of dwelling and inhabitation. Architecture must shift its focus from the building itself to the broader concept of how we inhabit spaces. As architects, we are uniquely positioned to mediate between diverse perspectives – balancing the often-divergent needs of stakeholders such as clients, contractors, engineers, local communities, and municipalities. This expertise in orchestrating complex dialogues should not only drive building innovation but also inspire a deeper exploration of how we live. By rethinking fundamental aspects of life – how we eat, move, dress, communicate, and work – architecture can redefine its role in shaping sustainable futures. Sometimes, the solution isn't warming the building but rather equipping the individual with adaptive technologies, such as wearable warming devices. Similarly, traditional laundries may become unnecessary if buildings offer ecological drying rooms that minimize energy consumption and environmental impact.

Architecture should adopt perspectives from other disciplines and, in turn, challenge those disciplines to evolve. It must become a discipline that constructs not just buildings, but the conditions for cohabitation and collaboration – particularly in an era of drastic climate change, where urgent adaptation is essential.

Action, coexistence, innovation, and openness lie at the heart of my vision for the future of architecture.

Plasticity and Mimesis: Three Metamorphoses. A Dialogue*

Catherine Malabou

Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature and European Languages and Studies at UC Irvine, Professor of Philosophy at CRMEP, Kingston University, and Professor of Philosophy at The European Graduate School. Previously, she was Maître de Conférences at Paris Nanterre University. She earned her PhD from EHESS, supervised by J. Derrida. Beyond her work on plasticity, her recent monographs include *Il n'y a pas eu de Révolution* (2024), *Au voleur!* (2022), and *Métamorphoses de l'intelligence* (2017).

Plasticità e mimesis: tre metamorfosi. Un dialogo*

Nidesh Lawtoo

Full Professor of Modern/Contemporary European Literature and Culture at Leiden University. Previously, he held positions at the University of Lausanne and at Johns Hopkins University, and led an ERC-funded project at KU Leuven (*Homo mimeticus*, 2017-2022). He is the author and editor of many publications that set the foundations of mimetic studies, such as a diptych on Violence and the Unconscious (2023) and *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (2022).

* With an editorial note by Alice Iacobone and an intermezzo with Isabelle Dahms & Giulia Rignano

* Traduzione italiana di Alice Iacobone

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Editorial note

The present dialogue took place online on February 23, 2023, in the context of a conference organized by Professor Nidesh Lawtoo and his team at KU Leuven. [1]

Revised and expanded for the present written version, this dialogue brings in conversation two of the most relevant thinkers of our time: Catherine Malabou, the author of a widely influential philosophical account that is largely (but not exclusively) based on plasticity, and Nidesh Lawtoo, the proponent of a new and successful field of interdisciplinary inquiry, mimetic studies.

Malabou has been working on the concept of plasticity for over thirty years, expanding it in a great number of directions and engaging with a variety of disciplines which range from classical philosophy (especially through the figures of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida) to the neurosciences, including also a critical engagement with psychoanalysis (for an in-depth overview, see Malabou 2022a). In her works, plasticity has come to encompass the activity of giving form, the passivity of receiving form, and the destruction of all form. Thus outlined, plasticity has become the fundamental feature of human beings, who are endowed with a plastic essence. «The human is plastic. This means that it gives itself its own form, that it is able to transform itself, to invent and produce itself, and that it is nothing but this very process of self-formation» (Malabou 2014). More recently, however, Malabou's reflections have also addressed anarchism and philosophy (Malabou 2023b; 2024), feminism (2022b), and artificial intelligence (2019).

Lawtoo, on the other hand, has centered his thought on the possibility of conceiving of mimesis anew, developing this concept well beyond the stereotypical understanding offered by the

[1] Information on the international conference, titled *Metamorphoses of Mimesis: Plasticity, Subjectivity and Transformation with Catherine Malabou*, can be found here: <https://genderedmimesis.com/conferences/>. The dialogue has been recorded; a part of the video is available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqCWGRJLbM8>. More information on Lawtoo's projects, past and current, is provided in the course of the text (see in particular footnote 9) and in the following website: www.homomimeticus.eu.

Western metaphysical tradition. No longer a mere production of bad copies depleted of ontological value, mimesis is devised by Lawtoo as central to subject formation and transformation for a mimetic species he calls *homo mimeticus*. Going beyond René Girard's account of mimetic rivalry and violence central to unifying mimetic *theory*, mimesis for Lawtoo goes beyond good and evil and is of pivotal importance for grasping the meaning of a great variety of contemporary phenomena through the lens of pluralist mimetic *studies*. As he explains: «From imitation to identification, affective contagion to mimetism, suggestion to hypnosis, embodied simulation to influence, mirroring reflexes to algorithmic spells, the protean phantom of what the ancients called, enigmatically, *mimēsis*, is back. Reloaded by the digital age, mimesis is currently generating a spiraling vortex that can no longer be framed by the traditional logic of visual representation» (Lawtoo 2022, 11). Without dismissing the far-reaching history of the concept and with an eye to future-oriented questions, mimetic studies turn mimesis into a powerful conceptual tool for our times, including the rise of new fascist leaders (Lawtoo 2019; also in Italian with *Mimesis*, Lawtoo 2020a). As of today, mimetic studies are well represented by the *Homo Mimeticus* trilogy, consisting of a first volume in which Lawtoo sets the bases of the field and outlines “a new theory of imitation” (Lawtoo 2022; trans. in Italian with Carocci); a second collected volume that he edited along with Marina García-Granero, which collectively furthers the “re-turn of mimesis” (Lawtoo & García-Granero 2024); and a third planned volume, edited with Willow Verkerk, which explores *The Metamorphoses of Mimesis with Catherine Malabou* (Lawtoo & Verkerk forthcoming).

The present dialogue, which will also conclude the third volume of the *Homo Mimeticus* series as a *Coda*, shows us some of the similarities shared by mimesis and plasticity while also further developing both concepts in a multifaceted interplay. It is meaningful that plasticity and mimesis, here, are not left intact by the encounter: their interaction is mediated by a third concept, that of *metamorphosis*, which diffracts and transforms them. This is not always the case with the idea of metamorphosis, often linked to superficial change in exterior appearance (as very well noticed by Malabou herself: «in the Western imaginary [...] form transforms; substance remains», Malabou 2012, 7). In this case, instead, metamorphosis works as an operator of radical transformation in the interaction.

In the context of this journal issue, it is all the more significant that precisely aesthetics is regarded by Lawtoo and Malabou as the common field of origin of both plasticity and mimesis (and, we could add perhaps, also of metamorphosis). Genealogy aside, Lawtoo has reframed mimesis from the angle of literature, film, TV series, and videogames (Lawtoo 2013, 2020b, 2024), and mimetic studies so far added theater, photography, and social media (Lawtoo & García-Granero 2024). Malabou's plasticity, in turn, has been brought into dialogue with literature and cinema by the author herself (Malabou 2012, 55–63; 2008, 39), and more recently with film (Dalton & Tyrer 2024) and with the arts in general (Opelz 2022) by other scholars. The present journal issue has tried to further explore the ties between plasticity, aesthetics, and the arts, aiming to deepen a line of research that remains particularly fertile.

I sincerely thank Nidesh Lawtoo and Catherine Malabou for their generosity in allowing me to reproduce this dialogue as a conclusion to the 22nd issue of *Philosophy Kitchen*.

NL NIDESH LAWTOO: As the original title of our dialogue suggests [*Plastic Mimesis / Mimetic Plasticity*, ed.], there seems to be a disconcerting mirroring relation between plasticity and mimesis. This also means that when plasticity and mimesis face each other, in a dialogic interplay, they have the potential to generate metamorphoses that cut across old-fashioned mind/body, nature/culture dualisms, including patriarchal dualisms. The performative powers of mimesis/plasticity also operate in subliminal ways that are not under full agentic or conscious control and are in this sense *un-conscious* or subconscious. In the process of dramatization, plastic-mimetic subjects trouble the very essence of foundational concepts in Western thought like the subject, freedom, intelligence, consciousness, anarchism, automatism, pleasure, the unconscious – including, of course, plasticity and mimesis as well.

Furthering a first foray in the plasticity of mimesis constitutive of the genealogy of *homo mimeticus*, [2] the dialogue that follows takes stock of Catherine Malabou's recent engagements with the problematic of mimesis – be it under the conceptual masks of “simulation”, “mimicry”, “repetition”, “mirroring”, or “epigenetic mimesis” among other emerging concepts that are currently contributing to the field of mimetic studies. [3] Our assumption is that if the subject is indeed plastic, mimetic, and constitutively relational, then philosophers and theorists would benefit from dialogic practices of thinking together – or sym-philosophizing – that not only represent but actually perform the mimetic turn. To that end, we draw on a genealogical practice of dialogic encounters with influential thinkers

NL NIDESH LAWTOO: Come suggerisce il titolo originale del nostro dialogo [*Plastic Mimesis / Mimetic Plasticity*], tra plasticità e mimesis pare esserci una sconcertante relazione di specularità. Questo significa anche che plasticità e mimesis, incontrandosi in un'interazione dialogica, generano metamorfosi capaci di tagliare trasversalmente le classiche dicotomie mente/corpo, natura/cultura, oltre alle varie dicotomie patriarcali. I poteri performativi di mimesis/plasticità operano anche secondo modalità subliminali, sfuggendo al pieno controllo cosciente o agitivo e in questo senso lavorando *inconsciamente* o *subconsciamente*. Nel processo di drammatizzazione, i soggetti plastico-mimetici mettono in crisi l'essenza stessa di concetti che sono alla base del pensiero occidentale, come quelli di soggetto, libertà, intelligenza, coscienza, anarchismo, automatismo, piacere, inconscio – inclusi, ovviamente, i concetti di plasticità e mimesis.

Approfondendo una prima esplorazione della plasticità della mimesis, costitutiva della genealogia dell'*homo mimeticus*, [2] il dialogo che segue fa il punto sulle recenti interazioni di Catherine Malabou con la problematica della mimesis – interazioni che si sono date sotto le maschere concettuali di “simulazione”, “mimetismo”, “ripetizione”, “rispecchiamento”, “mimesi epigenetica”, per non menzionare che alcuni dei nuovi concetti che stanno contribuendo a dar forma ai *mimetic studies* o studi mimetici. [3] L'ipotesi da cui prendiamo le mosse è la seguente: se il soggetto è plastico, mimetico e costitutivamente relazionale, allora i filosofi e i teorici trarrebbero beneficio da pratiche dialogiche del “pensare-con” – del syn-filosofare – che non solo rappresentano, ma effettivamente realizzano il *mimetic turn*. A tal fine, ricorriamo a una pratica

[2] See Lawtoo 2017; 2022, 129-156.

[3] See for instance Malabou 2023a. See also Malabou & Opelz 2022 for a dialogue with Malabou on “L'avenir de la mimèsis” that explicitly furthers mimetic studies and its dialogic tradition.

[2] Questa genealogia è ricostruita in Lawtoo 2017; 2022, 129-156.

[3] Per gli studi mimetici disponibili in italiano si veda Lawtoo 2024. Di recentissima uscita è la traduzione di *Homo Mimeticus*, apparsa per Carocci (Lawtoo 2025). Per i contributi di Malabou sulla mimesis si veda ad esempio Malabou 2021; 2023; Malabou & Opelz 2022.

currently broadening the reach of mimetic studies across disciplines. [4] I am thus honored to add Catherine Malabou as an ally to this emerging field. In the company of Isabell Dahms and Giulia Rignano who will join the conversation for an intermezzo on Gendered Mimesis, thinking dialogically with Malabou will give new form to the plastic metamorphoses of mimesis.

CM CATHERINE MALABOU: I thank you Nidesh, for in reality mimesis was not one of my fields of interests and you made me aware of the importance of this concept. In the past, like most philosophers, I have been touching on mimesis, but I never really focused on it and discovered how important it actually was – so thank you for that. I'm very curious to see how we can join plasticity and mimesis in productive ways, while transforming them in the process.

NL Yes, you are known for your influential concept of plasticity, which serves as a red thread, or *fil conducteur*, in your protean oeuvre. It is true that until recently, you haven't explicitly examined the concept of mimesis itself. And yet, the problematic of mimesis has been making increasingly frequent appearances in your most recent books, often under different conceptual masks such as "mirroring" or "simulation", for instance. The notion of the "mask" itself that you often convoke to speak about plasticity [5] is, of course, also a mimetic concept. It recalls the origins of mimesis (from *mîmos*, actor or performance) in theatrical spectacles where the figure of the *mimos* wears a mask, from

genealogica di dialogo e incontro con importanti pensatori e pensatrici che stanno contribuendo ad ampliare interdisciplinariamente la portata dei Mimetic Studies. [4]

Sono quindi onorato di aggiungere Catherine Malabou tra le alleate di questo nuovo campo di studi. Insieme a Isabell Dahms e Giulia Rignano, che si uniranno alla conversazione per un intermezzo sulla mimesis di genere, pensare dialogicamente con Malabou darà nuova forma alle metamorfosi plastiche della mimesis.

CM CATHERINE MALABOU: Ti ringrazio Nidesh, perché in realtà la mimesis non era uno dei miei ambiti d'interesse e tu mi hai fatto comprendere l'importanza di questo concetto. In passato, come la maggior parte dei filosofi, avevo toccato il tema ma senza concentrarmi davvero e senza scoprirne la rilevanza – quindi ti ringrazio per questo. Sono curiosa di vedere come potremo unire produttivamente i concetti di plasticità e mimesis, trasformandoli nel processo.

NL Sì, sei conosciuta per il tuo importante concetto di plasticità, che fa da filo rosso nell'attraversamento della tua opera così proteiforme. È vero che, fino a poco tempo fa, non avevi esaminato esplicitamente il concetto di mimesis in sé. E tuttavia, la problematica della mimesis è apparsa sempre più frequentemente nei tuoi libri recenti, spesso sotto maschere concettuali come quelle, ad esempio, di "rispecchiamento" o "simulazione". La nozione stessa di "maschera", che spesso evochi per parlare di plasticità, [5] è ovviamente anch'essa un concetto mimetico. Richiama le origini della mimesis (da *mimos*, "attore" o "performance") negli spettacoli

[4] Contributors to these interdisciplinary dialogues include, among others, Jean-Luc Nancy (philosophy), J. Hillis Miller (literary theory), Edgar Morin (sociology), Katherine Hayles (posthuman studies), Adriana Cavarero (feminist philosophy), Jane Bennett (new materialism), Vittorio Gallese (neurosciences) See: HOM Videos, <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971>.

[5] For instance, in Malabou 2010.

[4] Tra questi numerosissimi dialoghi e alleanze interdisciplinari ricordiamo quelle con Jean-Luc Nancy (e la filosofia), J. Hillis Miller (e la teoria letteraria), Edgar Morin (e la sociologia), Katherine Hayles (e gli studi sul postumano), Adriana Cavarero (e la filosofia femminista), Jane Bennett (e la filosofia neo-materialista), Vittorio Gallese (e le neuroscienze) Si veda: HOM Videos, <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971>.

[5] Ad esempio in Malabou 2023c.

which our notion of personality also comes (from *persona*, theatrical mask). And now your more recent focus on “epigenetic mimesis” [6] indicates that this problematic is becoming explicitly central to your concerns. If my work was in any way helpful for this mimetic turn of yours, I am of course honored.

To begin with, I was wondering if you could specify the underlying philosophical reasons that led to your recent interest in mimesis, a mimesis that is not simply a passive copy or representation of nature but entails a creative and productive dimension on the side of a plastic subject.

CM There could be many reasons I could advance to answer your question. The first one would be my reflections on artificial intelligence (AI) and technology on which you have also written a beautiful text. [7] Given the developments in AI, at the moment, it has become inevitable to reflect on simulation and to create or elaborate a new concept of mimesis that definitely exceeds all its traditional values and definitions. Recently there have been a lot of discussions about ChatGPT; many technophobes said that this AI chatbot was not to be taken seriously because this system was only mimetic in the pejorative sense and that it was unable to create anything. For me this kind of discourse is to be eliminated from the philosophical realm because it doesn’t grasp the very troubling power of simulating or imitating... what? Is it imitating the human, really? I don’t know but AI uses the power of simulation to create a new world. So, I think my interest in mimesis comes from my reflection on technology.

CM Yes, your wonderful book *Morphing Intelligence*, published in French under the title *Métamorphoses de l’intelligence*, is in many ways a correction or critique of your previous book titled, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*

teatrali, dove la figura del *mimos* indossa una maschera, dalla quale proviene anche la nostra nozione di personalità (da *persona*, “maschera teatrale”). E ora la tua recente attenzione alla “mimesis epigenetica” [6] indica come questa problematica stia diventando esplicitamente centrale tra i tuoi interessi. Se il mio lavoro è stato utile in qualche modo per questa tua svolta mimetica, ne sono naturalmente onorato.

Per cominciare, mi chiedevo se potessi specificare le ragioni filosofiche sottese al tuo recente interesse per la mimesis, una mimesis che non è semplicemente copia passiva o rappresentazione della natura, ma implica una dimensione creativa e produttiva da parte del soggetto plastico.

CM Ci sarebbero molte ragioni che potrei addurre per rispondere alla tua domanda. La prima sarebbe legata alle mie riflessioni sull’intelligenza artificiale (IA) e la tecnologia, su cui anche tu hai scritto un bellissimo testo. [7] Dati gli sviluppi dell’IA, in questo momento è diventato inevitabile riflettere sulla simulazione e creare o elaborare un nuovo concetto di mimesis che superi definitivamente le sue definizioni e connotazioni tradizionali. Di recente ci sono state molte discussioni su ChatGPT; molti tecnofobi hanno affermato che questo chat bot non andrebbe preso sul serio perché sarebbe solo mimetico nel senso peggiorativo del termine, cioè incapace di creare alcunché. Per me questo tipo di discorso non appartiene all’ambito filosofico perché non coglie il potere perturbante del simulare o imitare... cosa? Sta davvero imitando l’umano? Non lo so, ma l’IA usa la simulazione per creare un nuovo mondo. Perciò penso che il mio interesse per la mimesis venga dalla mia riflessione sulla tecnologia.

NL Sì. Potremmo dire che il tuo splendido libro *Metamorfosi dell’intelligenza*, pubblicato in francese con il titolo *Métamorphoses de l’intelligence*, sotto

[6] In Malabou 2023a.

[7] Here, Malabou is referring to Lawtoo 2020b.

[6] In Malabou 2023a.

[7] Malabou si riferisce qui a Lawtoo 2020b.

CM Yes, it was an incredible discovery for me. When I read in an article that IBM was creating synaptic chips that were “miming” the function of the brain, my previous distinction between the natural brain let’s say and the machine was becoming obsolete. If a machine is able to function as a natural brain, if there exist such things as synaptic chips, then the difference between a human brain and a technological one might become difficult to tell.

NL We’ll come back to the troubling question of AI simulations and the posthuman later on, but let us first step back to the embodied and material aspect of imitation on the side of the human subject. For me, the first and most direct connection between plasticity and mimesis stems from their shared genealogy and the shift of emphasis they triggered in recent years: both plasticity and mimesis are traditionally confined to aesthetic preoccupations with artistic representations or formations, be it in sculpture or in painting, for instance; and yet, from different perspectives – you by focusing on plasticity’s double capacity to give and receive form via your reading of Hegel, I by focusing on the pathological and patho-logical manifestations I saw at play in Nietzsche – we brought these traditional aesthetic concepts back in touch with the problematic of subject formation and transformation, thereby transforming their meanings in the process as well. Although you are most known for your materialist reading of Hegel’s dialectics, for your defense of the transcendental in Kant as an epigenetic category, and for your agonistic supplement to Derrida’s logic of the trace, I also find your sensitivity to the materiality of the brain, including its epigenetic plasticity prone to metamorphoses that cut across the biological and the symbolic, very Nietzschean in spirit.

For instance, I was pleased to read in *Morphing Intelligence* that you enlist Nietzsche as a «great philosopher of the brain» (2019, 141); you also call attention

multi aspetti sia una correzione o una critica del tuo libro precedente intitolato *Cosa fare del nostro cervello?*

CM Sì, è stata una scoperta incredibile per me. Quando ho letto in un articolo che IBM stava creando chip sinaptici che “imitavano” il funzionamento del cervello, mi sono accorta che la mia precedente distinzione tra il cervello “naturale” e macchina stava diventando obsoleta. Se una macchina è in grado di funzionare come un cervello naturale, se esistono cose come i chip sinaptici, allora la distinzione tra un cervello umano e uno tecnologico potrebbe diventare difficile da tracciare.

NL Torneremo più tardi sulla questione delle simulazioni dell’IA e del postumano, ma prima facciamo un passo indietro verso l’aspetto corporeo e materiale dell’imitazione dal lato del soggetto umano. Per me, la prima e più diretta connessione tra plasticità e mimesis deriva dalla loro comune genealogia e dal cambiamento di accento che entrambe hanno esperito negli ultimi anni: sia la plasticità che la mimesis sono concetti tradizionalmente confinati a questioni estetiche legate alla rappresentazione o alla formazione artistica, sia in scultura che in pittura, ad esempio; eppure, da prospettive diverse – tu concentrandoti sulla duplice capacità della plasticità di dare e ricevere forma attraverso la tua lettura di Hegel, io concentrandomi sulle manifestazioni pathos-logiche che ho visto all’opera in Nietzsche – abbiamo riportato questi concetti della tradizione estetica a contatto con la problematica della formazione e trasformazione del soggetto, trasformando così anche i loro significati nel processo. Sebbene tu sia più nota per la tua lettura materialista della dialettica hegeliana, per la tua difesa del trascendentale in Kant come categoria epigenetica e per il tuo “supplemento agonistico” alla logica della traccia di Derrida, trovo anche che la tua sensibilità per la materialità del cervello, inclusa la sua plasticità epigenetica che apre a metamorfosi attraverso il biologico e il simbolico, sia molto nietzscheana nello spirito. Ad esempio, mi ha

to his interests in «physiology» and physio-psychology in order to affirm that «life cannot be divided» (141) according to dualistic binaries like mind/body, culture/nature, physiology/psychology, original/copy, male/female, among others. As you speak of the «three metamorphoses of intelligence» in your detailed genealogy of AI simulations – that goes from nineteenth century genetics to epigenetics in the Blue Brain project to automatism internal to AI – I thus propose a little dialogic experiment. Let us take Nietzsche's "Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit" that open *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a provisional starting point. I discuss it briefly in the Prologue that opens the volume [the third volume of the *Homo Mimeticus* series, ed.], and since you were perhaps implicitly also alluding to this text to structure your three metamorphoses of intelligence, it might be a good way to provisionally start. The goal is not to close the discussion but rather to establish new genealogical bridges between plasticity and mimesis and favor new metamorphoses of both mirroring concepts.

As you recall, in the "Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit" Nietzsche uses animal figures to account for the plastic and metamorphic powers of an immanent, embodied, and material spirit prone to protean transformations that might help us join plasticity and mimesis. For this operation it is important not to restrict mimesis to the dominant metaphysical definition that reduces it to a debased copy of nature. Instead, let us focus on a mimetic pathos, or power that drives in the biological evolution of the spirit itself in ways that transgress the frontier between the biological and the symbolic. As is well-known, Nietzsche's parable of the *Verwandlungen* of the spirit describes «how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at least a child» (2005, 23). It's a parable dealing with the transformation of the spirit that remains rooted in the animality of the body in ways that entangle symbolic, spiritual, and biological perspectives central to both mimesis and plasticity.

fatto piacere leggere in *Metamorfosi dell'intelligenza* che consideri Nietzsche un «grande pensatore del cervello» (2021, 145); sottolinea inoltre il suo interesse per la «fisiologia» e la fisio-psicologia per affermare che «la vita non può essere divisa (145) secondo binari dualistici come mente/corpo, cultura/natura, fisiologia/psicologia, originale/copia, maschile/femminile, tra gli altri. Poiché parli delle "tre metamorfosi dell'intelligenza" nella tua genealogia dettagliata delle simulazioni dell'IA – che va dalla genetica del diciannovesimo secolo all'epigenetica nel progetto Blue Brain fino agli automatismi interni all'IA – ti propongo un piccolo esperimento dialogico. Prendiamo le "Tre metamorfosi dello spirito" di Nietzsche che aprono *Così parlò Zarathustra* come punto di partenza preliminare. Ne discuto brevemente nel Prologo che apre il volume [il terzo volume della serie *Homo Mimeticus*, NdT] e, dato che forse alludevi implicitamente anche a questo testo per strutturare le tue tre metamorfosi dell'intelligenza, potrebbe essere un buon modo per iniziare. L'obiettivo non è chiudere la discussione, ma piuttosto stabilire nuove connessioni genealogiche tra plasticità e mimesis e favorire nuove metamorfosi di questi due concetti speculari.

Come ricorderai, nelle "Tre metamorfosi dello spirito" Nietzsche utilizza figure animali per spiegare i poteri plastici e metamorfici di uno spirito immanente, incarnato e materiale, incline a trasformazioni proteiformi che potrebbero aiutarci a unire plasticità e mimesis. Per questa operazione è importante non circoscrivere la mimesis alla sua classica definizione metafisica che la riduce a copia depauperata della natura. Occorre invece concentrarsi su un pathos o un potere mimetico che guida l'evoluzione biologica dello spirito secondo modalità che tagliano trasversalmente il biologico e il simbolico. Come è noto, la parabola nietzschiana delle *Verwandlungen* dello spirito descrive «come lo spirito diventa cammello, e il cammello leone, e infine il leone fanciullo» (1968, 23). È una parabola che tratta della trasformazione dello spirito, che rimane radicato nell'animalità del corpo secondo modalità che intrecciano prospettive simboliche, spirituali

And since in your work you often point to the biological specificity of certain animals – the salamander that regrows its tail, for instance, generating a second tail that both supplements the missing one while differing from it [8] – we could do the same with the mimetic, anti-mimetic, and hyper-mimetic animals Nietzsche convokes.

First Metamorphosis: Cultural Load / Biological Heritage

(NL) The first symbolic figure, or animal, is the one of the camel that passively submits to the heavy values of tradition Nietzsche generally critiques: namely, moral values the spirit is supposed to bow down to and carry on its back. It's the phase of learning and submission characteristic of the first step in education, whose passivity, for Nietzsche, is inscribed in the animal's bodily submission. Mimesis seems to play a role in this submission. In fact, the camel, not unlike the cow, is a herd animal. In this biological but also socio-cultural sense it is a mimetic animal that is driven by a type of mimicry that, for Nietzsche, is not only animal but all too human. It's a first step that is often dismissed as simply passive and submissive. And yet, precisely as a first step, it also suggests that a biological mimetic drive is present in all humans, while the symbolic focus on the load of education indicates that the mimetic experience of learning also plays a major role in forming and transforming subjectivity. Could you articulate this interplay between the innate and the acquired, the biological and the symbolic, in this first metamorphosis of the spirit rooted in a mimetic animal?

(CM) It is strange that for Nietzsche the weight of biology and the weight of culture ends up being one and the same weight. The camel is the animal that carries something on its back, I remember that

e biologiche centrali sia per la mimesis che per la plasticità. E poiché nel tuo lavoro spesso fai riferimento alla specificità biologica di certi animali – come la salamandra che si fa ricrescere la coda, ad esempio, generandone una seconda che fa da supplemento a quella mancante pur differenziandosi da essa [8] – potremmo fare lo stesso con gli animali mimetici, anti-mimetici e iper-mimetici evocati da Nietzsche.

Prima metamorfosi: Bagaglio culturale / Eredità biologica

(NL) La prima figura simbolica, o animale, è quella del cammello, che si sottomette passivamente ai pesanti valori della tradizione generalmente criticati da Nietzsche: in particolare, i valori morali a cui lo spirito deve piegarsi e che deve portare sulle spalle. È la fase dell'apprendimento e della sottomissione tipica del primo gradino della formazione. Questa fase è caratterizzata da una passività che per Nietzsche è inscritta nella sottomissione corporea dell'animale. In questa sottomissione, la mimesis sembra in effetti giocare un ruolo. Il cammello, come ad esempio anche la mucca, è un animale sociale, che fa parte di un gregge. In questo senso biologico, ma anche socio-culturale, il cammello è un animale mimetico, guidato da una forma di imitazione che, per Nietzsche, non è solo animale ma anche fin troppo umana. È un primo passo che viene spesso liquidato come una fase di mera passività e sottomissione. Eppure, proprio in quanto primo passo, Nietzsche suggerisce anche che una tendenza mimetica di tipo biologico sia presente in tutti gli esseri umani, mentre il focus simbolico sul pesante portato dell'educazione indica che l'esperienza mimetica dell'apprendimento gioca anche un ruolo fondamentale nella formazione e trasformazione della soggettività. Potresti articolare questa interazione tra l'innato e l'acquisito, tra il biologico e il simbolico, in

[8] In Malabou 2011.

[8] Il riferimento è a Malabou 2009, 81-104.

metaphor. What the camel carries and what they obey is a mixture between the sedimentation of cultural tradition and biology. There is a point of indistinction between the two in Nietzsche. And I think this indistinction is at the core of what he calls memory. The child is the ultimate form of metamorphosis because the child is forgetful. So, memory in Nietzsche is this mixture between genetically inherited weight and all the cultural traditions that are taught and infused by education.

NL Yes, in this bio-cultural inheritance the following paradox struck me. In this complex interplay between what is given and what is acquired, biology and culture, central to the plastic formation of a mimetic animal, the line dividing activity from passivity, consciousness and the unconscious, does not seem clear-cut. After all, Nietzsche, who is arguably thinking about his own education in philology as well, tells us: «the heavy and the hardest (load) is what the camel's strength desires» (2005, 23). This seems to indicate a correlation between the weight of cultural training or mimetic submission to tradition on the one hand, and the plastic development of a type of mimetic strength that might be creative and productive in nature, on the other. Could you comment on this form of imitation based on automatic mimetic reflexes that sediment into habits and might appear as simply passive yet, through repetition, might also be the condition for the development of a type of strength constitutive of a more active, or productive mimesis?

CM Yes, I don't think Nietzsche only criticizes the camel and the mimetic drives it embodies. It's part of a process that leads to the next two metamorphoses. Of course, there is an evolution and transformation, but Nietzsche does not eliminate the camel, and thus the mimetic animal because, as you say, the camel is not only passive; it is also a figure of obedience. And in a certain sense, for Nietzsche, obedience is necessary. It drives the vital form

questa prima metamorfosi dello spirito radicata in un animale mimetico?

CM È strano che per Nietzsche il peso della biologia e il peso della cultura finiscano per essere lo stesso peso. Il cammello è l'animale che porta qualcosa sulla schiena, mi ricordo questa metafora. Ciò che il cammello porta e ciò a cui obbedisce è un insieme di biologia e sedimentazione della tradizione culturale. C'è un punto di indistinguibilità tra i due in Nietzsche. E penso che questa indistinguibilità sia al centro di ciò che lui chiama memoria. Il fanciullo è la forma ultima di metamorfosi perché è senza memoria. Quindi, la memoria in Nietzsche è questa combinazione di eredità genetica e tradizioni culturali insegnate e infuse dall'educazione.

NL Sì, rispetto a questa eredità biologico-culturale mi ha colpito il seguente paradosso. Nella complessa interazione tra ciò che è dato e ciò che è acquisito, tra biologia e cultura (centrali per la formazione plastica di un animale mimetico), la separazione tra attività e passività, tra conscio e inconscio, non è netta. Dopotutto, Nietzsche, che probabilmente stava anche pensando alla propria formazione in filologia, del cammello ci dice: «la sua forza anela verso le cose pesanti, più difficili a portare» (1968: 23). Questo sembra indicare una correlazione tra il peso della formazione culturale o della sottomissione mimetica alla tradizione, da un lato, e lo sviluppo plastico di un tipo di forza mimetica che potrebbe essere creativa e produttiva, dall'altro. Potresti commentare questa forma di imitazione basata su riflessi mimetici automatici che si sedimentano in abitudini e che possono apparire come semplicemente passivi, ma che, attraverso la ripetizione, possono anche costituire la condizione per lo sviluppo di una forma di forza costitutiva di una mimesis più attiva o produttiva?

CM Sì, non credo che Nietzsche critichi completamente il cammello e le spinte mimetiche che incarna. Fa parte di un processo che porta alle due metamorfosi

of resentment. He is not entirely against resentment. Resentment is necessary as a form of reaction against aggression, or any form of threat. The camel is desiring to carry the weight in order to defend itself and protect itself, which also entails an active side. In this sense, mimesis functions as a protection. So, it's not as negative a first step as it's often taken to be, even though it's not the ultimate form of liberation, of course.

(NL) It's interesting that by reading the metaphor of the animal literally and taking the mimetic drive that defines the camel as a starting point for a metamorphosis of the "spirit" we immediately trouble, or deconstruct, the symbolic/biological but also active/passive binaries that do not capture the Janus-faced properties of both mimesis and plasticity. As your focus on brain plasticity and epigenetics suggests, you are one of the few continental philosophers who engages with the neurosciences in order to establish productive dialogues across the two-culture divide. When I started working on a theory of the mimetic subject via Nietzsche and other modernist author around twenty years ago, I noted they were drawing on little discussed philosophical physicians like Hippolyte Bernheim, Gabriel Tarde, Pierre Janet, and others late nineteenth century psychologists who were attentive to the physio-psychology of mirroring mechanism they posited in the brain. I then realized that they were anticipating, by over a century, the so-called discovery of "mirror neurons", which, as you know, were discovered first in monkeys in the 1990s and were then confirmed in humans as well in the form of a network or system – thereby confirming the ancient idea that we are mimetic animals, or *homo mimeticus*.

It is in this context that I also came across your work on plasticity and the engagement with the neurosciences. I thus started thinking about the ways in which these two concepts could complement each other. What I find interesting, for instance, is that mirror neurons stress the relational

successive. Ovviamente c'è un'evoluzione e una trasformazione, ma Nietzsche non elimina il cammello, e cioè l'animale mimetico, perché, come dici tu, il cammello non è solo passivo; è anche una figura di obbedienza. E in un certo senso, per Nietzsche, l'obbedienza è necessaria. Essa guida la forma vitale del risentimento. E Nietzsche non è del tutto contrario al risentimento. Il risentimento è necessario come forma di reazione contro l'aggressione o qualsiasi forma di minaccia. Il cammello desidera portare il peso per difendersi e proteggersi, il che implica anche un lato attivo. In questo senso, la mimesis funziona come una protezione. Quindi, non è un primo passo così negativo come spesso viene considerato, anche se ovviamente non è la forma ultima di liberazione.

(NL) È interessante che, leggendo letteralmente la metafora dell'animale e considerando la tendenza mimetica che definisce il cammello come punto di partenza per una metamorfosi dello "spirito", immediatamente mettiamo in discussione o decostruiamo le dicotomie di simbolico/biologico e di attività/passività che sono incapaci di catturare le proprietà bifronti sia della mimesis che della plasticità. Come mostra la tua attenzione per la plasticità cerebrale e l'epigenetica, sei una delle poche pensatrici continentali ad interagire con le neuroscienze per coltivare dialoghi produttivi tra le due culture. Vent'anni fa, quando ho iniziato a lavorare su una teoria del soggetto mimetico attraverso Nietzsche e altri autori modernisti, ho notato che questi autori facevano riferimento a filosofi poco discussi come Hippolyte Bernheim, Gabriel Tarde, Pierre Janet e altri psicologi della fine del diciannovesimo secolo che guardavano alla fisiopsicologia dei meccanismi di rispecchiamento che collocavano nel cervello. Mi sono poi reso conto che stavano anticipando, di oltre un secolo, la cosiddetta scoperta dei "neuroni specchio", che, come sai, furono scoperti prima nelle scimmie negli anni '90 e poi confermati anche negli esseri umani sotto forma di una rete o sistema – confermando così l'antica idea che siamo animali mimetici, o l'ipotesi *homo mimeticus*.

orientation of the brain and point to automatic mechanisms that blur the line between consciousness and the unconscious; they also complicate the dominant picture of a volitional, autonomous, and free subject in favor of relationality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity. So, I was wondering: what is your take on mirror neurons? While far from providing the only key to intersubjective phenomena like empathy, mind reading, and imitation, could they complement brain plasticity by stressing the relational orientation of human brains that are impressed by models while having formative powers of their own?

CM The theory of mirror neurons has raised an immense resistance, at least in France, from sociologists, who argued that the origins of society have nothing to do with something biological, and that the mimetic relation between people are based on mutual constructions that are never given as such. They posit that in living beings there is no automatic sense for imitation and that everything is constructed – and so is mimesis. And so, as you say, mirror neuron theory was interpreted as a form of reduction of the unmotivated character of human society defended by figures like Durkheim and other classical sociologists. In reality, mirror neurons don't explain everything; this is what the sociologists didn't understand. Mirror neurons are implied in all activities in which I'm not facing precisely someone. For example, when I read a book which describes a situation I'm not myself in, it is because of my mirror neurons that I can represent such a situation, I can fiction myself as part of this scenario. But they don't explain everything. For autistic children, for example, mirror neurons are not functioning, so they don't function automatically. Even in "normal" brains they need to be educated. If one doesn't read, doesn't watch films, is not in interaction with others, mirror neurons are just unhelpful. Look for instance at what happens to abandoned orphans in Romania who were left alone and uneducated: they couldn't speak for their mirror

È in questo contesto che ho anche incontrato il tuo lavoro sulla plasticità e l'interazione con le neuroscienze. Ho quindi iniziato a riflettere su come questi due concetti potessero integrarsi a vicenda. Ciò che trovo interessante, ad esempio, è che i neuroni specchio sottolineano l'orientamento relazionale del cervello e indicano meccanismi automatici che sfumano la distinzione tra coscienza e inconscio; complicano anche l'immagine egemonica di un soggetto intenzionale, autonomo e libero in favore della relazionalità, dell'incarnazione e dell'intersoggettività. Quindi mi chiedevo: qual è il tuo parere sui neuroni specchio? Pur essendo lontani dal fornire l'unica chiave d'accesso a fenomeni intersoggettivi come l'empatia, la lettura della mente e l'imitazione, potrebbero integrare la plasticità cerebrale evidenziando la relazionalità del cervello umano, modellato dall'esterno ma alla luce di poteri formativi autonomi?

CM La teoria dei neuroni specchio ha incontrato un'enorme resistenza, almeno in Francia, da parte dei sociologi, secondo cui le origini della società non avrebbero nulla a che fare con il biologico e le relazioni mimetiche tra le persone sarebbero basate su costruzioni reciproche mai date come tali. Secondo loro, negli esseri viventi non esisterebbe imitazione automatica e tutto sarebbe invece costruito, anche la mimesis. E quindi, come dici tu, la teoria dei neuroni specchio è stata interpretata come una forma di riduzionismo del carattere non motivato della società umana, difeso da figure come Durkheim e altri sociologi classici. In realtà, i neuroni specchio non spiegano tutto; questo è ciò che i sociologi non hanno capito. I neuroni specchio sono implicati in tutte quelle attività in cui non mi trovo di fronte qualcuno di preciso. Ad esempio, quando leggo un libro che descrive una situazione in cui non mi trovo, è grazie ai neuroni specchio che posso rappresentarmi tale situazione, posso immaginarmi come parte di quello scenario. Ma non spiegano tutto. Nei bambini autistici, ad esempio, i neuroni specchio non funzionano, cioè non funzionano automaticamente. E anche nei cervelli "normali" devono

neurons were left unemployed. This is what sociologists haven't really understood: that mirror neurons were not a threat to their theory. Of course, they are very helpful and indispensable for understanding the functioning of imitation, but if they are not stimulated, shaped, and educated, they don't function.

(NL) This is very interesting and helpful for two reasons. First, what you say reminds me that a figure I consider a precursor of mirror neuron theory was a sociologist, albeit a marginalized one precisely by Durkheim: namely, Gabriel Tarde in *The Laws of Imitation* (1890), where he argues that «there is in the brain an innate tendency to imitation [*une tendance innée à l'imitation*]» (2001, 148). And second, what you say confirms Nietzsche's parable of the camel: without the load, without the cultural training, a mimetic drive alone is not generative of learning and the strength that potentially ensues. Would you then speak of a plasticity of the mirror neuron system, shaped by life experience?

(CM) Yes, exactly.

(NL) Now that we have complicated what appeared to be a simply passive form of imitation, we can perhaps move on to the second metamorphosis which does not seem to be mimetic at all; instead, it requires a plastic and quite explosive transformation of the spirit.

Second Metamorphosis: The Paradox of Mimetic Agonism

(NL) Building on its mimetic strength, the camel turns into a lion who seems to be totally anti-mimetic. No longer submissive to the values of the past, the lion is a proud, independent, and sovereign animal, who, Nietzsche tells us, will «seize freedom for itself and become lord of its own desert» (2005, 23). An activity of negation is needed for this free affirmation to

essere educati. Se uno non legge, non guarda film, non interagisce con gli altri, i neuroni specchio sono semplicemente inutili. Guarda, ad esempio, cosa è successo agli orfani abbandonati in Romania, che vennero lasciati soli e senza istruzione: non riuscivano a parlare perché i loro neuroni specchio erano inattivi. Questo è ciò che i sociologi non hanno davvero capito: che i neuroni specchio non erano una minaccia alla loro teoria. Certo, sono molto utili e indispensabili per comprendere il funzionamento dell'imitazione, ma se non vengono stimolati, plasmati e educati non funzionano.

(NL) Questo è molto interessante e utile per due motivi. In primo luogo, ciò che dici mi ricorda che una figura che considero un precursore della teoria dei neuroni specchio era un sociologo, anche se marginalizzato proprio da Durkheim: Gabriel Tarde in *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890), dove sostiene che «nel cervello c'è una tendenza innata all'imitazione [*une tendance innée à l'imitation*]» (2001: 148). E in secondo luogo, ciò che dici conferma la parabola di Nietzsche sul cammello: senza il carico, senza la formazione culturale, la tendenza mimetica da sola non genera apprendimento e la forza che potenzialmente ne consegue. Parleresti allora di una plasticità del sistema dei neuroni specchio, plasmata dall'esperienza di vita?

(CM) Sì, esattamente.

(NL) Ora che abbiamo complicato ciò che sembrava essere una forma di imitazione semplicemente passiva, possiamo forse passare alla seconda metamorfosi, che non sembra affatto mimetica, ma richiede piuttosto una trasformazione plastica ed esplosiva dello spirito.

Seconda metamorfosi: Il paradosso dell'agonismo mimetico

(NL) Basandosi sulla sua forza mimetica, il cammello si trasforma in un leone che sembra essere completamente anti-mimetico. Non più sottomesso ai valori del

emerge. Thus, the lion opposes the religious and metaphysical values of the past embodied by the dragon “thou shalt” in view of seizing its freedom. This is an important moment of rupture in the metamorphosis of the spirit, especially philosophical spirits like Nietzsche who do not want to remain passive disciples in – let’s admit it – a heavy-loaded discipline like philosophy.

CM Yes, I see it. Also for me, “The Three Metamorphoses” is a metaphor of the personal trajectory to philosophy via education. I think there is a moment in which the young philosopher is trying to invent their own concepts. This is necessary but Nietzsche is also ironic when it comes to that.

NL If we transpose this confessional element to your own work, I also find a strong and healthy *anti-mimetic* dimension in your books. This is especially vital when confronted with powerful intellectual models like Jacques Derrida, who once told you that you don’t need a master but, rather, a “counter-master” [*contre-maître*]. This anti-mimetic dimension is central to our theory of *homo mimeticus* as well and to the critique of herd behavior it entails. It also appears repeatedly in your work, often in conjunction with plasticity and the explosions it generates. At times, it leads you in early works to set up an opposition between plasticity and mimesis that might not be clear-cut. For instance, in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* you speak of plasticity’s «refusal to submit to a model» (2007, 6). Could you comment on your anti-mimetic drive in your development as a philosopher in general and a woman philosopher in particular?

CM Of course, we are all the same: at some point we want to develop our own concepts and ideas in a non-mimetic way. Paradoxically, this is perhaps the moment when we are most mimetic. There is a beautiful text by Proust about *pastiche*, and he says that we are never closer to

passato, il leone è un animale fiero, indipendente e sovrano, che, ci dice Nietzsche, «vuol come preda la sua libertà ed essere signore nel proprio deserto» (1968, 23-24). Una negazione è necessaria perché emerga questa libera affermazione. Così, il leone si oppone ai valori religiosi e metafisici del passato incarnati dal drago del “tu devi” mirando a conquistare la propria libertà. Questo è un importante momento di rottura nella metamorfosi dello spirito, specialmente per spiriti filosofici come Nietzsche che non vogliono restare discepoli passivi in una disciplina che è – ammettiamolo – carica di pesi come la filosofia.

CM Sì, concordo. Anche per me *Le tre metamorfosi* è una metafora del percorso personale verso la filosofia attraverso l’educazione. Penso che ci sia un momento in cui il giovane filosofo cerca di inventare i propri concetti. Questo è necessario, ma Nietzsche è anche ironico a riguardo.

NL Se trasponiamo questo elemento confessionale al tuo lavoro, noto anche una forte e sana dimensione *anti-mimetica* nei tuoi libri. Questo è particolarmente produttivo quando uno si confronta con modelli intellettuali importanti come Jacques Derrida, che una volta ti disse che tu non hai bisogno di un maestro, ma piuttosto di un “contro-maestro” [*contre-maître*]. Questa dimensione anti-mimetica è centrale anche per la nostra teoria dell’*homo mimeticus* e per la critica al comportamento gregario che essa implica. Questa dimensione appare ripetutamente nel tuo lavoro, spesso in connessione con la plasticità e le esplosioni che genera. Nei tuoi primi lavori questo ti ha portato a volte a stabilire un’opposizione tra plasticità e mimesis che potrebbe non essere così netta. Ad esempio, in *Cosa fare del nostro cervello*, parli della plasticità come «rifiuto ad essere sottomesso ad un modello» (2007, 14). Potresti commentare sulla tua tendenza anti-mimetica nel tuo sviluppo come filosofa in generale e come filosofa donna in particolare?

pastiching than when we think we are not; when we think we are independent, and creating our own style like the figure of the lion, thinking “I’m the sovereign, I don’t imitate anyone, etc.”, this is the moment when we are perhaps totally embedded in imitation. You cannot say “I’m free”, “I’m not imitating”, without having in mind your model. That is the paradox of sovereignty: sovereignty is the arche-model. When you’re denying imitation in reality you are trying to get as close as possible to that model of the sovereign. So, I think the lion is a very ambiguous figure: on the one hand, it’s admirable, beautiful, and sovereign; on the other hand, it’s a victim of its own independence.

NL I asked this question for two reasons. First because, as Nietzsche says, there is often a “confessional” element in philosophical thought that is important to acknowledge. And second, because the affect or *pathos* of mimesis informs and transforms philosophical *logos* over time. The time of your anti-mimetic rupture – you’ll tell me if the term is too strong – with Derrida was marked in books written over a decade ago, books like *Changing Difference, What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, and even more clearly in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, a book that marks your distance from your former mentor by proposing plasticity as a «motor scheme» that replaces writing. The focus on the concept of form in particular is a key distancing anti-mimetic move from the deconstructive emphasis on formlessness and so is your focus on the neurosciences, which proved to be very productive.

CM Certo, siamo tutti uguali: a un certo punto vogliamo sviluppare i nostri concetti e idee in modo non mimetico. Paradossalmente, questo è forse il momento in cui siamo più mimetici. C’è un bellissimo testo di Proust sul *pastiche* in cui dice: non siamo mai così vicini a fare del *pastiche* come quando pensiamo di non farlo; quando pensiamo di essere indipendenti e di creare il nostro stile, come la figura del leone, pensando “sono sovrano, non imito nessuno, ecc.”, è proprio questo il momento in cui siamo forse totalmente presi nell’imitazione. Non si può dire “sono libero”, “non sto imitando” senza avere in mente un modello. Questo è il paradosso della sovranità: la sovranità è l’archi-modello. Quando neghi l’imitazione, in realtà stai cercando di avvicinarti il più possibile a quel modello di sovranità. In questo senso penso che il leone sia una figura molto ambigua: da un lato è ammirabile, bello e sovrano; dall’altro, è vittima della sua stessa indipendenza.

NL Ti ho posto questa domanda per due ragioni. In primo luogo perché, come dice Nietzsche, c’è spesso un elemento “confessionale” nel pensiero filosofico che è importante riconoscere. In secondo luogo perché l’affetto o *pathos* della mimesis informa e trasforma il *logos* filosofico nel tempo. Il periodo della tua rottura anti-mimetica – mi dirai tu se il termine è troppo forte – con Derrida è segnato da libri scritti più di un decennio fa, come *Changer de différence, Cosa fare del nostro cervello* e, ancora più chiaramente, *La plasticità al tramonto della scrittura*, un libro che segna la tua distanza da colui che era stato il tuo mentore proponendo la plasticità come “schema motorio” che sostituisce la scrittura. L’accento sulla forma, in particolare, è una chiave di distanziamento anti-mimetico dall’enfasi decostruttiva sulla mancanza di forma, e così anche il tuo interesse per le neuroscienze, che si è dimostrato molto produttivo.

i n t e r m e z z o

Gendered Mimesis

NL A gendered perspective that Nietzsche does not develop also seems constitutive of this anti-mimetic move of distance in your thought. In *Changing Difference*, for instance, you make clear that this break with models, or this refusal of imitation, is more important if one is a «woman philosopher» in a patriarchal world in which she is often confined to what you call the «miming of male master» (2011, 106). An anti-mimetic drive central to all creative thinkers in general is thus redoubled in the case of women thinkers given that in the patriarchal tradition women have been reduced to a bad copy or imitation of men. For feminist philosophers working still in a predominantly patriarchal context (this is certainly still the case in France and Belgium but not only), it is thus vital to take critical distance from mimesis, or develop subversive strategies of mimicry, as Luce Irigaray would say, to develop their own thought.

CM Precisely Irigaray is trying to get rid of the dominant notion of mimesis understood as just the imitation of masculine thinking by developing strategies of mimicry. So, I don't think we can get rid of mimesis at all. We have to use it against itself, so to speak. That is why in her beautiful reading of the *Timaeus*, she identifies with *chora* and says that women should mime the *chora*, mime plasticity in order to subvert the very image of passivity, the mother, and the receptacle, and again, use mimesis against itself. I totally agree with that. I don't believe in the total freedom of the lion. At the same time, when it comes to women philosophers in France, it has been a catastrophe. These women philosophers we are talking about, like Irigaray and others, have never been studied and been part of any curriculum. Even at this international conference that provides the

Mimesis di genere

NL Una prospettiva di genere che Nietzsche non sviluppa sembra essere anche costitutiva di questo movimento anti-mimetic di distanza nel tuo pensiero. In *Changer de différence*, ad esempio, chiarisci che questa rottura con i modelli, o questo rifiuto dell'imitazione, è ancora più importante se si è una «donna filosofa» in un mondo patriarcale dove questa viene spesso ridotta a «un mimo del maestro maschile [*un mime de la maîtrise masculine*]» (2009, 123-124). La tendenza anti-mimetica, che è centrale per tutti i pensatori creativi in generale, è quindi raddoppiata nel caso delle pensatrici, dato che nella tradizione patriarcale le donne sono state ridotte a una cattiva copia o a un'imitazione degli uomini. Per le filosofe femministe che lavorano ancora in un contesto prevalentemente patriarcale (questo è certamente ancora il caso in Francia e Belgio, ma non solo), è quindi cruciale prendere le distanze dalla mimesis o sviluppare strategie sovversive di mimetismo, come direbbe Luce Irigaray, per sviluppare il proprio pensiero.

CM È proprio Irigaray che cerca di liberarsi dalla nozione dominante di mimesis intesa come mera imitazione del pensiero maschile sviluppando strategie di mimetismo. Quindi non credo affatto che possiamo liberarci completamente della mimesis. Dobbiamo usarla contro sé stessa, per così dire. Ecco perché, nella sua bellissima lettura del *Timeo*, Irigaray si identifica con *chora* e dice che le donne dovrebbero mimarla, mimesi la plasticità per sovvertire l'immagine della passività, della madre e del ricettacolo, e di nuovo, usare la mimesis contro sé stessa. Sono completamente d'accordo con questo. Non credo nella totale libertà del leone. Allo stesso tempo, se pensiamo alle donne filosofe in Francia, la situazione è ed è stata catastrofica. Queste donne filosofe di cui parliamo, come Irigaray e altre, non sono mai state

Plasticity and Mimesis: Metamorphoses of the Dialogic
Plasticità e mimesis: tre metamorfosi. Dialogo
Catherine Malabou, Nidesh Lawtoo

context for our dialogue, there are no French students. There is a kind of split between the French academic structure and all kind of independent research, particularly feminine research.

(NL) Indeed. I discovered Irigaray in the United States.

(CM) Yes, of course. It's the same for Monique Wittig; Julia Kristeva a bit less, but she is more a psychoanalyst than a philosopher; and even Simone de Beauvoir is not that read in the philosophical academic realm. They are not part of the traditional curriculum. For example, when you have to go through the *Agrégation de philosophie*, the exam one needs to pass to become a teacher, these women philosopher have never been part of the curriculum.

(NL) Yes, these figures are very important to both the Homo Mimeticus (HOM) and Gendered Mimesis (GM) projects. [9] We recently benefited from an encounter with the feminist philosopher and political theorist Adriana Cavarero and her relational notion of inclinations in particular, which also overlaps with mimesis; the work of Judith Butler's on the performative dimensions of gender is equally important. To broaden connections with this feminist (see Cavarero & Lawtoo 2021; see also the mini-series of video-interviews titled *Mimetic Trouble* with Judith Butler [10]) and post-feminist genealogical traditions, Isabelle Dahms and Giulia Rignano, who are part of the Gendered

studiate e non hanno mai fatto parte di alcun corso di studi. Anche a questa conferenza internazionale che fornisce il contesto per il nostro dialogo, non ci sono studenti francesi. C'è una sorta di spaccatura tra la struttura accademica francese e ogni tipo di ricerca indipendente, in particolare quella femminile.

(NL) È vero. Ho scoperto Irigaray negli Stati Uniti.

(CM) Sì, ovviamente. Lo stesso vale per Monique Wittig; Julia Kristeva un po' meno, ma lei è più una psicoanalista che una filosofa; e persino Simone de Beauvoir non è molto letta nel contesto accademico filosofico. Non fanno parte del curriculum tradizionale. Per esempio, quando si deve preparare l'*Agrégation de philosophie*, l'esame per diventare insegnante, queste filosofe non sono parte del programma.

(NL) Sì, queste figure sono molto importanti sia per il progetto sull'*homo mimeticus* che per quello sulla *gendered mimesis*. [9] Di recente abbiamo avuto occasione di incontrare la filosofa femminista e teorica politica Adriana Cavarero e la sua nozione relazionale di "inclinazioni", in particolare, che si sovrappone anche con la mimesis; il lavoro di Judith Butler sulle dimensioni performative del genere è altrettanto importante. Per ampliare le connessioni con queste tradizioni genealogiche femministe (si veda Cavarero & Lawtoo 2021; vedi anche la miniserie di video-interviste intitolata *Mimetic Trouble* con Judith Butler [10]) e post-femministe,

[9] Here, Lawtoo is referring to the project that he currently directs, *Gendered Mimesis* (GM). Drawing on the results of the ERC-funded *Homo Mimeticus* project (HOM), the new project and its team explicitly go in the direction of contemporary feminist philosophies in order to outline a new ontology of the mimetic subject, capable of accounting for the mimetic paradoxes that are at the bases of today's gendered identities.

[10] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971>

[9] Lawtoo si riferisce qui al progetto che dirige attualmente, *Gendered Mimesis* (GM). Prendendo le mosse dai risultati del progetto su *Homo Mimeticus* (HOM), il nuovo progetto ed il suo team vanno esplicitamente nella direzione delle filosofie femministe contemporanee con l'obiettivo di formulare una nuova ontologia del soggetto mimetico capace di render conto dei paradossi mimetici costitutivi delle identità di genere.

[10] Disponibile su: <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971>

Mimesis team, have some questions for you as well.

ID ISABELLE DAHMS: Yes, indeed. You say that philosophy also shapes bodies and I was wondering if you could say a bit more about this process of shaping.

CM Yes, philosophy also shapes bodies. This is something that is very rarely said in philosophy, which is more concerned with shaping minds and spirits. I know that Foucault wrote about how philosophy is a kind of *dressage*. It's a discipline in the bad sense of the term. But there are very few developments on how philosophy entails a training which is not only mental, but also physical, bodily and it's in that sense that I meant that phrase. It's about the distribution of zones, bodily zones of pleasure, because clearly – and Plato was the first to say it – philosophy and love are very close to each other. I totally agree with Plato that philosophy is impossible without love and consequently also without physical desire. But this is where Plato stops, because he says that this passionate relationship that philosophy is, is in fact shaping just the soul. And when it comes to the body, it's not really philosophical. It is a step lower. I don't agree with that. A woman, man, or person of any gender has a distributed type of body in which different nuances of pleasure are expressed, so to speak, and they are born out of the different reactions we had to texts for instance. I think that we are not equal. We are not equally sensitive, philosophically speaking, to all authors. For example, there are authors that I do not feel attracted to. For example, I always had problems with Leibniz or Husserl. For some reason, these philosophers don't have a direct effect on my body. I know this is strange, but Hegel for me is instead "excitable speech", as Butler would say, and creates a distribution of erotic zones.

ID Following up on this, how would you explain the relationship between performativity and plasticity? That is, Butler's thinking and your own.

Isabelle Dahms e Giulia Rignano, che fanno parte del team di *Gendered Mimesis*, hanno alcune domande per te.

ID ISABELLE DAHMS: Sì, assolutamente. Tu dici che la filosofia plasma anche i corpi e mi chiedevo se potessi dire qualcosa in più su questo processo di plasmazione.

CM Sì, la filosofia plasma anche i corpi. È qualcosa che viene detto raramente nella filosofia, che è più preoccupata a modellare le menti e gli spiriti. So che Foucault ha scritto di come la filosofia sia una sorta di addestramento, *dressage*. È una disciplina nel senso negativo del termine. Ma ci sono pochissimi sviluppi su come la filosofia implichi un addestramento che non è solo mentale, ma anche fisico, corporeo, ed è in questo senso che intendevo quella frase. Si tratta della distribuzione di zone, zone corporee di piacere, perché chiaramente, e Platone è stato il primo a dirlo, la filosofia e l'amore sono molto vicini tra loro. Sono completamente d'accordo con Platone sul fatto che la filosofia sia impossibile senza amore e, di conseguenza, anche senza desiderio fisico. Ma è qui che Platone si ferma, perché dice che questa relazione passionale che è la filosofia riguarda solo il modellamento dell'anima, e quando si arriva al corpo, non è davvero materia filosofica. È un gradino più in basso. Non sono d'accordo con questo. Una donna, un uomo o una persona di qualsiasi genere ha un tipo di corpo distribuito in cui vengono espresse diverse sfumature di piacere, per così dire, e queste nascono dalle diverse reazioni che abbiamo avuto ai testi, ad esempio. Penso che non siamo tutti uguali. Non siamo tutti ugualmente sensibili, filosoficamente parlando, a tutti gli autori. Ad esempio, ci sono autori dai quali non sono attratta. Ad esempio, ho sempre avuto problemi con Leibniz o Husserl. Per qualche ragione, questi filosofi non hanno un effetto diretto sul mio corpo. So che sembra strano, ma Hegel per me scrive invece "parole che provocano [*excitable speech*]", come direbbe Butler, e crea una distribuzione di zone erotiche.

CM Performativity is, of course, very important. I totally understand why Butler could make such a use of it in, for example, *Gender Trouble*; it was a way for them to declare that gender had no pre-existing bases and that a gendered identity was forming itself only through repetition, performative iteration, etc., and that there was nothing behind that. Okay. But at the same time, because we talk so much about essence today, this seems to me to erase a little bit too quickly the problem of essence. In the notion of performativity, you have something like an idea of non-conservation; for example, a work of art that is just a performance cannot be kept. And this lack of constitution of an archive is a problem for me. I think this is what is perhaps missing, if I may say so, in Butler's work. Where is the archive? Where is the archive of identity? If gender identity is only performative, where does this repetition, this performative, inscribe itself and constitute an essence in the good sense of the term? That would be my answer. Plasticity is perhaps more open to both, of course, repetition, iteration, etc., and at the same time, to the question of form. This was also the topic of our discussion with Butler in the book *You Be My Body for Me*. What do you do with the form? Where does the form enter the picture in your performative system?

GR GIULIA RIGNANO: I was wondering if you could point out what is the major difference between the kind of mimesis at play in Luce Irigaray's subversive repetition and Paul Preciado's intake of testosterone. Could this comparison add something to the continuation of a subversive mimesis, or do you see an incompatible difference?

CM The obvious answer is that Preciado does not believe at all in sexual difference. This is the reproach they address to Irigaray: to be still too dependent on the woman/man, feminine/ masculine distinction. So, the first point concerns the nonbinary schema that Preciado is definitely

ID Proseguendo su questo, come spiegheresti il rapporto tra performatività e plasticità, cioè tra il pensiero di Butler e il tuo?

CM La performatività è, ovviamente, molto importante. Capisco perfettamente perché Butler abbia potuto farne un tale uso, ad esempio in *Questioni di genere*; è stato un modo per affermare che il genere non ha basi preesistenti e che un'identità di genere si forma solo attraverso la ripetizione, l'iterazione performativa, ecc., e che non c'è nulla dietro questo. Bene. Ma allo stesso tempo, dato che oggi parliamo tanto di assenza, questo mi sembra cancellare un po' troppo in fretta il problema dell'essenza. Nella nozione di performatività c'è qualcosa come un'idea di non-conservazione; ad esempio, un'opera d'arte che è solo una performance non può essere conservata. E questa mancanza di costituzione di un archivio è un problema per me. Penso che questo sia ciò che forse manca, se posso dirlo, nel lavoro di Butler. Dov'è l'archivio? Dov'è l'archivio dell'identità? Se l'identità di genere è solo performativa, dov'è che si iscrive questa ripetizione, questo performativo, dov'è che costituisce un'essenza nel senso positivo del termine? Questa sarebbe la mia risposta. La plasticità è forse più aperta a entrambi gli elementi: ovviamente alla ripetizione, iterazione, ecc., e allo stesso tempo alla questione della forma. Questo è stato anche il tema della discussione tra me e Butler nel libro *Che tu sia il mio corpo*. Cosa fai con la forma? Dove entra in gioco la forma nel tuo sistema performativo?

GR GIULIA RIGNANO: Mi chiedevo se potessi indicare qual è la principale differenza tra il tipo di mimesis in gioco nella ripetizione sovversiva di Luce Irigaray e l'assunzione di testosterone da parte di Paul Preciado. Questo confronto potrebbe aggiungere qualcosa alla continuazione di una mimesis sovversiva o vedi una differenza incompatibile?

CM La risposta ovvia è che Preciado non crede affatto nella differenza sessuale. Questo è il rimprovero che rivolge a Irigaray:

adopting and trying to substitute for the sexual difference one. It is indeed true that Irigaray, because of her time, is still very attached to sexual difference. Now the question about testosterone and hormones points toward transgenderism, which is also something that is quite alien to Irigaray, because she has never tried to change her gender. Of course, Irigaray wrote a lot about the transformability of femininity; she presented the woman as a plastic essence, but she never envisaged to overcome the fact of being a woman and to engage in something like transgenderism. Testosterone is instead a way to act upon the biology of one's own gender in order to pass into another gender. So, I wouldn't see many connections between the two.

GR I see some similarity in Irigaray's subversive repetition, that, of course, comes from another period. But in a way she speaks to a carnality and a zone of indifferenciation that she wants to play with to actually go beyond the male and female binary. Preciado today uses his own body, actually not through a subversive repetition of discourse, but through hormones. It's almost as if he's enacting this subversive repetition through the assumption of a substance that changes his body first and then allows for a different representation. So, I see a connection but it is as if they are starting from two different points.

CM Yes, I think the notion of dysphoria developed in Preciado's last book *Dysphoria Mundi* is very important in this respect. He's talking about this dysphoric zone of the world, a kind of extra space, almost an outer space from which he talks, seeing the world from another space. Maybe we could find something like that in Irigaray; I'd have to think about it.

GR It's maybe also related with the change in our conception of matter, because sexual difference was very important to give materiality a space into discourse. And now queer theory is actually amplifying sexual difference and the power

di essere ancora troppo dipendente dalla distinzione uomo/donna, femminile/maschile. Quindi, il primo punto riguarda lo schema non binario che Preciado adotta e che cerca di sostituire a quello della differenza sessuale. È vero che Irigaray, che scriveva nel suo tempo, è ancora molto legata alla differenza sessuale. Ora, la questione del testosterone e degli ormoni punta verso la dimensione transgender, che è qualcosa di abbastanza estraneo a Irigaray, che non ha mai cercato di cambiare genere. Certo, Irigaray ha scritto molto sulla trasformabilità della femminilità; ha presentato la donna come un'essenza plastica, ma non ha mai preso in considerazione la possibilità di superare il proprio essere donna e di partecipare alla dimensione transgender. Il testosterone è invece un modo per agire sulla biologia del proprio genere al fine di passare a un altro genere. Quindi non vedrei molti collegamenti tra i due.

GR Quel che io vedo è una certa somiglianza nella ripetizione sovversiva di Irigaray, che naturalmente proviene da un altro periodo. In un certo senso, lei parla di una carnalità e di una zona di indifferenziazione con cui vuole giocare per andare oltre la dicotomia maschile/femminile. Preciado oggi usa il proprio corpo non attraverso una ripetizione sovversiva del discorso ma attraverso gli ormoni. È quasi come se stesse attuando questa ripetizione sovversiva attraverso l'assunzione di una sostanza che prima cambia il suo corpo e poi permette una rappresentazione diversa. Quindi vedo una connessione, ma è come se partissero da due punti diversi.

CM Sì, penso che la nozione di disforia sviluppata nell'ultimo libro di Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, sia molto importante a questo proposito. Parla di una zona disforica del mondo, una sorta di extra spazio, quasi uno spazio esterno dal quale parla, vedendo il mondo da un altro spazio. Forse potremmo trovare qualcosa del genere in Irigaray; dovrei pensarci.

GR Forse è anche legato al cambiamento nella nostra concezione della materia,

of materiality that they opened up. I see a continuity between sexual difference and queer theories, even though this continuity came after seeing all the discontinuities. But now it's as if I the body is so much rooted in materiality and I was thinking how mimesis actually occupies a place both on a discursive side and on a material side.

CM You're right. I was also surprised to see that Carla Lonzi, for instance, was just translated in French this year, in 2023. *Let's Spit on Hegel* was translated a month ago, but there is still nothing about *Clitoridean Woman*. Because she was the one to invent the term clitoridean in order to insist on the fact that the material and the symbolic were working hand in hand. It was thus important to insist on the clitoris to affirm that it symbolized women, women's independence. It was not only an organ but also an agent of autonomy. So, I totally agree on this double value of materiality and the symbolic.

NL In different forms, mimesis seems indeed at the center of the complex articulation of the symbolic and materiality. From Luce Irigaray's destabilizing notion of mimicry central to the materialist tradition of sexual difference of which Carla Lonzi is an important precursor to Judith Butler's theory of performativity tied to forms of mimetic iteration that are perhaps still rooted in a linguistic/deconstructive ontology but are also receiving a materialist supplement from transgender theorists like Preciado, it seems that mimesis could help us articulate different and often competing traditions in feminist philosophy. There should thus be work for the Gendered Mimesis team!

NL On a different but related genealogical front, in order to further our understanding of the ontologies of difference informing gendered difference as well, I am happy to hear you also endorse an agonistic conception of mimesis that is neither passively mimetic nor reducible to parodic mimicry but is based on what I

perché la differenza sessuale era molto importante per dare uno spazio alla materialità nel discorso. E ora la queer theory sta effettivamente ampliando la differenza sessuale e il potere della materialità a cui essa ha aperto. Vedo una continuità tra la differenza sessuale e le teorie queer, anche se questa continuità è arrivata dopo che tutte le discontinuità erano state messe in luce. Ma ora è come se il corpo fosse così radicato nella materialità e stavo pensando a come la mimesis occupi effettivamente un posto sia sul lato discorsivo che su quello materiale.

CM Hai ragione. Anch'io sono rimasta sorpresa nel vedere che, ad esempio, Carla Lonzi è stata tradotta in francese solo quest'anno, nel 2023. *Sputiamo su Hegel* è stato tradotto un mese fa, ma non c'è ancora nulla su *La donna clitoridea*. Perché è stata lei a inventare il termine "clitoridea" per evidenziare il fatto che il materiale e il simbolico vanno di pari passo. Era quindi importante insistere sul clitoride per affermare che simboleggiava le donne, l'indipendenza delle donne. Non era solo un organo, ma anche un agente di autonomia. Quindi sono totalmente d'accordo su questo doppio valore della materialità e del simbolico.

NL In forme diverse, la mimesis sembra in effetti essere al centro della complessa articolazione del simbolico e della materialità. Dalla nozione destabilizzante di mimetismo di Luce Irigaray, centrale per la tradizione materialista della differenza sessuale di cui Carla Lonzi è una precorritrice importante, alla teoria della performatività di Judith Butler, legata a forme di iterazione mimetica che sono forse ancora radicate in un'ontologia linguistica/decostruzionista ma che ricevono anche un supplemento materialista da teorici transgender come Preciado, sembra che la mimesis potrebbe aiutarci ad articolare tradizioni diverse e spesso in competizione nella filosofia femminista. Dovrebbe quindi esserci lavoro per il gruppo di *Gendered Mimesis*!

NL Su un piano genealogico diverso ma collegato, per approfondire la nostra

would call mimetic agonism. Broadly speaking, mimetic agonism is driven by a strong *anti*-mimetic or agonistic drive in the sense that the model is opposed or supplemented, but in this movement of supplementation a creative mimesis is at play that draws selectively on the model, paradoxically, in order to push with-and-against him, her, them. I found traces of this mimetic agonism, which is again not simply passive nor does it lead to mimetic rivalry, but is productive in nature in major figures that tend to be simply opposed: Plato contra Homer, Aristotle contra Plato, Nietzsche contra Plato, Freud contra Nietzsche, Girard contra Freud, and now Malabou contra Derrida. My sense is that these thinkers benefit from being read as part of an agonistic and creative mimetic relation. This would entail that a creative mimesis is still internal to the anti-mimetic lion and that the sovereign subject retains epigenetic traces of the strength of the mimetic camel. Do you think this strategy of mimetic agonism can be creatively adopted by feminist or feminine philosophers more generally as a strategy for thinking with and against the tradition?

CM Yes, somebody at the conference asked, “What would be a feminist, or rather feminine philosophy?” It is true that this is a possible trap to say that something like a feminine philosophy might exist because it would be an essentialization in the bad sense of the term – and I don’t think that such a thing exists. At the same time, what is specifically feminine in this agonistic mimesis is that precisely “the woman” has been denied any kind of essence. That’s the reason I was interested in this concept of “essence”, to rebuild it from a feminist point of view, because we women are the subjects of this erasure. Clearly there is no essence of the woman for philosophers. If we have an essence, it is the masculine one. We are a kind of appendix to the masculine. At the same time, this absence of essence is a very productive basis for a reconstruction that necessarily borrows from the traditional

comprensione delle ontologie della differenza che informano anche la differenza di genere, sono felice di sentirti difendere una concezione agonistica della mimesis che non è né passivamente mimetica né riducibile a una mimica parodistica, ma che si basa su ciò che io chiamerei *agonismo mimetico*. In termini generali, l’agonismo mimetico è guidato da una forte tendenza *anti*-mimetica o agonistica, nel senso che il modello viene contrastato o integrato, ma in questo movimento di integrazione è in gioco una mimesis creativa che attinge selettivamente al modello, paradossalmente, per spingersi con-e-contro di lui, lei, loro. Ho trovato tracce di questo agonismo mimetico, che non è né semplicemente passivo né conduce a una rivalità mimetica, ma è produttivo nella sua natura, in figure di grande rilievo che tendono a essere semplicemente opposte: Platone contro Omero, Aristotele contro Platone, Nietzsche contro Platone, Freud contro Nietzsche, Girard contro Freud, e ora Malabou contro Derrida. Ho l’impressione che questi pensatori traggano beneficio dall’essere letti come parte di una relazione mimetica agonistica e creativa. Questo comporterebbe che una mimesis creativa sia ancora interna al leone anti-mimetico e che il soggetto sovrano conservi tracce epigenetiche della forza del cammello mimetico. Pensi che questa strategia dell’agonismo mimetico possa essere creativamente adottata da filosofe femministe o femminili in generale come strategia per pensare con e contro la tradizione?

CM Sì, qualcuno alla conferenza ha chiesto: “Che cosa sarebbe una filosofia femminista, o piuttosto una filosofia femminile?”. È vero che forse è una trappola dire che potrebbe esistere qualcosa come una filosofia femminile, perché si tratterebbe di un’essenzializzazione nel senso negativo del termine – e non penso che esista qualcosa del genere. Allo stesso tempo, ciò che è specificamente femminile in questa mimesis agonistica è che è proprio “la donna” ad essere stata privata di qualsiasi tipo di essenza. È per questo che mi sono interessata al concetto di “essenza”, per ricostruirlo da un punto di

definition of essence. The “I” has to be mimetic in some sense; we have to do with what we have. But then, once we have something like a model, we can transform it and subvert it. That would be what I would call a strategy for feminine philosophy: to play with this absence of essence; rebuild an essence; and then subvert it.

NL Your understanding of essence complicates, subverts, or deconstructs the dominant understanding of essence rooted in a static and universal conception of being. You remind us that the etymology of essence (*eidos*) points to the very opposite: namely, a movement of becoming. The movement that I often find at play in the concept of mimetic agon is a double movement of attraction and repulsion. I group it under the Nietzschean rubric of “*pathos* of distance” in which the distance or detachment internal to an agonistic critique at the level of thought or *logos* is nonetheless driven by a mimetic *pathos* of attraction in which emotions, or *pathos*, play a role.

CM You are totally right to stress *pathos* because in plasticity there is a type of passivity in the sense of *pathein* in Greek, which is suffering, and at the same time I don’t like the term “affect”. It’s a term I don’t use very much, only when I speak about Deleuze because he uses it frequently, particularly in his reading of Spinoza. I’m a bit suspicious of affect because you cannot have affect without auto-affection for all affects proceed from auto-affection, from a source which entails the relation of the self to itself. It thus presupposes a notion of a totally constituted subject able to talk, exchange, dialogue with itself, etc. and all forms of particular affects derive from auto-affection. This is something that Derrida has totally deconstructed, and I fully agree with him. I thus prefer terms like drives or passions, even feelings or emotions. Even Deleuze, in his reading of Spinoza, originates affects in auto-affection because for Spinoza the essence of God affects itself. So, you cannot easily get rid

vista femminista, perché noi donne siamo i soggetti di questa cancellazione. Chiaramente non c’è alcuna essenza della donna per i filosofi. Se abbiamo un’essenza, è quella maschile. Siamo una sorta di appendice per il maschile. Allo stesso tempo, questa assenza di essenza è una base molto produttiva per una ricostruzione che necessariamente prende in prestito dalla definizione tradizionale di essenza. L’“io” deve essere mimetico in qualche modo; dobbiamo fare con ciò che abbiamo. Ma poi, una volta che abbiamo qualcosa come un modello, possiamo trasformarlo e sovvertirlo. Questo sarebbe ciò che io chiamerei una strategia per una filosofia femminile: giocare con questa assenza di essenza; ricostruire un’essenza; e poi sovvertirla.

NL La tua idea di essenza complica, sovverte o decostruisce la visione egemonica per cui l’essenza sarebbe radicata in una concezione statica e universale dell’essere. Ci ricordi che l’etimologia di essenza (*eidos*) punta esattamente nella direzione opposta: cioè, a un movimento di divenire. Il movimento che spesso trovo all’opera nel concetto di agonismo mimetico è un doppio movimento di attrazione e repulsione. Lo riunisco nella categoria nietzschiana di “*pathos* della distanza,” in cui la distanza o il distacco interno a una critica agonistica a livello di pensiero o *logos* è comunque guidato da un *pathos* mimetico di attrazione in cui le emozioni, o il *pathos*, giocano un ruolo.

CM Hai perfettamente ragione a sottolineare il *pathos*, perché nella plasticità c’è un tipo di passività nel senso di *pathein* in greco, che significa sofferenza, e allo stesso tempo non mi piace il termine “affetto”. È un termine che non uso molto, solo quando parlo di Deleuze perché lo utilizza frequentemente, in particolare nella sua lettura di Spinoza. Sono un po’ sospettosa del concetto di affetto perché non puoi avere affetto senza auto-afezione, perché tutti gli affetti procedono dall’auto-afezione, da una fonte che implica la relazione del sé con sé stesso. Presuppone dunque una nozione di soggetto totalmente costituito, in grado di parlare, relazionarsi, dialogare con sé stesso, ecc., e

of this theory of auto-affection, which remains in fact very linked with the sovereign theory of the subject. This is of course not what Deleuze wants to do but there is nevertheless something of a trace of that in the sovereignty of the auto-affected subject in his thinking.

(NL) This is indeed the reason why I prefer the notion of *pathos* to affect, because it stresses the relational dimension of mimetic drives. Somewhere in a fragment in Nietzsche's *Nachlass* he describes the will to power as «not a being, not a becoming but a *pathos*», an emotional force that comes from the outside and takes possession of the ego dispossessing even sovereign subjects of their presence to selfhood and generating what he calls a «phantom of the ego».

Independently of how we call this drive, force, or *pathos*, my sense is that it has the power to generate a movement of thought in mimetic thinkers, or thinkers of mimesis, in which both *logos* and *pathos* are at play. This double movement seems to me to be constitutive of your philosophical style. There is a strength in your style that is obviously driven by your admirable conceptual rigor and clarity of logical argumentation but is also doubled by a *pathos* that gives your voice a distinctive tonality and timbre needed to confront the oppressive “thou shalt” of traditional philosophical imperatives. Did I hear correctly? And does what I called mimetic agonism inform not only what you say, your *logos*, but also how you say it, your philosophical *lexis*?

(CM) It's very difficult for me to answer because I have no clear idea of it. I'll answer briefly by saying that I never write anything without an interpellation. It is always as if someone was asking me something. It's an address. I never write in another form than that of the address. I hear something like a question, a solicitation, or a voice, and I would situate my writing as answers, always. This is what Heidegger says about language: that the

tutte le forme particolari di affetto derivano dall'auto-afezione. Derrida questo l'ha totalmente decostruito, e qui sono completamente d'accordo con lui. Per questo motivo, preferisco termini come “pulsioni” o “passioni”, persino “sentimenti” o “emozioni”. Anche Deleuze, nella sua lettura di Spinoza, fa derivare gli affetti dall'auto-afezione, perché per Spinoza l'essenza di Dio affetta sé stessa. Non ci si libera facilmente da questa teoria dell'auto-afezione, che in realtà rimane molto legata alla teoria del soggetto. Ovviamente Deleuze non vuole fare questo, ma nel suo pensiero c'è lo stesso un residuo di tutto ciò per quanto riguarda la sovranità del soggetto in auto-afezione.

(NL) Questa è in effetti la ragione per cui preferisco il concetto di *pathos* a quello di affetto, perché sottolinea la dimensione relazionale delle tendenze mimetiche. Da qualche parte, in un frammento del suo *Nachlass*, Nietzsche descrive la volontà di potenza come «non un essere, non un divenire, ma un *pathos*», una forza emotiva che viene dall'esterno e si impossessa dell'io, spossessando persino i soggetti sovrani della loro presenza alla propria identità e generando quello che chiama un «fantasma dell'io». Indipendentemente da come chiamiamo questa tendenza, forza o *pathos*, la mia impressione è che essa abbia il potere di generare un movimento di pensiero nei pensatori mimetici, o nei pensatori della mimesis, in cui sia il *logos* che il *pathos* sono in gioco. Questo doppio movimento mi sembra costitutivo del tuo stile filosofico. C'è una forza nel tuo stile che è ovviamente guidata dal tuo ammirabile rigore concettuale e dalla chiarezza dell'argomentazione logica, ma è anche raddoppiata da un *pathos* che dà alla tua voce una distinta tonalità e un timbro che sono necessari per confrontarsi con gli oppressivi “tu devi” degli imperativi filosofici tradizionali. Ho capito bene? E ciò che ho chiamato agonismo mimetico informa non solo ciò che dici, il tuo *logos*, ma anche come lo dici, il tuo *lexis* filosofico?

(CM) Mi è molto difficile rispondere perché non ho un'idea chiara su questo punto.

first words of children are always an answer; that the child starts speaking by answering someone or something, and I think this is totally right. For Heidegger it is language answering itself for the first solicitation comes from language itself and is totally rigorous. He says: «*die Sprache spricht* [language speaks]» which means language is calling itself and answering itself. Even if the question does not exist, then, we answer. The first word is an answer, and this is how I write. For that reason, the writing is necessarily *patho*-logical, in the sense of *pathos*. Because when you write while addressing someone, emotions and autobiographical elements necessarily enter in the picture.

(NL) Yes, the relational dimension of your thinking resonates with the relationality of mimesis; it also rendered the mimetic genre of the dialogue based on question and answer doubly adequate for our chosen topic. Before we come to the figure of the child, I have a last question for the lion. It concerns the problematic of the unconscious and the science that supposedly discovered it, and stills casts a long shadow on contemporary theory, including feminist philosophy. Both at the level of the camel and the lion, the plastic and mimetic metamorphoses that ensue involved affects that are not under the control of consciousness, are engrained in habits and automatic reflexes, and are in this sense unconscious. The discovery of the unconscious is often still synonymous of psychoanalysis, though historians of psychoanalysis (from Henry Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious* to more recent historians like Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani with *The Freud Files*) demonstrate, convincingly in my view, that this discovery is part of a "Freudian legend" that erases important philosophical physicians, from Pierre Janet to Alfred Binet, Hippolyte Bernheim to Auguste Forel, among others. Given the limits of Freudian, Lacanian, and other Oedipal approaches to the psyche, with their focus on familial triangles, normative

Risponderò brevemente dicendo che non scrivo mai nulla senza sentirmi interpellata. È sempre come se qualcuno mi stesse chiedendo qualcosa. È un appello. Non scrivo mai in una forma diversa dall'appello. Sento qualcosa come una domanda, una sollecitazione o una voce, e poi colloco la mia scrittura come una risposta, sempre. Questo è ciò che Heidegger dice a proposito del linguaggio: che le prime parole dei bambini sono sempre risposte; che il bambino inizia a parlare rispondendo a qualcuno o qualcosa, e penso che questo sia del tutto corretto. Per Heidegger è il linguaggio che risponde a sé stesso, perché la prima sollecitazione proviene dal linguaggio stesso ed è rigorosissima. Heidegger dice: «*die Sprache spricht* [il linguaggio parla]», il che significa che il linguaggio chiama sé stesso e si risponde. Anche se la domanda non esiste, noi rispondiamo. La prima parola è una risposta, e questo è il modo in cui scrivo. Per questa ragione, la scrittura è necessariamente *patho*-logica, nel senso del *pathos*. Perché quando scrivi rivolgendoti a qualcuno, emozioni ed elementi autobiografici entrano necessariamente in gioco.

(NL) Sì, la dimensione relazionale del tuo pensiero risuona con la relazionalità della mimesis; inoltre rende il genere mimetico del dialogo basato su domanda e risposta doppiamente adeguato al nostro tema. Prima di arrivare alla figura del fanciullo, ho un'ultima domanda per il leone. Riguarda la problematica dell'inconscio e la scienza che presumibilmente lo ha scoperto, e che ancora getta un'ombra lunga sulla teoria contemporanea, compresa la filosofia femminista. Sia a livello del cammello che del leone, le metamorfosi plastiche e mimetiche che ne derivano coinvolgono affetti che non sono sotto il controllo della coscienza, sono radicati in abitudini e riflessi automatici e sono, in questo senso, inconsci. La scoperta dell'inconscio è spesso ancora sinonimo di psicoanalisi, anche se storici della psicoanalisi (come Henry Ellenberger con *The Discovery of the Unconscious* fino a storici più recenti come Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen e Sonu Shamdasani con *The Freud Files*) dimostrano, a mio

views of sexuality, symbolic focus on the phallus, sexist and racist concepts like “penis envy”, “dark continent”, etc. (among other problematic aspects that have come massively to the fore in recent years), you often take psychoanalysis to task in books such as *The New Wounded* or *Pleasure Erased*, to mention two of your titles. The discontent with psychoanalysis is palpable on many fronts, and their inability to engage with trans-identities has been made clear by transgender figures like Paul Preciado. I wonder if, rather than trying to reform a system that is obviously resistant to reform, a step back to pre-psychoanalytical theories of the unconscious attentive to what Nietzsche called “genuine physio-psychology” might not serve as an alternative strategy.

I ask this question because it seems to me that you are already pursuing it. In addition to being critical of psychoanalysis, in your recent work on intelligence you have engaged with forgotten figures like Alfred Binet, who was amongst the psychologists interested in automatism and movement and emotions. In a book co-authored with Charles Féré, they argued that movement seen generates a reflex to move, thereby anticipating mirror neurons by over a century. Nietzsche was an avid reader of that physio-psychological literature and it’s via them that I came across this pre-Freudian but also post-Freudian genealogy of what Marcel Gauchet calls the “cerebral unconscious”. I called it the “mimetic unconscious”, to stress its mimetic but also plastic, relational, and embodied character. Given these philosophical physicians’ attention to what we now call the brain, could figures like Binet or Janet not be more directly aligned with contemporary neurologists like Changeux than Freud and Lacan?

CM I don’t want to anticipate too much on my talk because the “subconscious” and its relation to the synonymous concept of the “subliminal” will be my topic and I will come back precisely to Janet and the pre-Freudian theories that you mention. [11] As you know, Freud has

parere in maniera convincente, che questa scoperta fa parte di una “leggenda freudiana” che oscura il contributo di importanti medici filosofi, da Pierre Janet a Alfred Binet, Hippolyte Bernheim, fino ad Auguste Forel, tra gli altri. Dati i limiti dell’approccio freudiano, di quello lacaniano e di altri approcci edipici alla psiche (tutti concentrati su triangoli familiari, visioni normative della sessualità, attenzione simbolica sul fallo, concetti sessisti e razzisti come “invidia del pene”, “continente nero”, ecc., per non menzionare che alcuni dei vari aspetti problematici che sono emersi negli ultimi anni), tu spesso critichi la psicoanalisi su questioni come quella de *I nuovi feriti della mente* [*Les nouveaux blessés*] o de *Il piacere rimosso* [*Le plaisir effacé*], per citare due dei tuoi titoli. L’insoddisfazione nei confronti delle varie psicoanalisi è palpabile su molti fronti, e la loro incapacità di confrontarsi con le identità trans è stata resa evidente da figure transgender come Paul Preciado. Mi chiedo se, piuttosto che cercare di riformare un sistema che è evidentemente resistente alla riforma, un passo indietro verso le teorie pre-psicoanalitiche dell’inconscio, attente a ciò che Nietzsche chiamava “genuina fisio-psicologia”, non possa servire come strategia alternativa.

Faccio questa domanda perché mi sembra che tu stia già percorrendo questa strada. Oltre a essere critica nei confronti della psicoanalisi, nel tuo recente lavoro sull’intelligenza hai guardato a figure dimenticate come Alfred Binet, che fu tra gli psicologi interessati all’automatismo, al movimento e alle emozioni. In un libro scritto insieme a Charles Féré, sostenevano che il movimento visto genera un riflesso di movimento, anticipando così la scoperta dei neuroni specchio di oltre un secolo. Nietzsche era un lettore appassionato di quella letteratura fisio-psicologica, ed è per loro tramite che sono venuto a conoscenza di questa genealogia pre-freudiana ma anche post-freudiana di ciò che Marcel Gauchet chiama “l’inconscio cerebrale”. Io lo chiamo “inconscio mimetico”, per sottolineare il suo carattere mimetico ma anche plastico, relazionale e incarnato. Data l’attenzione di questi medici filosofi

eliminated the concept of “subconscious”. In the beginning Freud was identifying the pre-conscious with the subconscious. And then, in time he moved away from the subconscious because it is too biologically determined and he was referring to Janet. He got rid of that vocabulary and elaborated on the theory of the pre-conscious, the conscious and the unconscious. Clearly there is a move in psychoanalysis that tends to eliminate any kind of biologically anchored vision of the unconscious. Even if Freud starts with the brain in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, he clearly and very quickly gets rid of it. Lacan also radicalizes this abandonment of biology. I think that you are totally right that today there is a movement of coming back to the “cerebral unconscious” with figures like Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet, with the sociology of Gabriel Tarde, and Pierre Changeux can be inscribed in this genealogy. I will explain in my chapter [in the third volume of *Homo Mimeticus*, ed.] why this notion of the subconscious remains interesting.

a ciò che oggi chiamiamo cervello, non ti sembra che figure come Binet o Janet siano più direttamente allineate con neurologi contemporanei come Changeux rispetto a quanto lo siano Freud e Lacan?

CM Non voglio anticipare troppo del mio intervento [alla conferenza, NdT], perché il “subconscio” e la sua relazione con il sinonimo concetto di “subliminale” sarà il mio argomento e tornerò precisamente su Janet e le teorie pre-freudiane che menziono. [11] Come sai, Freud ha eliminato il concetto di subconscio. All’inizio Freud identificava il preconscious con il subconscio. E poi, nel tempo, si è allontanato dal concetto di subconscio perché troppo biologicamente determinato, e l’ha fatto riferendosi a Janet. Ha abbandonato quel lessico e ha sviluppato la teoria del preconscious, del conscio e dell’inconscio. Chiaramente c’è un movimento nella psicoanalisi che tende a eliminare qualsiasi tipo di visione dell’inconscio che lo ancori biologicamente. Anche se Freud parte dal cervello nel *Progetto di una psicologia*, se ne libera in fretta e definitivamente. Lacan poi radicalizza questo abbandono della biologia. Penso che tu abbia assolutamente ragione nel dire che oggi c’è un movimento di ritorno all’“inconscio cerebrale” con figure come Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet, con la sociologia di Gabriel Tarde; e Pierre Changeux può essere iscritto in questa genealogia. Spiegherò nel mio capitolo perché questa nozione di subconscio rimane interessante.

[11] See Malabou (forthcoming).

[11] Si veda Malabou (forthcoming).

Third Metamorphosis: Over-mimesis

(NL) After passing through the mimetic camel, the (anti-)mimetic lion, and having addressed questions of gender, affective life, and style, the spirit is ready for the third and last metamorphosis. In a circular movement, this last transformation brings us back to the plastic and mimetic sphere of becoming that has been driving us all along – albeit with a difference. The spirit, in fact, turns into a figure of pure affirmation, play, and innocence that can create new values: as Nietzsche puts it, «innocence the child is and forgetting, a beginning anew, a play, a self-propelling well, a first movement, a sacred Yea-saying» (2005, 24). An embodiment of the innocence of becoming, the child is both a plastic and a mimetic creature. Even at the neurological level, it is in childhood that both brain plasticity and the mimetic faculty are at its highest. Could it be that the much-misunderstood *Übermensch* is given power, or will to power, by the over-mimetic and over-plastic properties of childhood? That the will to power is entangled with plastic and mimetic powers? Interestingly, the child, *das Kind*, as Nietzsche understands it, is a figure of metamorphoses *par excellence* that goes beyond male and female binaries, is open to affirmative transformations oriented toward the future, and operates more as a “bridge” or a “wheel” than as a stable point of arrival.

To come back to the future-oriented question of AI with which we started, I find it interesting that in recent years the Nietzschean figure of the Overhuman has been read as a prefiguration of posthumanism and transhumanism as well. While I seriously doubt Nietzsche would have been invested in transhumanist dreams of immortality in imaginary technological *Hinterwelten*, he would probably have taken the post-human problematic of AI as seriously as

Terza Metamorfosi: Over-mimesis

(NL) Dopo essere passati attraverso il cammello mimetico, il leone (anti-)mimetico e aver affrontato questioni di genere, vita affettiva e stile, lo spirito è pronto per la terza e ultima metamorfosi. In un movimento circolare, questa ultima trasformazione ci riporta alla sfera plastica e mimetica del divenire che ci ha guidati per tutto il tempo – ma con una differenza. Lo spirito si trasforma in una figura di pura affermazione, gioco e innocenza capace di creare nuovi valori: come dice Nietzsche, «innocenza è il fanciullo e oblio, un nuovo inizio, un giuoco, una ruota ruotante da sola, un primo moto, un sacro dire di sì» (1968, 25). Incarnazione dell'innocenza del divenire, il fanciullo è una creatura sia plastica che mimetica. Anche a livello neurologico, è nell'infanzia che sia la plasticità cerebrale che la facoltà mimetica sono al loro apice. Non potrebbe forse darsi che il tanto frainteso *Übermensch* sia dotato di potenza, o volontà di potenza, proprio dall'eccesso di mimesis e plasticità dell'infanzia? Che la volontà di potenza sia intrecciata con potenze plastiche e mimetiche? È interessante notare che il fanciullo, *das Kind*, così come lo intende Nietzsche, è una figura della metamorfosi per eccellenza poiché eccede la dicotomia maschile/femminile, è aperto a trasformazioni affermative orientate verso il futuro, e funziona più come un “ponte” o una “ruota” piuttosto che come un punto d'arrivo stabile.

Tornando alla questione orientata al futuro con cui abbiamo iniziato, quella dell'IA, trovo interessante che negli ultimi anni la figura nietzschiana dell'oltreuomo sia stata letta come una prefigurazione del postumanesimo e del transumanesimo. Anche se dubito fortemente che Nietzsche si sarebbe lasciato coinvolgere dai sogni transumanisti di immortalità all'interno di *Hinterwelten* tecno-immaginari, probabilmente avrebbe preso sul serio quanto te la problematica postumana dell'IA. Almeno dalla pubblicazione di *Metamorfosi dell'intelligenza* hai

you do. Since at least *Metamorphoses of Intelligence*, you have been addressing the problematic of AI simulations that challenge the distinction between the human brain and artificial intelligence you had set up in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*. Synaptic chips now have the power to imitate or simulate the human brain in ways that are not only passive and mechanical but productive and plastically creative and are contributing to the current revolution in AI. I'm thinking of generative AI created by Open AI like ChatGPT that can write poetry, answer questions, and even simulate falling in love, apparently... It's interesting we both found Spike Jonze's film *Her* inspiring to think about this mimetic, or, as I call it, hyper-mimetic revolution in this respect.

Here is my question: the logical and therapeutic advantages of the recent leap forward in AI are very promising indeed, especially when it comes for the developments of cures for neurodegenerative disorders or diminishing experiments on animals, for instance. At the same time, in a mirroring inversion of perspectives, AI simulations also cast a long pathological shadow, particularly the power of simulations to affect and infect the hyper-mimetic brain of *homo mimeticus* with disinformation, conspiracies, and other contagious pathologies that can dispossess the ego along lines dramatized by *Her*. Without falling into the trap of technophobia, I worry that posthumans, all too humans subjects, have made much technological progress on AI simulations, but still have a long way to go to offer diagnostic evaluations simultaneously attentive to both the therapeutic and pathological effects of the metamorphoses of mimesis. Since you stressed the productive or patho-logical side of AI, could you comment on its dangerous, *pathological* side?



I think the pathological side of technology comes from capitalism and from the ways these new technologies are used in order to normalize, to

affrontato la problematica delle simulazioni IA mostrando come queste mettano in discussione la distinzione tra cervello umano e intelligenza artificiale che avevi tracciato in *Cosa fare del nostro cervello*. I chip sinaptici ora sono in grado di imitare o simulare il cervello umano in modi che non sono solo passivi e meccanici, ma produttivi e plasticamente creativi, contribuendo in questo modo alla rivoluzione che sta avvenendo nell'ambito dell'IA. Penso ad esempio all'IA generativa creata da Open AI, come ChatGPT, che può scrivere poesia, rispondere a domande e persino simulare l'innamoramento, pare... È interessante che entrambi abbiamo trovato che il film di Spike Jonze *Her* fosse d'ispirazione per riflettere sulla rivoluzione mimetica, o come la chiamo io, iper-mimetica, da questo punto di vista.

Ecco la mia domanda: i vantaggi logici e terapeutici dei recenti passi in avanti nell'IA sono davvero molto promettenti, specialmente quando si tratta di sviluppare cure per disturbi neurodegenerativi o di diminuire gli esperimenti sugli animali, ad esempio. Allo stesso tempo, in un'inversione speculare di prospettive, le simulazioni IA gettano anche un'ombra lunga di natura patologica, in particolare per quanto riguarda la capacità delle simulazioni di influenzare e infettare il cervello iper-mimetico dell'*homo mimeticus* con disinformazione, cospirazioni e altre patologie contagiose che possono alienare l'io in direzioni che in *Her* vengono dramatizzate. Senza cadere nella trappola della tecnofobia, temo che i postumani (in quanto soggetti troppo umani), pur avendo fatto notevoli progressi tecnologici nelle simulazioni IA, abbiano ancora molta strada da fare per offrire valutazioni diagnostiche che riescano a tenere conto sia degli effetti terapeutici che di quelli patologici delle metamorfosi della mimesis. Dato che hai sottolineato il lato produttivo o pathos-logico dell'IA, potresti ora commentarne il lato pericoloso e *patologico*?



Penso che il lato patologico della tecnologia derivi dal capitalismo e dai

flatten and reduce all kinds of creativity, intelligence, and singularity. Technology per se is neither good nor bad; what is dangerous is the use that is made of it. Speakers from Finland at the conference [Matti Eskelinen & Eero Suorsa, ed.] spoke about how neuro-liberality was becoming a discipline taught in Finnish university, for example, and there are numerous ways in which neuro-liberalism puts technology to use to develop pathologies of subjectivation. I hope we can resist it, this becoming neuro-liberal and neuro-capitalist of technology, because the positive aspects are numerous.

A friend of mine who is very involved in the development of AI refuses to call it “artificial intelligence” and calls it rather “artificial imagination”. He told me that AI systems are working in interactions with humans. It’s similar to mirror neurons: in themselves they have no power; their power comes with what you do with them. For example, ChatGPT is often used as Google; people ask, “please remind me of this or that”. But it’s not the way it functions. ChatGPT is a creative tool, so I can ask it to write something, for example, in Malabou’s style, it will give you an answer; and then you can correct it and give it more specific directions, like “I’d like it in a romantic style”; and then gradually you start a dialogue, and you create something. So, I can only hope that this creative dimension of technology, which relies on interactions, will have a space to breathe and it won’t be totally used for example to generate bad-quality translations, or create bad scripts or books. In the end, it really depends on the use.

(NL) Yes, like all *pharmaka*, AI simulations can be put to *pathological* and *patho-logical* uses and require new diagnostic evaluations. Given the sedimented layers of mimesis that drive the plastic metamorphoses of the spirit in its evolutionary development from the camel to the lion to the child, I recognize

modi in cui queste nuove tecnologie vengono utilizzate per normalizzare, appiattare e ridurre tutti i tipi di creatività, intelligenza e singolarità. La tecnologia in sé non è né buona né cattiva; ciò che è pericoloso è l’uso che se ne fa. Alla conferenza due relatori finlandesi [Matti Eskelinen e Eero Suorsa, NdT] hanno parlato di come la neuro-liberalità sta diventando una disciplina insegnata nelle università finlandesi, per esempio, e ci sono molti modi in cui il neuro-liberalismo utilizza la tecnologia per sviluppare patologie di soggettivazione. Spero che possiamo resistere a questo divenire neuro-liberale e neuro-capitalista della tecnologia, perché gli aspetti positivi sono molti.

Un mio amico molto coinvolto nello sviluppo dell’IA rifiuta di chiamarla “intelligenza artificiale” e la definisce piuttosto “immaginazione artificiale”. Mi ha detto che i sistemi IA lavorano in interazione con gli esseri umani. È simile a quel che accade coi neuroni specchio: non hanno capacità di per sé; le loro capacità dipendono da ciò che fai con loro. Per esempio, ChatGPT è spesso usato come Google; la gente chiede: “per favore, ricordami questo o quello”. Ma non è il modo in cui funziona. ChatGPT è uno strumento creativo, quindi posso chiedergli di scrivere qualcosa, per esempio, nello stile di Malabou, e ti darà una risposta; e poi puoi correggerlo e dargli indicazioni più specifiche, come “vorrei che fosse in uno stile romantico”; e poi gradualmente iniziate un dialogo e create qualcosa. Posso solo sperare che questa dimensione creativa e interattiva della tecnologia assuma sempre più ampio respiro e che tecnologie come ChatGPT non vengano utilizzate soltanto per generare traduzioni di bassa qualità o per scrivere brutti copioni o libri. Alla fin fine, dipende davvero dall’uso.

(NL) Sì, come tutti i *pharmaka*, le simulazioni IA possono essere utilizzate in maniere *patologiche* e in maniere *patos-logiche*, richiedendo via via nuove valutazioni diagnostiche. Data la mimesis stratificata che guida le metamorfosi plastiche dello spirito nel suo sviluppo dal cammello al leone al fanciullo, riconosco il

the logical and creative potential of AI for the future – if not for all, at least for the free, playful spirits that went through the different metamorphoses of the spirit Nietzsche outlines. On the other side, the dangers might also be high – if we consider the relational, mirroring, and emotional pathos rooted in the evolutionary biology of a herd animal living increasingly digitized lives, and often deprived of the heavy load of education and the solid philological training Nietzsche was implicitly alluding to in his confessional parable. AI simulations can generate conspiracy theories that render humans and posthumans alike very vulnerable to all kinds of manipulations. Such manipulations operate subliminally on the mimetic unconscious, generating phantom egos that are not mere copies or reproductions of other egos but are dispossessed by subliminal forms of passive imitation constitutive of the *vita mimetica*.

To close the circle and return to the point with which we started, namely your recent turn to mimesis to account for the innovative power of AI simulations, here is my last question. You recently wrote that «we lack an updated notion of mimesis that would adequately characterize the imitating powers of artificial epigenetic systems» and you proposed the concept of «epigenetic mimesis» (Malabou 2023, 185) as a step in this direction. In line with the mimetic turn you also stressed the need to go beyond definitions of mimesis as a realistic copy of nature, for synaptic chips do not simply copy the brain – though a productive mimesis seems to be at play. Do you see continuities between “epigenetic mimesis” and the Kantian distinction between passive mimesis and creative mimesis, *nachmachen* and *nachahmen*, and the Janus-faced sides of the patho(-)logies of mimesis we have been discussing via the three metamorphoses of the spirit? And why do you think a mimetic turn, or return remains important for the present and future?

potenziale logico e creativo dell’IA per il futuro – se non per tutti, almeno per gli spiriti liberi e vivaci che hanno attraversato le diverse metamorfosi dello spirito delineate da Nietzsche. D’altra parte, anche i rischi possono essere grandi, specie se consideriamo il pathos di rispecchiamento relazionale ed emozionale radicato nella biologia evolutiva di un animale sociale che vive vite sempre più digitalizzate, ma che spesso è privato del pesante bagaglio dell’istruzione e della solida formazione filologica a cui Nietzsche si riferiva implicitamente nella sua parabola confessionale. Le simulazioni IA possono generare teorie del complotto che rendono sia umani che postumani vulnerabili a ogni tipo di manipolazione. Si tratta di manipolazioni che operano subliminalmente sull’inconscio mimetico, generando degli ego fantasma che non sono semplici copie o riproduzioni di altri ego, ma sono spossessati da forme subliminali di imitazione passiva costitutiva della *vita mimetica* [in latino nell’originale, NdT].

Per chiudere il cerchio e tornare al punto da cui siamo partiti, cioè la tua recente svolta verso la mimesis per spiegare il potere innovativo delle simulazioni IA, ecco la mia ultima domanda. Di recente hai scritto che «ci manca una nozione aggiornata di mimesis che renda conto adeguatamente dei poteri imitativi dei sistemi epigenetici artificiali», e hai proposto il concetto di «mimesis epigenetica» (Malabou 2023, 285) per andare in questa direzione. In linea con il *mimetic turn*, hai anche sottolineato la necessità di superare le definizioni di mimesis come copia realistica della natura, poiché i chip sinaptici non si limitano a copiare il cervello – anche se una mimesis produttiva sembra essere all’opera. Vedi delle continuità tra la tua “mimesis epigenetica”, la distinzione kantiana tra mimesis passiva e mimesis creativa, *nachmachen* e *nachahmen*, e i lati bifronti delle patho(-)logie della mimesis di cui abbiamo discusso attraverso le tre metamorfosi dello spirito? E perché pensi che un *mimetic turn*, o *re-turn*, sia importante per il presente e il futuro?

CM

When I wrote on epigenetic mimesis via Kant I started from the dominant notion of art imitating nature, but in the creative sense. And the goal of that for Kant is that nature acquires something like a self through art – nature mirroring itself through art. It's not a passive imitation, which Kant also condemned. Mimesis is a way for nature to acquire something like a self, as if nature was able to reflect on itself. And my question was: could we apply the same type of reflection on technology? Could we say that a certain use of technology might be able to give technology the possibility of a self? That is, technology mirroring itself, as if an AI was able in the end to have something like a self, to self-reflect.

So yes, the genealogy we traced via Nietzsche's account of metamorphoses could be usefully aligned with this productive notion of mimesis as well. As you know, Nietzsche has a very strong critique of the notion of the subject. At the same time, he thinks that creativity has to incarnate itself in forms like *Zarathustra*. These incarnations are not subjects; they are more like theatrical actors, and I think they proceed from the same logic as the one I was describing: imitation in a creative sense is a way to confer a self to something or someone that is not a subject but is an actor or *mimos*, as you remind us, that at the same time incarnates something. So, yes, I think that this embodied, emotional, and creative rethinking of mimesis is very important.

CM

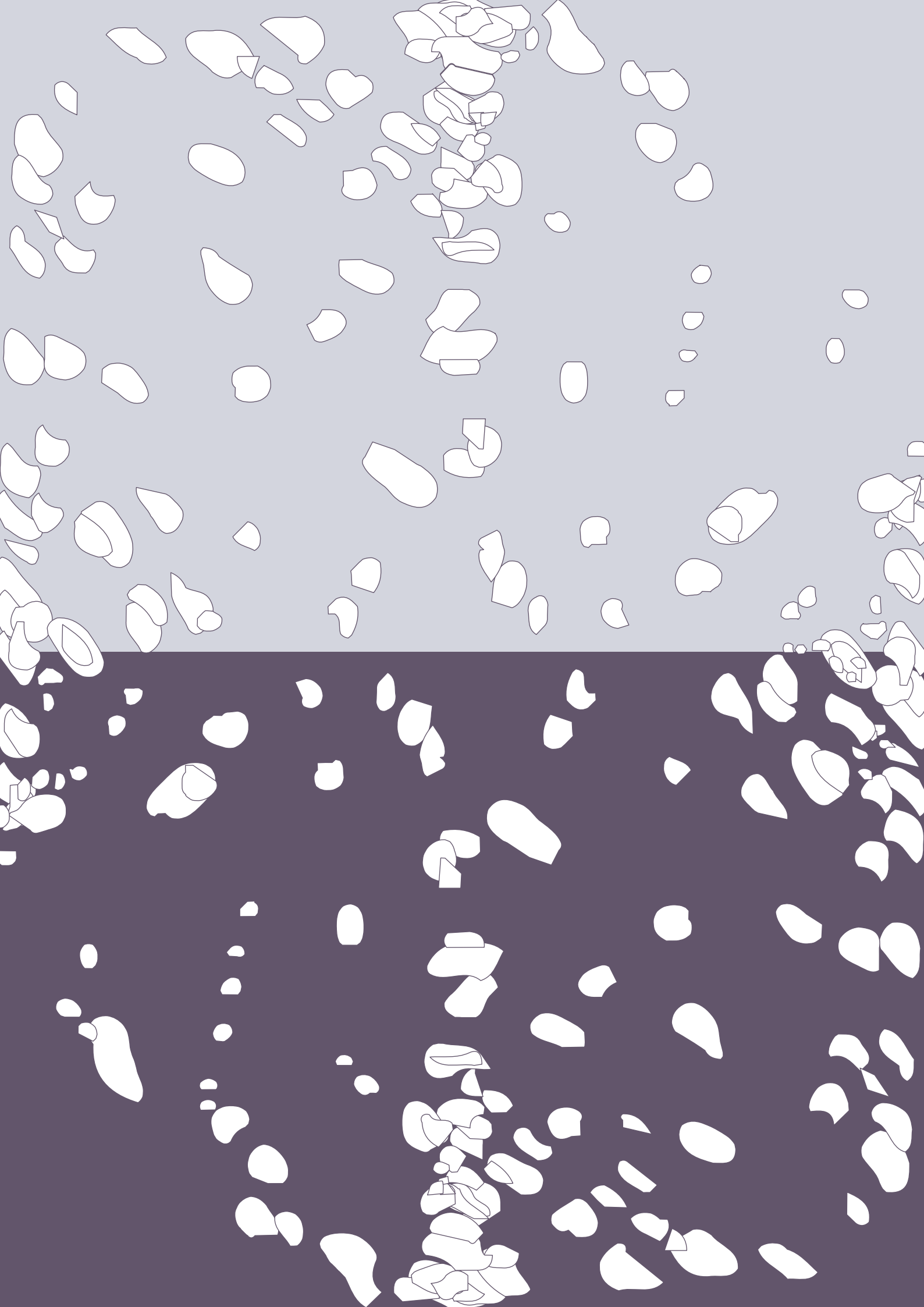
Quando ho scritto sulla mimesis epigenetica attraverso Kant, sono partita dalla nozione dominante di arte che imita la natura, ma in un senso creativo. E lo scopo di questo per Kant è che la natura, attraverso l'arte, acquisisca qualcosa come un sé – natura che si rispecchia nell'arte. Non è un'imitazione passiva, che anche Kant condannava. La mimesis è un modo per la natura di acquisire una specie di sé, come se la natura fosse in grado di riflettere su sé stessa. E la mia domanda era: potremmo applicare lo stesso tipo di riflessione alla tecnologia? Potremmo dire che un certo uso della tecnologia potrebbe offrire alla tecnologia la possibilità di produrre un sé? Cioè, la tecnologia che rispecchia sé stessa, come se un'IA alla fine fosse in grado di avere qualcosa come un sé, di riflettersi.

Quindi sì, la genealogia che abbiamo tracciato attraverso il racconto delle metamorfosi di Nietzsche potrebbe essere utile affiancata a questa nozione produttiva di mimesis. Come sai, Nietzsche critica fortemente la nozione di soggetto. Allo stesso tempo, pensa che la creatività debba incarnarsi in forme come *Zarathustra*. Queste incarnazioni non sono soggetti; sono più come attori teatrali, e penso che procedano dalla logica che stavo descrivendo: l'imitazione in senso creativo è un modo per conferire un sé a qualcosa o qualcuno che non è un soggetto ma un attore o *mimos*, come tu ci ricordi, e che allo stesso tempo incarna qualcosa. Quindi sì, penso che questa riconcettualizzazione della mimesis in chiave incarnata, emozionale e creativa sia molto importante.

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