

# ‡ THE FUTURE OF PLASTICITY

CATHERINE MALABOU

INTERVIEWED BY KATE LAWLESS

Catherine Malabou is a leading figure in contemporary French philosophy. She is currently professor at two esteemed European institutions: The European Graduate School and the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University. Her dissertation was completed under the supervision of Jacques Derrida and published as *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (2004). Other notable publications include: *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2009) and *The New Wounded* (2012). Malabou is best known for her concept of plasticity, which she draws from Hegel and extends through investigations in neuroscience. For Malabou, plasticity is the paradigm *par excellence* that both advances a new theory of trauma and anticipates the need for a total redefinition of the subject. Her latest book, *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality* (forthcoming June 2016, Polity Press), comes to terms with speculative realism and develops a new approach to the Kantian transcendental.

This interview was conducted during Malabou's visit to London, Ontario in February 2016 to deliver her keynote lecture at "Passionate Disattachments: The Work of Catherine Malabou," a conference hosted by The Centre for Advanced Research in European Philosophy at King's University College and The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Professor Malabou for her warmth, generosity and assistance in making this interview possible.

**Kate Lawless:** I'd like to begin with the question of trauma. Contemporary theories of trauma often follow a psychoanalytic framework, where trauma is a form of belatedness. We might also think about this as a kind of futurity. Can you tell me about the relationship between trauma and temporality in general, or trauma and the future in particular?

**Catherine Malabou:** So, as you know, my elaboration of trauma is not exactly that of psychoanalysis. The kind of traumas I'm interested involve a question of temporality, but they are immediate, not belated. They strike the person. I'm thinking here of cerebral lesions. The psyche has no time to prepare itself for the trauma, but also no possibility of reinterpreting it after the fact because most of the time the lesion effects language and memory. So, I'm interested in the kind of trauma that, according to me, Freud has omitted, which is the physical trauma happening in the brain.

**KL:** Yes, he brackets that, doesn't he?

**CM:** Let's say he immediately recuperates it into his genealogy of the psyche.

**KL:** So, would you say that in your theory or understanding of trauma there's no mediation? Is that one of the main differences?

**CM:** That's right. There's no mediation. This is why emergency therapies were invented, like debriefing, making people talk immediately. Because if you don't do that then there is this neurotic imposter that is a kind of storytelling after the fact, which, contrary to Freud, does not really help the trauma but upholds it. So, there are good narratives and there are bad ones. And generally the ones that come after cerebral trauma are not helpful.

**KL:** What would an example of a good narrative look like?

**CM:** Oliver Sacks worked a lot on this. A good narrative: this is what he calls neurological novels. The good narratives are not necessarily linguistic; they don't necessarily require speech. Generally speaking, what Sacks says is that the patients have to find means other than language to work through the trauma. And for Sacks it was music. It was patients' reactions to music that he

transformed into a narrative.

**KL:** How does this idea relate to the question of futurity? Does the future exist at all in this conception of trauma?

**CM:** I think you have two possible versions. Either you say: the future consists in redemption because at one moment or another there will be a kind of salvation. According to me, Sacks is very much into that – that there will be a way, not to cure these people, but to, in a certain sense, accomplish a kind of spiritual metamorphosis. So, either you say that, or you say that there is no future. And this is my position. There is no future, just a temporary progress – not even progress, but wellbeing. You can only bring some comfort.

**KL:** Are you suggesting that metamorphosis operates simply to allow a being to continue?

**CM:** Yes. Yes, exactly. That's it. I don't think you can go beyond that. A metamorphosis is not a resurrection; it is just a tentative effort to bridge the gap that opened at the core of identity. It seems to me sometimes that Sacks is more confident than I in a sort of mystical conception of metamorphosis as redemption.

**KL:** So fascinating. Tell me, how does this relate to your analysis of metamorphosis in Kafka?

**CM:** Kafka precisely provides us with a vision of a destructive metamorphosis, which has no redemptive power at all. When the story begins, the metamorphosis has already taken place, so that the process is hidden from view, and appears since the beginning as meaningless. This is what is so strong in that story, is that the metamorphosis does not happen. So, in that sense, your question about temporality fits in here because while Gregor spends his time asking himself what happened, he never comes to a conclusion. So there's an attempt at re-elaboration, but it doesn't work.

**KL:** Let's return for a moment to recent theories of trauma, in which the concept of belatedness lends itself to a linear conception of history. Benjamin

and Debord are early critics of this abstract, homogenous idea of history. I wonder: what do you think your concept of destructive plasticity might offer here in terms a reading of history? What is the future of history?

**CM:** I don't even know if the term history would still be helpful in this context because a cerebral event absolutely cannot be recuperated. It is not something that can genuinely be integrated in the course of history, it is a brutal accident, deprived of any meaning, a pure interruption. I know that there exists a history of catastrophes. If we take history in that sense, and in that sense only, then it works.

**KL:** And history always involves some kind of recuperation or mediation of the past.

**CM:** A mediation, reflexivity, narrative, self-representation, self-genealogy. In the case of cerebral lesions, this doesn't exist. There is no diachrony, only a kind of perpetual present.

**KL:** Let's return to some of your work on Hegel, where you first discovered the concept of plasticity. In an earlier essay, you talk about plasticity as a form of mediation between the future and temporality. Can you elaborate on this idea – plasticity as a form of mediation?

**CM:** It's true that in the beginning I elaborated a positive concept of plasticity, and then, later on, I went to the destructive one. So, let's say – if we're going to focus on the first one – that I was trying to challenge Heidegger's reading of Hegel. Heidegger says in the last paragraph of *Being and Time*, that Hegel has no concept of future because his concept of time in general is just a paraphrase of Aristotle, a succession of nows. In a certain sense, it's just a perpetual present. There's no past and no future.

**KL:** That sounds a lot like the lesion moment.

**CM:** Yeah. Absolutely. Except that in Aristotle, this privilege conferred to the present has quite a different meaning. He states that the "now," as long as it lasts, gives us an image of eternity, even if brief, even if transient. The present

time, and the present tense induce a permanence, a pure adherence of my psyche to the immediate being of what is. Memory and anticipation don't yet intervene. Heidegger was the first to underscore this insistence on the present. The problem is that he sees it everywhere, in every philosopher. Therefore, he does not perceive that Hegel's concept of time is certainly not contained in the moments explicitly devoted to the question of "nows," that it is elsewhere, in the dynamisms of the system. Time is the way the system works – and the system is plastic.

**KL:** Right. And you found that concept in Hegel.

**CM:** Yes. So, it's absolutely not when he talks about time that plasticity appears. It's on the side. And so it designates a general movement. It's the way in which the subject, what he calls the subject, which is not necessarily the human subject or the real subject or the real in general, but everything that constitutes a kind of system of anticipation. It's about predicting the future and at the same time getting blind to it. It's this double relationship to the event that constitutes Hegel's notion of time.

**KL:** How does plasticity fit into that conception of time?

**CM:** First of all, Hegel opposes plasticity to flexibility – that is, an excessive liquidity, and rigidity, an excessive hardness. So, to be plastic means that everything that happens to you fashions you but at the same time does not destroy you. Plasticity is the way in which time shapes or fashions us, constitutes our subjectivity and at the same time allows for resistance.

**KL:** Is this where the concept of sculpting comes in? Does this suggest plasticity has an original connection to the aesthetic as opposed to the philosophical?

**CM:** Yes. The term *Plastizität* appeared at the end of the nineteenth century in Goethe. In the beginning, it was specifically devoted to aesthetics and also to education – the child is plastic because he can learn, etc. But Hegel displaced it from the aesthetic realm into the metaphysical one in order to characterize subjectivity and time in general. So, in some sense, he stole the concept from Goethe. And the concepts that existed before *Plastizität* were

*die Plastik*, and the adjective *plastisch*, which explicitly referred to sculpture. So, Goethe invented the substantive, *Plastizität* to designate the capacity to be sculpted. And Hegel distorted that to make it characterize the temporal being of subjectivity.

**KL:** And you mobilize this distortion to talk about the formation of the subject in the context of trauma and lesions.

**CM:** In the first part of my work I studied mostly this shaping and sculpting in the positive sense. And then, because I started to work on trauma, I discovered that trauma could also have this fashioning power out of destruction – like when you have the former identity that gets destroyed by the lesion, and then, you become someone else, so there’s a formation of a personality, but it’s a formation out of destruction.

**KL:** So your concept of plasticity is really dialectical; and your work on trauma in some senses helped to illuminate this dialectical dimension. But there is no trauma in Hegel’s version of plasticity. How did you become interested in trauma?

**CM:** Well, actually, I discovered there was something missing in my treatment of plasticity, which was this negative sense that Hegel thematizes very clearly: the meaning of destruction. After my PhD, I realized that I had only emphasized the “good side” of plasticity, its positive values of construction and formation. I think it came, then, from a question I got after a conference or a talk. Someone asked me about the negative implications of plasticity. What exactly is the explosion? So, that’s how I started asking myself how we could possibly conceive of a negative kind of shaping, and this led me to the question of trauma.

**KL:** I hope you won’t mind if we change directions slightly and move into the realm of politics. I’ve been thinking about the fact that many philosophers today, especially the children of May ’68, seem quite concerned about the impotence of politics. There’s a quote by Jameson, in which he says: “It seems as if there are no political solutions present or visible on the historical horizon.” He wrote this back in the 80s, but I think it’s a common sentiment now too.

Two questions emerge from this lament: Can plasticity address the impotence of politics today? And, if so, what is the relationship between plasticity and politics? What is the plasticity of politics?

**CM:** I quite agree with Jameson. I think it's very difficult at the moment to see anything new on the horizon. So, I'm rather doubtful when I see people so sure of themselves, when they're firm in their belief, like Badiou, that the revolution, or whatever, is coming. I don't believe this is true. Of course, it's very seductive; it's very attractive. I don't believe that communism is on its way. But I do think that something is happening at the moment, which is the total redefinition of the subject, much bigger than what I imagined in the beginning with my little plasticity, something enormous that I will address in my talk tonight, which is: who is the Anthropos of the Anthropocene? I think we have to admit that we have to rediscover the part played by human nature within our subjectivity, which means that at the level of identity, it changes everything, whether we are geological or biological or both. The question is how to deal with this non-conscious, indifferent, neutral aspect of our subjectivity and what to do with it.

**KL:** There's a material aspect to this obviously.

**CM:** One hundred percent, a material aspect, which means that it might be that politics is not a question of will or intention or a project any longer, but a way to figure out how to deal with the non-intentional part of us. This is very interesting because I recently discovered that Guattari has a book, which is called *On Three Ecologies*. It's very small, and not extremely good, but it has some very compelling ideas. He says that ecology implies a total redefinition of subjectivity. And he says something like: this will force us to invent new forms of singularization – not of subjectivation, but singularization, a kind of farewell to subjectivity and a creation of new territories, which for him will be absolutely singular. It's the end of the global; it's the end of vast political projects for the whole of humanity.

**KL:** Can you elaborate this idea of singularization?

**CM:** If we refer to the last meeting in Paris, the CoP for environment, it was

clear that two kinds of policies were debated: the universal one, we have to lower the temperature and this is global; but also the local one, little workshops on what to do in this or that African village, very singular. I think that the divorce between the global and the local will become massive and that we have to invent a singularization or ways of living here and there which escapes the global.

**KL:** Is this because the global has some kind of imaginary or mediated quality to it, whereas these singularities are moments of immediacy?

**CM:** Yes. Yes, and it means that we have to stop waiting for the State or political parties or organizations to help us. These inventions of singularities will necessitate a total redefinition of the subject and I'm afraid that people are not really ready for that.

**KL:** There has been much talk recently, especially in leftist political circles, about a return of the commons. How does this fit into your framework? Do you think this return is a kind of nostalgia for a previous and now anachronistic form of community specific to the modern epoch? Or can we think of the commons in terms of Guattari's idea of singularities, or local agglomerations?

**CM:** This idea of the commons is very important. For example, in Spain, all the political frames are exploding because of the multiplicity of approaches to the common and the rise of parties like Podemos. This brings up another interesting point. In Catalunya,<sup>1</sup> they are very much nationalists, but this nationalism is precisely a way of singularizing. This is a kind of local fight against the global, which at the same time relies on the idea of a community. So this is a very interesting example. In the beginning I hated that kind of movement – nationalism – because it's very ambiguous.

**KL:** Of course. Well, Jameson talks about this too, right. And he says that in some ways – and I'm going to paraphrase him here – that nationalism is only

1 Since the discussion of the political situation in Catalonia hangs on the idea of local nationalism as a point of singularization (against that of nationalism as a globalizing force) we have chosen to retain the Catalan spelling of their own region: thus it appears throughout as 'Catalunya' [Ed.].

a problem in the context of a powerful nation like the United States, in which nationalism leads to the globalization of America or Americanization. But a nationalism that responds to and resists these kinds of global dictatorships is different. Do you think that nationalism or national projects of the second variety might in some ways represent some kind of singularity?

**CM:** Yes. I mean, the main question is: what is the cement of this community? Is it good? Or is it reactive and racist? This is my problem with autonomy movements like the ones in Catalunya for example in Spain. On the one hand, I am very much in favour of an independence of Catalunya, and I think that the government's decision to prohibit a referendum is perfectly inadmissible. At the same time, I cannot help thinking that there is something dangerous in the desire of a region or a people to close themselves to alterity, in that context to break with the whole country and other regions that Spain represent. Local nationalism is a kind of double bind.

**KL:** I'd like to pose a rather playful question, so perhaps you'll grant me leeway for some wordplay. I want us to think about the polysemic character of plastic in order to link the concept of plasticity to what we might call the polymerization of everyday life. The word plastic has at least two basic meanings: one the one hand, it is an adjective meaning pliable or easily molded and, on the other hand, it is a noun describing a synthetic material whose structure is polymeric. If we hold these two versions of plastic in our minds, can we ask what the concept of plasticity might tell us about the future of plastic? And perhaps even the future of ecological crisis?

**CM:** Yes, but you also have another contradiction, formation and explosion, which is also about the simultaneity of, say, democracy and terrorism! In our world, everything that appears as a creation of form is immediately getting destroyed. This is again the double meaning of plasticity, emergence of a form and explosion of this same form. What interests me so much in this concept of plasticity is that it is dialectical – the enemy is inside, the contradiction is inside. Terrorism is not our utterly “other,” it is the inverted image of globalization, it is produced by it, produced by capitalism. There is an immanent negativity of our world, and ecology is an example – we are in total self-destruction, and we understand it too late. Plasticity is both the form of our

lives, the mode of being of our bodies, and what destroys us. You can have this double logic, this dialectic – because I don't think we're out of Hegel, not at all – this permanent negotiation between the two contradictory aspects of everything. And this is what we have to deal with.

**KL:** Certainly, and in some ways this is connected to historical development of interiority, that is, the interiority of the subject. And so, I think what you are suggesting in a certain sense is that this interiorization has become generalized.

**CM:** There is no transcendence; there is no way to defend these ideas against this kind of opening to an absolute alterity.

**KL:** One final question: is the future plastic?

**CM:** Ah, yes, totally, if by this we understand the double logic, which doesn't mean that it's beautiful. It means that it can be beautiful and also internally threatened by its own contrary. But it won't be given from the outside, from any promise or whatever. It will for sure be whatever we make of it.