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Exploding Woman!*

Mulher explosiva!

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Abstract

Perhaps better considered a confessional than a traditional academic essay, this work is an exploration of the relationship between Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity and Woman. I ask the question, "what does it mean to 'lay claim' to Woman in our current gender context?" It begins with a short prologue, followed by an unraveling of Malabou's plastic landscape. I then address and expand upon "The Woman Problem", attempting to see the way in which it is shaped by gender context and how it also shapes the gender context itself. I suggest that Woman's status is perhaps best emulated through the concept of explosive plasticity. Finally, I close with the allegory of Exploding Woman.

Keywords

Plasticity. Gender. Malabou. Woman.

Resumo

Talvez muito mais uma confissão do que um ensaio acadêmico tradicional, este trabalho é uma exploração da relação entre o conceito de plasticidade de Catherine Malabou e a mulher. Faço a seguinte pergunta: "o que significa 'reivindicar' a mulher em nosso atual contexto de gênero?" Começo com um breve prólogo, seguido de um desdobramento da paisagem plástica de Malabou. Em seguida, abordo e amplio "O problema da mulher", tentando ver a maneira como ele é moldado pelo contexto de gênero e como ele também molda esse mesmo contexto. Sugiro que o status da mulher talvez seja melhor emulado pelo conceito de plasticidade explosiva. Por fim, encerro com a alegoria da Mulher Explosiva.

Palavras-chave

* The following text is the essay she wrote for a module called "Plasticity and Form", taught by Professor Stella Sandford. I proposed that this paper be published as it is, without any modification." (Catherine Malabou).

Plasticidade. Gênero. Malabou. Mulher.

I reconfigured this essay several times before finally making the decision to just *come right out and say it!* In the plea for academic credibility, I had originally tried to remove myself from the equation of this work. It was taught to me from a young age that using “I” in an essay would discredit the text. I was looking for an uninvolved and anonymous voice to authorize my ideas. What followed was a cold analysis of gender, of woman, that was somehow both too careful and too uncaring, too clean and too dirty. It lacked the humility, curiosity, and admittedly, the apologetic desperation from which these thoughts are born. Ultimately, my body is the site of this situated-ness, however it does not negate the reality of the concepts at play nor the critical thinking done to unravel them. I do not claim any real authority over what is not mine, though I may adopt a position of power momentarily for the sake of investigation. If one cannot find a semblance of themselves in the text, however clear or muddied, then borrow this body to reflect upon. So without further ado, *EXPLODING WOMAN!*

The phrase, when it first arrived, tickled me, electric, but without much apparent sentiment. This is my active exploration of its unapparent sentiment.

I

This phrase entered my periphery shortly after I experienced my first and very tantalizing rendezvous with the work of Catherine Malabou. The *EXPLOSION* in exploding woman bloomed from Malabou’s account of plasticity. *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* is both the title and inquiry of her 2008 publication on plasticity. I will begin with a brief summary of this work. Here, she uses the brain as a philosophical object, something akin to taboo in philosophy, and renders out its plasticity, and thus our plasticity. Despite the cutting-edge developments of neuroscience, we have grown loyal to the idea of an “entirely genetically determined brain” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 4). Malabou sets out to challenge this through reinscribing, revivifying neuroscientific discoveries

as they pertain to the individual and the social sphere. What results is the linkage between what were previously isolated as neuronal terms and concepts, untouchable by the common man (even more untouchable by the philosopher) and the activity of the brain, “its manner of developing itself [and] its meaning as a *work*, our work, and as history, *our* history” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 4). In other words, the neuroplastic phenomenon does not rest solely in the hands of science. It is not somehow eschewed from the reality of the brain’s self-organization as we experience it. Rather, it is in every way related to our own development, our own history, our own *identity*. To reveal our freedom, we must acknowledge our neuronal impetus for self-modulation, reconciling the arbitrary divide between the two.

“The work proper to the brain that engages with history and individual experience has a name: plasticity” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 4). Plasticity is the capacity, *the power*, to both give and receive form. It is the sculptural shaping of material, both “formable and formative at the same time” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 5). With the possibility of creation comes the possibility (maybe even the promise?) of destruction. Indeed, plasticity encapsulates destruction of form, complete annihilation, *explosion* (MALABOU, 2008, p. 5). However, the lack of form does not quite sink into a state of formlessness. Plasticity is not fluidity; its relationship with form necessitates the existence of form. Plasticity is not elastic; once enacted upon, the material can never return to its previous shape. Plasticity, either in its mode of receiving, creating, or exploding, “marks a certain determination of form”. It can, however, reconstitute the mark, “change [its] determination” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 15-16).

Our mistake lies in the assumption that “the neuronal man is simply a neuronal given and not also a political and ideological construction” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 13). When we accept a neuronal given, we undermine the fact that from the beginning, the brain is nourished and impressed upon by individual experience, individual existence. That is, the brain is in some way a “self-cultivating organ” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 30). If the ideologized neuronal-brain is responsible for the production of a culture that rests on the falsity of biological determinism, of a fixed brain,

then what would a liberated brain, a plastic brain, bring into being? And this is exactly Malabou's point, that a revelation of a "genetic non-determinism" can thus give way to "a social and political nondeterminism" (MALABOU, 2008, p. 13). If the structure of the social world is co-opted by the structure of the neuronal world, then internalizing the plastic structure of our brain, and in turn, intimising ourselves *with* ourselves, could potentially lead to "a new freedom" (MALABOU, 2008, p. 13).

What plasticity is *not*, however, is mere flexibility. The conflation of the two poses a critical threat to new freedom on the horizon. "Flexibility," Malabou says, "is the ideological avatar of plasticity—at once its mask, its diversion, and its confiscation" (MALABOU, 2008, p. 12). To be flexible is to surrender one's autonomy, one's own creative force. It is "to fold, to render oneself docile vis-a-vis one's environment...to adapt to everything" (MALABOU, 2008, p. 13). The new freedom Malabou describes is not built upon the back of flexibility. Flexibility has no history (MALABOU, 2008, p. 13), no personality — *it does not belong to us*. Plasticity, however, is *ours* to situate ourselves in, to be the subjects of, to mobilize. It is in our grasp to embody change, *create* change, *become* change, and in a way, change the notion of change itself. If mere "change" belongs to flexibility, we must say then that plasticity offers something wholly different, wholly inspired.

II

While Catherine Malabou casts a wider net on the social implications of plasticity, I am specifically interested in its relationship with gender, with Woman. I am curious what these new plastic tools are capable of, if they are the right ones to aid me (us? some?) getting unstuck. The concept of explosive plasticity, destructive plasticity, originally fell out of the main frame for me. In fact, while I was dazzled with the vivacity of Malabou's account of plasticity, I originally thought "explosion" was a stretch, and I made note of this to my cohorts. Initially, it was the positive pole of plasticity that I wanted to piece together with Woman, the side of plasticity that was "the sensible

image of taking form” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 5). I wanted to endow gender as a whole with the hope that gleamed from the plastic capability of receiving and giving form. Woman is so often affixed to the themes of receptivity, permeability, passivity, *and thus* to the role of giver, creator, Gaia. And while the reality of plasticity is that it “implies at once the elaboration of form” (giver/receiver) and “the effacement of another form” (explosion), I now felt the visceral urge to watch everything burn (MALABOU, 2008, p. 71). Arson, flame, bomb, explosion, I was now thinking, could approach this Woman Problem.

What is the Woman Problem? Well, “what is Woman (now)?” This is the secret question that anchors most feminist discourse. The direction of discourse is partially dependent on the way that question is (un)answered, and that (un)answer is dependent on the gender context of the time. Of course, the gender context is dependent on the Woman of the time. But what is Woman? Is this question all together formed and answered by the same things? A response to an observation and also a concept pulled from abstraction? To both identify and (un)answer this century’s edition of the Woman Problem, we must first scope out the current gender context.

“Gender is Over (if you want it)” reads a t-shirt being sold online by an LGBTQ+ non profit organization. This reference to John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “War is Over (if you want it)” is just as meaningless and shallow as it was during its first run. The aim here is not to put the non-profit under fire, but there is an irony that the slogan is followed by a qualifier, stating that they support and validate the expression of all gender identities. The sentiment of this slogan permeates the progressive gender attitude. This is where we sit: a seemingly paradoxical moment in time, where gender is at once superfluous and yet, still, even in its antithesis, in non-gender, adopts a similar schema that even the most convicted of anti-gender movements tend to reference. That is, non-gender, or at least the challenging of it, is still largely occupying the same categorical space as gender. Gender is Over – performatively, as a brand, in fleeting moments, sometimes sold to us, as a way to drown out the disquiet. Gender is Over – when it is convenient, when things get complicated. Gender is Over — even though the proliferation of gender identities, weaponized as

subversion, still takes the form of the regime that *is* gender, and allows the forces of Power to colonize and medicalize individual ambiguity as a symptom.

Gender is very much *not* over, even if the “gender” in question is being recontextualized. And why should it be? Why should the act of self-fashioning be taken lightly? One cannot swat away the relevance of historic and present consequences of gender, of a type of identity, by simply declaring its irrelevance, nor does it vanish by replacing it with a new signifier. Let me be clear: gender *should* be recontextualized, reconceptualized, but let us not fool ourselves with the idea that, since gender is socially constructed, it has no value, no reality, that it can be nullified by wishful thinking. If we are to truly deconstruct gender, we must remain curious and critical of its dissemblance, so as not to allow it to occupy the same hegemonic status as the assemblance of it. We mustn’t be *flexible* in the face of “undoing identity” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 72). We can’t simply negate gender – we risk ourselves being reconstructed “within a pure and simple logic of imitation and performance” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 72). If gender really was over, people wouldn’t be looking for a way out; the path would already be clear.

III

Indeed, people *are* looking for a way out, and it is precisely in these escape routes, some already dug out, some still being dug, that we find the Woman Problem, that Woman realizes her problem, that Woman realizes she is her problem?

Gender-Escapee Paul Preciado recounts his route through the gender rubble and into exaltation in his remarkable piece *Can the Monster Speak?*. Preciado illustrates in vivid detail the desire to find a “way out” of binary constraints and of the “mockery of sexual difference” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 14). “Assigned female at birth” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 12)¹, Preciado found

¹ The quotations here are not meant to signal a distrust or issue with his concept. Rather, because of the intimate nature of this work, I believe it is extremely important to use Preciado’s own terminology when describing his gender identity.

himself fundamentally misaligned with the expectations of women under the “heteropatriarchal binary circus” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 14). The choices offered under (the facade of) womanhood, “the victim” or “the belle”, were, understandably, inconceivable as an existence worth living for Preciado (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 14). Propelled by this desperation to escape, and an intrinsic urge to subvert, Preciado “decided to stop being a woman” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 14), beginning his transition from living as a “supposedly emancipated woman” to “identifying as transexual” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 15). What follows is Preciado’s account of a calculated fashioning of freedom, a complete revolution of the conception of self, the “awakening of another genealogy”, a “molecular uprising”, “a techno-shamanistic process” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 20). This is not a case of mimesis – “A trans person is not imitating anything, just as a crocodile is not imitating a floating tree trunk...to be trans is to cease to be a crocodile and connect with one’s vegetal future, to understand that the rainbow can become a skin” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 22). The reception of the body, the conception of the body, radically reanimated and reconstructed; a deliberate blowout to the political fuse-box.

My summary does no justice; it is not my story to tell. Its presence is warranted in this essay because Preciado became a visionary of the self — of what could be, not merely of what was tolerable. Preciado created in himself a new symbolic. It did not occur idly: armed, “with language and hormones” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 22), with “laws” (PRECIADO, 2022, p. 19) written by himself, for himself to follow so as not slip back into the immediate throes of gender, (the threat of which still lurks — he does not deny this), Paul Preciado carved a way out of the binary, and stepped into trans-ness. He both embraced and contributed to the blossoming of a new aesthetic, a new symbolic, a new network. This is an example of plasticity at work. This is perhaps a representation of the current gender context at its most potent, most excellent.

Our context is one which wants to demolish the binary. Our context would like to reconstitute language. Our context would like to emphasize the notion of choice in becoming who we are. Our context is plastic in theory, and often flexible in practice. The social impetus to self-

identity parades itself as a purely liberatory act, but often is reduced to a kind of self-branding, the selling-out of our own gender performance. The gender context in its most vigorous form is then lifted and homogenized by power regimes that pander to flexibility, by condensing the complexity of self-fashioning into a symptom, a mold, a form. However, “one is formed only by virtue of a resistance to form itself” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 71).

IV

Back at gender base camp, the Apocalypse is in full swing. I watch as cloisters of battered bodies congregate into pods. I note that several bodies bolt from their groups, beckoning others to follow, to join a growing clump to my left. Some dissipate on their own into the swallow of the forest. Others seem to have acclimated to the environment. Some groups have members that share physical features, others do not. In the corner of my eye, I glimpse Woman, full of holes, glitching in and out of space, of relevancy like a hologram. I quickly avert my eyes back to the revolution at hand. A voice, *This woman thing*, it says, *it was something given to you, assigned to you*. Therefore, I have the right to revoke it. To choose otherwise, to lay claim to “woman”, is saying, what then? Have I developed a sad case of Stockholm Syndrome? Am I a proprietor of oppressive socio-cultural norms? What is this unwavering loyalty to a, frankly, contingent symbolic? Am I clinging onto something, someone, who is obsolete?

If the current shape of liberation takes place in the disavowal of the gender binary, how is Woman, born and bred through that binary, able to rise to the political occasion? Or is she wounded beyond repair? Are we to take her out back and shoot her in the head, all sick-dog-like? What is the benefit of clinging to an identity, almost anachronistic in its function? Can Woman still be a radical position? Has Woman been politically drained beyond use? Or maybe, has Woman been drained beyond political use? Or has the use of Woman as political drained her? This is the Woman Problem bred from the gender context. Or at least from mine.

I am one of the gender refugees who hasn't quite made it past the binary, though I haven't made a nest in it, either. I want to be a woman, I want something I do not have, though I am told I already have it, that I "am" one. I am also told that I "am not" anything and that there is nothing to have. I am also told that Woman is "not", there is nothing to "be". How could I want this? How could anyone? What does it offer me? Familiarity? Certainly not – my best reference to myself as a woman is how "bad" I think I am at being one, *whatever the hell any of that means*.

Some of the most brilliant feminist philosophers have called for an intentional rescind of Woman. For Monique Wittig, to be a lesbian is to resist hetero-patriarchal oppression, a decisive political move. Judith Butler describes Wittig's way "out" of gender as a "leave-taking of heterosexuality" (BUTLER, 2006, p. 162). It is by reconstituting language according to a new subject, the lesbian — famously, for Wittig, not a woman. But would this move not be the subversion of individual desires, namely, heterosexual ones? "*Those old things? They're compulsory,*" it is said. But then, does lesbianism, or homosexuality, not achieve the same compulsory status as heterosexuality? Is one's individual desire not still co-opted by a structure of power, even if that power is intended to replace a former power? And additionally, does the lesbian's existence as resistance not then become anchored in that which it aims to destroy?

I do not want to ascend to a power that mirrors the same hegemonic regime that it claims to subvert, a power that has simply been re-coded in non-threatening liberatory language and false promises. I do not want to be told that Gender is Over and then be offered yet another bipartisan gender party: binary or non-binary. I do not want to be flexible. I *want* to commit to creating the freedom that Paul Preciado describes but for myself. I *want* to take responsibility for my plasticity, and to "follow its path to think new modalities of forming the self... beyond the overly simplistic alternative between rigidity and flexibility", as Catherine Malabou urges (MALABOU, 2008, p. 14). I *want* to suggest that the ambiguity of Woman and her penchant for non-existence may be an intimation of her plastique construction, and that maybe one just needs to light the fuse?

Woman's existence keeps the heterosexual, phallogocentric matrix in order; it is a power

source that convention sucks from to keep itself running. At the same time, her ambiguity, the inability to quantify or qualify her, her constant threat of disappearance, requires convention to have an account of something Other. With the breaking of the binary, she represents a sort of stepping stone into obscurity, the chasm between What Has Been and What Could Be. If, as Malabou states, the creation/explosion distinction in plasticity “proceeds from a more original contradiction: that between the maintenance of the system, ‘homeostasis’, and the ability to change the system, or ‘self generation’” is correct, then Woman is the very embodiment of this dialectic. She is this tension. In the binary world, she has always been coded as Other. Yet, in the non-binary world, she is now the Other to another Other. She signifies non-existence either way. Embedded in the construction of woman is her own-self effacement; laying claim to Woman in the current gender context is at once the confirmation of an existence that was meant to self-destruct, that is already, has always been *EXPLODING!*

This chasm, this tension is the site for plastic thinking to emerge, for Exploding Woman to situate herself, the fertile ground for her *resilience*. If Woman was constructed on the promise of her own demise, then it is precisely this condition that prompts the “[creation] of [her] own constancy, to self-generate [her] homeostasis” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 14). Exploding Woman transforms the traces, the problematic of the Exploding Woman she was before. The guarantee of her destruction is her very method of survival. The guarantee of her destruction is her way-out?

V

“The relation that an individual entertains with what, on the one hand, attaches [her] originally to [her]self, to his proper form, and with what, on the other hand, allows [her] to launch [her]self into the void of all identity, to abandon all rigid and fixed determination: is this not the best possible definition of plasticity?” (MALABOU, 2008, p. 80).

Perhaps plasticity warrants a re-engineering of Simone de Beauvoir’s infamous quote, “*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*”, or maybe plasticity was the silent precursor to its

formulation. Her becoming is her birth, and she is born and killed a thousand times over. It is like Catherine Malabou says: “Today everyone lives multiple lives, at the same time and successively.” (MALABOU, 2008, 71).

If Woman really is plastique, if she really does Explode, then by (any) tomorrow the very concept of Exploding Woman may have annihilated itself into oblivion. If this work can hold itself up for even a moment before its own collapse, then I will be content. I hope it is clear that it is the very legitimacy of a non-binary reality that urges reevaluation of the reality of Woman. My qualms lie only with complacency, and this applies to women, too. Language reveals hypocrisy that may have laid dormant in the writing process, and I have no doubt that I reinforce ideas I hate and under-represent ones that I don't. This is less of an apology, this time, and instead an emblem of the bedlam and sensitivity surrounding the formation of identity.

If we take plasticity seriously — and we probably should — then the “new responsibility” that Catherine Malabou hopes to instill is pertinent to everyone. Self-fashioning and self-identifying out of a societal imperative to demonstrate docility is excruciating and boring. Self-fashioning and self-identifying because of the burgeoning onset of rupture, of flux, of conflict, explosion, is excruciating, necessary, and perhaps conducive to a new freedom.

VI

The Flexible Woman drags around a third leg. It was sewn onto her with the anticipation of changing her form, but it is just a necrotic leg. It was never hers. The Plastic Woman sprouts three, four, five, and counting, legs. She grows extra eyes, too. Extra ears, extra teeth (Aristotle rolls in his grave), extra lips. She even sprouts extra women. The Plastique Woman is on fire. She is free.

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