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## Catherine Malabou's Hegel: One or Several Plasticities?

**Abstract** *Through an original and extraordinarily fruitful reading of the Hegelian conception of negativity, Catherine Malabou developed the concept of plasticity which she keeps working on as one of her cardinal concepts even to this day. Engaging in the problematic of unity in Hegel, the paper takes on the task of trying to answer the question whether plasticity is one or are there several plasticities. The author argues that one must be careful not to reduce the inherent multiple of plasticity to a single plasticity which becomes plasticity par excellence: the plasticity of plastic explosion, of an abrupt and absolute break, to be distinguished from a creative or productive plasticity of habit. Malabou claimed that Hegel was – contrary to what Deleuz read in him – a philosopher of conceptual multitude as a multitude which cannot be reduced to only one image, the image of unity. If this is true, then the concept of plasticity itself with which she grasped the essence of Hegel's dialectics, should be understood at least as a “unity in conflict”, if not as an inorganic, inhomogeneous, composed unity – and perhaps even as a unity of the pack.*

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**Keywords:** *plasticity, negativity, explosion, sculpture, kenosis*

One or several plasticities? That is the question that this essay will put to Catherine Malabou, miming the well-known one that she asked Gilles Deleuze at the beginning of “Who’s Afraid of Hegelian Wolves?” (Malabou 1997: 114). Her question begins a critical analysis of Deleuze’s treatment of Hegel, an analysis that seeks to show that the ultimate aim of Deleuze’s reading is to reduce the multiplicity of Hegelian thought to a simplified logical unity. She thus aims to demonstrate that Hegel was to Deleuze what the white whale was to the captain Ahab from the Melville’s novel, the whale that had to be hunted without respite in order for his own theory to function at all. The structure of the question I am asking here is redoubled; when Malabou put her question to Deleuze, she herself mimed the well-known question Deleuze and Guattari put to Freud in the first chapter of their *A Thousand Plateaus*. That book began with the question of one or several wolves; Deleuze and Guattari were very critical of what they saw in Freud’s analysis of the Wolfman as a tendency in psychoanalysis to reduce

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the infinite multiplicity of unconscious affects to the logical unity of a signifier that always ends up having the traits of the father (Deleuze, Guattari 1980: 40–41). Just as Freud, in their view, reduced the pack of wolves, step by step, to only one wolf-father, so did Deleuze, in Malabou's opinion, reduce the Hegelian multiplicity. She writes:

Hegel never has a chance to get away. Let us imagine for a moment that a student confides in Deleuze, saying that in reading Hegel she sees, if not wolves, at least a pack of something. Let us suppose that this student adds that she considers the Hegelian system not to be like a tree, like a uncentred thinking, but a process of distribution of singularities, the regulated explosion of an energy free of all fixity, an economy of *fluidity* of the real and of thinking; that she is particularly interested in Hegel's preoccupation with "fluidifying solidified thinking", with dispossessing consciousness of its mastery. Would not Deleuze reply that it is impossible to uncover something like a pack or band within the dialectic? "What is it I see, then?" the student would ask. "You see a camel, an ox, an ass. Several animals, perhaps, but a single figure: that, precisely, of the unity that lays claim to its burden, its saddlebags, its harness, and moos, bleats, and brays." (Malabou 1997: 117)

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The student does not read Hegel according to a figure of unity, but rather through the lens of "regulated explosion of an energy free of all fixity", as "an economy of *fluidity* of the real and of thinking". These words, coming from the lips of a hypothetical student of Deleuze, in fact express Malabou's own reading of Hegel as she developed it in her famous work *The Future of Hegel* (Malabou 1996). The phrase "explosion" works there in an even less metaphorical context, that of plastic explosive, which is her name for a particular problem in the development of the dialectic. This is because the concept with which she grasped the Hegelian dialectic, developed in close proximity to some concepts of Deleuzian philosophy, she calls plasticity. And this is why I ask: One or several plasticities?

When I ask whether plasticity is one and one alone, or are there perhaps several plasticities, I implicitly propose that the multiplicity, specific to the concept of plasticity as she herself developed and defended it, should not be reduced to only one plasticity, plasticity of all plasticities, plasticity *par excellence*: namely, the plasticity of explosion, of an abrupt and sudden break, of a pure and immediate detachment. If Hegel, contrary to the Deleuzian reading, was a philosopher of conceptual multiplicity, then perhaps also the concept of plasticity with which Malabou grasped the essence of his dialectics should be conceptualized at least as a conflictual unity, if not as an inorganic, inhomogeneous, composed unity – as a unity of the pack.

The task of this paper is therefore to engage the concept of plasticity in Malabou's work and to understand why explosive plasticity became the plasticity *par excellence*. But while the task may be simple, the answer cannot be, by the very nature of things. It seems that it revolves around the relationship between the One and the multiple and therefore addresses one of the most important questions of Hegelian philosophy: How to think oneness? While the critics of Hegelian dialectics in the twentieth century – Deleuze, Althusser and his school, and before them also Heidegger – saw in it the ultimate teleological structure of unification into an all-encompassing unity, in a closed totality, a series of contemporary Hegelians defended the position that the whole in question is not a perfect, seamless whole, that the Hegelian one is a split one, and that the Hegelian End should not be thought without the process that brought it about.<sup>1</sup> We can consider Malabou's concept of plasticity precisely as an attempt to think a oneness that is not in itself "one". This is what is at stake in the quoted passage: the explosion and the process of fluidification are precisely two ways to think original unity as something that is in itself a figure of non-homogeneity, something non-unitary. But let me spell out in advance the answer that is implicit in my question: I think that plasticity in Malabou is ultimately in danger of being overly "unified", that it does not exhibit enough excess. In my reading, Hegelian thought is fundamentally characterized by a tension or a contradiction between the goal and the getting there, between the whole and what we could call the "leaking out". What is at stake for Hegel is not pure becoming, but rather the paradoxical in-between of being and becoming; it is not pure fluid, but rather the in-between of a monolith and a pure fluid. At the level of an image, of visualization, plastic explosive is a very good illustration of the unity of the substance and its fluidification. In our mind, we can picture hard stone change into a cloud of dust in just a few moments, as for instance when an "eternal" rock on the hillside is blown to pieces. But if we follow Malabou's argument, such an image is actually misleading. What is at stake with her concept of explosive plasticity is not the paradoxical unity of unity and a split, of difference and identity,

1 One must underscore the continuous efforts of Slavoj Žižek to support these points, mostly by linking the Hegelian totality to the Lacanian concept of non-All: "The conclusion to be drawn is that, for the very same reason, the Hegelian 'totality' is also 'non-All'" (Žižek, 2012: 76–77). See also: "What Hegel rejects is precisely such a totalization—from-the-future: the only totality accessible to us is the flawed totality of the present, and the task of Thought is to 'recognize the Heart in the Cross of the present,' to grasp how *the Totality of the Present is complete in its very incompleteness*, how this Totality is sustained by those very features which appear as its obstacles or fatal flaws" (Žižek 2012: 260).

but rather the question of how to think the point of an absolute break, the point of no return – perhaps even of no return to dialectics itself!<sup>2</sup> But these considerations are too hasty and pre-emptive.

### Plasticity and the future of Hegel

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Speaking in broad terms, what Malabou thinks of as plasticity in Hegel is what we could call *negativity* (in the specific Hegelian meaning of the term). While Hegel's theological critics claimed, for instance, that his idea of negativity within God inscribes an external flaw or imperfection or even a "hunger for being" into this supreme being (Malabou 1996, 98),

2 Malabou insists on this point when defending Hegel from Heidegger's criticism, arguing that absolute knowledge does not simply take the process back to its beginning, but rather transforms it radically. See: Malabou 1996: 144ff.

Malabou defended Hegel, claiming that the negativity within God should not be considered as his passivity, but rather as the plasticity of God, that is to say, as the very productive capacity of God.

[F]or Hegel, the divine negativity, conceived in its most radical form, does not manifest the lack or the passivity, but rather the *plasticity* of God (Malabou 1996: 104).

In a very similar move, Hegel's critics claimed that his explanation of the unmovable mover and of the working of the mind in Aristotle either in-scribes passivity into a dimension of pure activity, or is an anachronistic demand by the concepts of German Idealism on Aristotle's text. Here again, Malabou defended Hegel by insisting that what Hegel argues for is not to be understood as passivity, but rather as something in between passivity and activity, as plasticity (Malabou 1996: 53–54). And again, we must add, plasticity functions as the proper concept of productivity in Hegel.

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This allows us to make a general statement that negativity for Hegel does not involve imperfection or passivity, but plasticity. But what exactly does this mean? The term “plasticity” was first introduced by Malabou in its usual context as the “plastic arts” where it implies a duality, since it can refer to that which in the process of molding the clay, for instance, *receives* form, as well as to that which *gives* form. Already in this widely used meaning, a paradoxical unity of the active and the passive is expressed in the term. Simultaneous to the immediate context of the arts of sculpturing, painting and architecture, the term plasticity can refer to the process of formation in education and culture. Malabou exposed and discussed a vast multiplicity of plasticities, ranging from the plastic arts to plastic upbringing, to synthetic materials and to plastic explosive. She concludes that the term plasticity is itself plastic:

The plasticity of the word itself draws it to extremes, both to those concrete shapes in which form is crystallized (sculpture) and to the annihilation of all form (the bomb). (Malabou 1996: 9)

This formulation already exposes the primary contestation between two extremes in the multiple uses of plasticity. The plasticity of sculpture is something quite different from the plasticity of plastic explosive. While the former is the paradoxical interplay of giving and receiving form, the latter is an abrupt, “explosive”, sudden and absolute transformation, a radical break with all form. For Malabou, plasticity is dialectical:

The process of plasticity is dialectical because the operations which constitute it, the seizure of form and the annihilation of all form, emergence and explosion, are contradictory. (Malabou 1996: 12)

Let me formulate a possible – yet in the ultimate instance, as I hope to demonstrate, unjustified – objection to Malabou's exposition. It may seem that plastic explosive is only linked to the problematic of plasticity by pure coincidence, at least insofar as we follow the actual use of the term. In the French expression "*plastic*" which denotes plastic explosive and "*plasticage*" which denotes an explosion of the plastic explosive, the difference between an explosive and something plastic is obscured. One should note, however, that both of these terms originate from the English expression "plastic explosive". And surely, what is plastic about plastic explosive is some plastic material that can be molded, just like Plasticine or dough. This substance is added to the explosive precisely because of its plasticity. To make it quite clear: plastic explosive is a mixture of *two* substances, the explosive and the plasticizer. But even if we consider plastic explosive as *one* substance, we should still distinguish its characteristic of being plastic from its characteristic of being explosive. Not everything that is plastic explodes, just as not everything that is explosive is plastic (moldable, fluid). One could therefore accuse Malabou of attributing the capacity of being explosive to plasticity itself, whereas in fact there is only a coincidental link between the two. It is like drawing the false conclusion that human beings are something Socratic simply because Socrates is a human being. What if we had on our hands, instead of the plastic explosive, an ordinary plastic duck? Would this indicate that plasticity is something that essentially quacks? Of course not. And so we will have to admit that plastic explosive does not indicate that the possibility of an explosion, "the capacity to annihilate all form", is something that essentially determines plasticity. *And yet, Malabou claims precisely this.* It seems that she introduced in her series of examples of plasticity, which consistently referred to something moldable, to the interplay of giving and receiving form – sculpture, silicone implants, education – an alien element (the explosive). And as if this was not enough, she declared this alien element plastic *par excellence*, the ultimate plasticity. As if that which stands out of the series because of its oddity suddenly stood out because of its paradigmatic character.

By the end of this inquiry, the production of a new type of discursivity will be revealed as the plastic operation *par excellence*, as powerful as the force of dynamite, exploding whole centuries of discourse. (Malabou 1996: 134)

In *The Future of Hegel*, this possible reproach remains without an explicit answer. To make it even worse, while Malabou apparently considers the crystallized sculpture and the fluidifying explosion in an opposition

that defines dialectical procedure, it has to be pointed out that the sculpture can function as a dialectical example even without any reference to explosion. With sculpture, there is the unity of giving and receiving form, there is Hegel's idea of sculpture as a paradoxical unity of universality and particularity, and there is more. The sculptor Auguste Rodin famously insisted that the documentary photographs of a horse in gallop, showing that at least one of the legs is always touching the ground, actually distort the reality of movement, because they show movement resembling "the servants of the Sleeping Beauty, who were all suddenly struck motionless in the midst of their occupations" (Rodin 1911: 32). This is why he favored the traditional (but factually inaccurate) depiction of a horse in gallop, with all four legs in the air; the plastic artist thus created a synthesis of several motions of the body in one painting or sculpture. For Rodin, a sculpture is apparently never merely a "crystallized form", but a paradoxical synthesis that captures movement in a seemingly static, unmovable, unchangeable form.

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So why is the plasticity of explosion so important that it becomes the paradigmatic plasticity? The answer to this is much more direct in Malabou's essays on the ontology of accident (Malabou 2009). She writes quite frankly in the very first paragraphs that to speak about destruction or annihilation as something that pertains to plasticity is certainly unusual. Explosion, rupture, clear cut, a complete metamorphosis without transition and without mediation – these are the typical images of what she calls "destructive plasticity", a plasticity that, in her own words, has never received a name in psychoanalysis, neurology, in the arts, in the sciences, in medicine, in education or indeed in any other field:

As I said, we usually do not talk about plasticity in this case any more. The explosive, destructive and disorganizing power that is perhaps virtually present in all of us, susceptible to manifesting itself, materializing or actualizing itself at any moment, has never received a name in any domain whatsoever. (Malabou 2009: 12)

And yet Malabou not only insists on the point that the capacity to explode at any moment is a mode of plasticity, but also on the much stronger point that destructive plasticity is the plasticity *par excellence*. The contradiction between the plasticity of the sculpture and plasticity of explosion is made even more explicit and precise. She declares that what we usually understand as plasticity is a creative or affirmative plasticity and separates it from negative plasticity. On the one hand, there is the "normal", creative, positive plasticity of "equilibrium", of history and identity; on the other hand, which is what she is interested in, there is sudden

destruction, annihilation, the rupture of continuity. She lists and examines the following examples of the negative plasticity: Alzheimer's disease, brain-damage, severe trauma, and aging. She found one of the most effective examples of the sudden and absolute metamorphosis in the history of literature in the first line of Kafka's famous *Metamorphosis*: "When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin" (Kafka 1915: 29).<sup>3</sup>

This seems to indicate that we can productively talk about plasticity as something explosive only in the extreme case where the explosive nature of plasticity is understood as the essence of plasticity in general. This takes us back to our question: Why is destructive plasticity paradigmatic? Why can it function as the key to the concept of plasticity as such – and therefore also to productive plasticity?

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### **Man, God, Philosopher**

Malabou determines Hegel's own use of the term plasticity in three related areas, all of which exploit the common meaning of the capacity to both give and receive form (Malabou 1996: 9–13). The first area is from *Aesthetics* where Hegel discusses the art of sculpture – for him, plasticity is best expressed there (Hegel 1970, vol. 14: 355). The second use immediately follows from the first one: what Hegel calls substantial or exemplary individuals of the ancient Greek world, – Pericles, Sophocles, Socrates –, are literally to be thought as *statues*. This is because their substance is not rigid and unmovable: these individuals have in some sense formed, molded themselves; they are a self-molding substance (Hegel 1970, vol. 14: 374). But the most important for Malabou is the area she calls philosophical plasticity. This is revealed in Hegel's position from the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that only philosophical statements are truly plastic (Hegel 1970, vol. 3: 60). For Hegel, a philosophical phrase never simply *states* its truth, but always already implies a demand to *produce* that truth. I believe that these outlines in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* constitute the fundamental position that was later adopted by Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics. But we could also distinguish this character of truth in a Hegelian philosophical proposition, in the manner of J. L. Austin, as its performativity, its capacity to distinguish itself from true statements, like the one that one expects

3 Malabou adds, though, that insofar as Gregor remembers his former life and regrets losing it, his case does not really fit well with the point she is developing, one about an absolute transformation without any continuity (Malabou 2009: 24).



as the answer to the question "When was Caesar born?"<sup>4</sup> We could say that for Hegel, the truth must be performed – and this is precisely what is at stake in plasticity as the interplay of giving and receiving form.

Hegel's own use of the term plasticity is therefore limited to what Malabou calls productive or creative plasticity. What she calls destructive plasticity is simply dialectics for Hegel, or negation. Malabou lists and examines three chief conceptualizations of plasticity that can be applied to the corpus of Hegel's work. They are discussed under the figures of Man, God, and Philosopher. She maintains that there is no hierarchy between these three plasticities, but rather radical historical ruptures that demarcate the epochs of spirit, whereby Man refers to Antiquity, God to Christianity, and Philosopher to the Future of Hegel.

The plasticity of Man as the plasticity of the epoch of Greek Antiquity is more or less in accord with Hegel's own use of the term. She explains it with reference to the question of habit, especially in relation to Hegel's reading of Aristotle's *nous*. Habit is a typically Deleuzian theme and it is no surprise that she draws to an extent from the concept of virtuality (Malabou 1996: 45) as a specific kind of potentiality, as a potentiality that does not actualize itself but rather functions and produces effects precisely as a potentiality (Deleuze, 1968: 134–139). In the discussion on Aristotle's *entelechy*, she describes the special position of an in between potential and the actual as a "reserve of the future" (Malabou 1996: 50). As neither reserve of the future nor virtuality imply anything like a radical discontinuity or annihilation of all form, the domain of habit apparently falls completely in the realm of "creative" plasticity.

The concept of plasticity related to the epoch of Man is best expressed in sculpture, insofar as it reveals subjectivity as a plastic, self-molding substance. But in the epoch of God, as Malabou explains it, there is a shift in the relationship between substance and subject. The central concept of the epoch becomes the concept of *kenosis*, but not only in its traditional meaning of the self-humiliation and the self-emptying of God, but also and particularly in the meaning of the death of God. To develop this radical understanding of *kenosis*, Hegel evoked protestant hymns that described the death of Christ on the cross as the death of God. He explained this religious feeling as not only the death of Christ as a man, but precisely as the death of the Divine itself – so that the death of Christ implies the death of God the Father himself. For Hegel, one could claim,

4 This is Hegel's own example from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see: Hegel 1970, vol. 3: §40.

kenosis is always already a kenosis of kenosis. In its radical meaning, expressed by the Crucifixion, kenosis is the emptying of the emptying itself, it is the death of death itself. This is why, for Hegel, the metaphysical foundation of the Christian Easter mystery is a negation of negation. The idea of Divine Resurrection is itself only possible on the grounds of a radical understanding of kenosis as the Death of God. Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection coincide in the Hegelian concept of kenosis as an event that is not merely an external occurrence with regard to God, but is rather an internal event within God: God adopts contingent, particular being and through such self-emptying saves himself from remaining a purely abstract God. We could say that it is this internal externality of God is what Malabou calls his plasticity.

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But this radical concept of kenosis explains only one side of the plasticity of God. It corresponds to the concept of subjectivity that was developed by German Idealists. Malabou's key reference to this "inverse side" of kenosis is Hegel's text *Faith and Knowledge* where Hegel points out a specific congruity between God and the subject in the Modern Age.<sup>5</sup> Just as the religion of the Modern Age is marked by the feeling of the death of God, so the (Kantian) subject of the Modern Age as the subject of knowledge is forced to admit that it is incapable of autonomous foundation, that it requires an external foundation – such as for instance in faith (*Glauben*), as Jacobi eagerly supplied. Just as we can speak of God's self-alienation in the Incarnation, we can also speak about a specific emptiness at the foundation of Modern-Age subjectivity: the void, opaqueness, and indeterminateness of its foundation. This is why Malabou underlines the connection between kenosis on the one hand and the aspiration of reason in the Modern-Age to limit itself by an unreachable Beyond (Malabou 1996: 104; 111). Moreover, her concept of plasticity in the epoch of God is precisely a co-implication of the negativity of God and the negativity of subjectivity in the Modern-Age, a correspondence between the kenosis of God and the kenosis of the subject.

While the plasticity of habit implied what we could call a *circulation* of giving and receiving form, the plasticity of kenosis cannot be described in such terms. This is because the concept of time in the epoch of Modernity is different from the concept of time in the epoch of Greek Antiquity. What is at stake is no longer a cyclical or repetitive temporality of habit, but a linear temporality of Incarnation as a unique, singular

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5 Published in: Hegel 1970, vol. 2.

event that opens up the space of Meaning. Nevertheless, Malabou indicates that the concept of plasticity in this epoch is still to be considered as an interplay of giving and receiving form (and therefore in accord with the usual understanding of the word plastic). She points out that the negativity within God, his self-alienation in the suffering (*Entäußerung*, as Luther puts it) does not imply a passivity of God; since God in Hegel must be capable of producing himself, the negativity in him is in fact the very condition of spontaneity and activity. This play of negation and the negation of negation is what allows us to use the term plasticity in the case of kenosis, even though this process is neither reversible nor repeatable.

It is only when Malabou goes on to explain the Hegelian concept of absolute knowledge as the third and final epoch of plasticity that this idea fully addresses and answers the question of the future of Hegel. If in the epoch of sculpture plasticity was considered from the perspective of the “becoming essential of the accident” (since a sculpture expresses the universality of an individual), and if in the epoch of kenosis plasticity was considered from the perspective of the “becoming accidental of the essence” (since Incarnation is a self-alienation of God in something accidental), then it is the epoch of absolute knowledge that reveals the perspective which we could call the perspective of the future. Malabou writes:

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The process of substance's self-determination leans from side to side. Of necessity, one of its slopes will become larger than the other: either the “becoming essential of the accident” in the Greek moment of subjectivity, or the “becoming accidental of essence” in the modern moment. (Malabou 1996: 188)

It is the concept of absolute knowledge that reveals plasticity *par excellence*. It is only the plasticity of absolute knowledge that reveals the *explosiveness* of plasticity which was what was at stake from the beginning. And it is precisely here that the concept of plasticity becomes the very explosive force that disintegrates the historically anterior plasticities – those of the sculpture and kenosis – and makes them but moments in one Plasticity, which is the plasticity of plastic explosive.

The most important novelty of absolute knowledge in the development in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is its absoluteness. Malabou explained it with reference to Hegel's infamous concept of sublation (*Aufhebung*), a process that both eliminates and preserves the elements in a contradiction. As Malabou explains, absolute knowledge is the point where the entire historical-logical process of sublations is itself sublated: eliminated and transformed (Malabou 1996: 145). The most important point that

Malabou maintains is this: if we interpret absolute knowledge to be simply a point at which the dialectical process is referred back to its beginning, than that point cannot be called the absolute, but only a relative point. Now, it is clear that in Hegel, a return to beginning is never a complete return to the starting point. A circulation is therefore a misrepresentation of the dialectical process, even though the metaphor of the circle was used by Hegel himself. In a dialectical "circle", what circulates is transformed and so the result is never the same as the beginning. But for Malabou, this idea of the structure of dialectics is still problematic, insofar as it never submits dialectics itself to this dialectical process! She insists that the series of sublations must itself be sublated, absolutely sublated. Dialectics must operate on itself and produce something new from itself in this Grand Finale. The point of absolute knowledge is therefore a point in which dialectics itself is transformed:

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Far from enforcing a violent stoppage of the dialectical progress, the advent of Absolute Knowledge will imply instead the exact opposite: its metamorphosis. Dialectical sublation will become absolute sublation – its own absolution. (Malabou 1996: 155)

This, and only this, brings about plasticity *par excellence*: it is no longer a plastic substance nor a plastic subjectivity, it is the plasticity of plasticity itself. The plastic explosive, evoking a radical destruction of form, is plastic in the emphatic meaning of the term precisely because it implies a radical and absolute transformation, a transformation of the circularity of transformation, a transformation of the interplay of giving and receiving form and a formation of something completely new and unexpected. Moreover, the explosive formation is the incarnation of the idea of the "aleatoric" substance and is the foundation of the concept of "explosive subjectivity" which, for Malabou, is what is at stake in her reading of Hegel (Malabou 1996: 162; 187). Explosive plasticity is therefore the foundation of her concept of an explosive subject, a subject marked by a permanent threat of accidental and complete transformation – just as an Alzheimer's patient will one morning wake up from his or her dreams transformed into someone else, without any connection to his or her previous identity.

Malabou's concept of plasticity, as it is developed in *The Future of Hegel*, can be demonstrated in a table (see below). Why such systematization? Firstly, because I think it really does demonstrate the three epochs of her concept of plasticity in a concise and fairly reliable manner. But more importantly, because I wish to stress the systemic character that permeates her concept of plasticity. She writes explicitly that the inter-relations

between the epochs do not imply a hierarchical progress, but rather a radical break. But even a non-hierarchical system implies a systemic unity; and for Malabou, systemic unity is the unity of paradigmatic plasticity, of plasticity *par excellence*: the plastic explosive. But does not the strong systemic unity, centered around one concept, expose Hegel to the objection raised by Gilles Deleuze (and many others), the objection that Hegelian dialectics is in principle a reduction to one – that is, to the very objection that she refuted so eloquently in her paper on Hegelian wolves, the paper on the irreducible multiplicity of Hegelian concept?

Table: System of Plasticity

Name	Epoch	Field	Image	Explication	Temporality
Man	Greeks	Art	Sculpture	Habit	Circular Time
God	Modernity	Religion	Incarnation	Kenosis	Linear Time
Philosopher	The Future of Hegel	Philosophy	Explosion	Absolute Knowledge	Accident (Punctual Time)

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### Plasticity and Plasticities

We can only agree with and must underline Malabou's idea of the punctual character of absolute knowledge. It is not knowledge with a specific content, but rather a turning point that renders knowledge absolute, without increasing it or decreasing it in any way. One may suggest that the difference between Deleuze as a philosopher of affirmation and Hegel as a philosopher of negation can be recognized precisely as the difference between an infinite and unstoppable production of positive difference on the one hand and the negative concepts of "absolute beginning" and "absolute ending" on the other. But this opposition would not do justice to Hegelian dialectics. Because what is at stake for Hegel is precisely how to think both the process *and* its radical ending. We may describe absolute knowledge precisely as an attempt to think this pair in unity: a unity of a clean, abrupt cut and the process that led to it.

In light of these considerations, let us examine Malabou's idea of the "explosiveness" of absolute knowledge, of the point where dialectics finally submits itself to itself and irreversibly transforms itself. The question is this: can Hegel's dialectic really be thought as something which is *not* already involved in that object of which it itself is dialectics? I believe the only possible answer to this is an emphatic no. And yet, it seems that Malabou is hinting precisely in this direction by separating *relative sublation* from an

*absolute sublation*, where it is only the latter that is capable of sublating itself. But the working and movement of Hegelian dialectics is always itself included in what it works on and what it moves. It can never be reduced to a pure method, to an external procedure that will supposedly bring us closer to the truth, for it always inhabits the gap between truth and method.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Hegelian dialectic is a production of truth that it is supposedly only uncovering. Or, from the perspective of truth: the truth is never a naked truth; it is never a pure result of the uncovering of truth, because the uncovering constitutes the truth. Truth is not naked; it is already clothed in its expressions; and moreover, it is nothing but this clothing. Does it not follow from this that the Hegelian dialectic is, in a way, an “absolute process”? That is to say, one can never progress in dialectics if one does not assume that the dialectic has already intervened in its object.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* one could even say that a step forward in dialectics is precisely the realization that the dialectic has already intervened in its object. In other words, a step forward is possible only as a realization that a step forward was always already made, albeit unconsciously or as an undesired, unforeseen side-effect. We can understand absolute knowledge itself exactly in this way: not as a foreseeable *telos* of an automatic mechanical process but as a true surprise and perhaps even as an act of chance that follows from a completely logical path.

But if Hegelian dialectics has always, by definition, already permeated its object, then the idea of Absolute Knowledge as the point where dialectics takes itself as its object does not differ from any other point and cannot be grasped as its final step. There is no such thing as a “relative sublation”, because every sublation is also a sublation of sublation itself and therefore an “absolute sublation”. If the movement of sublations remains beyond what it sublates, then this is indeed only a mechanical procedure, a prescribed method, and not true dialectics. But this also means that the concept of absolute knowledge, insofar as we explain it with the help of explosive plasticity, cannot count as a paradigmatic determination of Hegelian dialectics. The special case of Absolute Knowledge is not in what

6 I am, of course, hinting at Hans-Georg Gadamer’s famous work, where the principle thesis is that human sciences differ from natural sciences in that there cannot be a clear distinction from truth and method (Gadamer 1960).

7 This is why Althusser criticized Hegel with the famous separation of the real object from the object of knowledge: “Marx rejected the Hegelian confusion which identifies the real object with the object of knowledge, the real process with the knowledge process” (Althusser 1968: 40). Althusser’s criticism is justified to the extent that such a distinction is indeed impossible in Hegel.

Malabou calls “absolute sublation”, but rather in that it is a concept of the End, an Absolute End that is nevertheless a logical consequence of the process that brought to it.

Our understanding of Hegel can benefit significantly from the image and the concept of an explosion, insofar as it designates such a radical and abrupt ending, or the formal gesture of a punctuation mark. But what makes the plasticity of Absolute Knowledge different from other plasticities is *not* that it is an absolute case of plasticity, while others are only relative. Rather, it is the *abruptness* of the advent of Absolute Knowledge that makes it different from the *process* of dialectics as a process of transformation and self-transformation. The value of the concept of explosive plasticity lies perhaps precisely in its separation from the concept of productive plasticity, which is also irreducible to it.

To reject the idea of explosive plasticity as the plasticity *par excellence* it is therefore quite enough to bring to the fore the idea of plasticity that is not based on the logic of explosion. And this work was already done by Malabou, as pointed out before: to analyze the dialectical nature of a sculpture as plastic art we do not need to suppose the explosiveness of that sculpture. Hegel's own idea of the plastic individuals of the Greek Antiquity even excludes, rather than requires, a possibility of an abrupt, radical and aleatory change of their character, an ontology of accident, such as is perhaps required to analyze the cases of Alzheimer patients, the brain-damaged, and the aged. More importantly, even the plasticity of habit, such as was developed by Malabou, does not rest on the ontology of explosion. Perhaps it is even completely alien to it: the transformation at work in the domain of habit resembles much more the gradual progress of a river making its way through rock; and sudden and absolute transformation are precisely what breaks a habit, not what constitutes it. We can only agree that the plasticity of habit and the plasticity of explosion should be read together – but not because they compose a dialectical contradiction, sublated in one of its terms.

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Undoubtedly, the systemization of knowledge and the encyclopedic categorisation of being were practices dear to Hegel; but in contemporary thought, they are at the same time also its least inspiring practices. It is true that Hegel consistently pursued the idea that the logical concatenation of concepts coincides with the concatenation of epochs in history, an idea that bears the obvious traces of the aspirations of his time. But if we do not aim to compose a universal theory of history and logic in one strike, such an idea is at least unnecessary, if not counterproductive.

The idea that explosive plasticity is paradigmatic suggests that the plasticity of habit and the plasticity of Incarnation are fully explained by explosive plasticity, while the reverse is not true. Let me return to the context of the Deleuzian distinction between uncentred concepts and concepts as packs, and point out once more that Malabou defended Hegel as a philosopher of the pack. If plasticity is a pack of concepts, then the link that connects the plasticity of sculpture to the plasticity of kenosis and to the plasticity of the Absolute Knowledge cannot be explained by simple, schematic formulas like Art-Greeks, Religion-Germans, Philosophy-Hegel. To truly understand plasticity as a conceptual pack we must understand it as plastic also in the sense that the plasticity of sculpture is just as relevant today as it was for the Greeks, and that its spiritual context is not confined to the field of the theory of art. That is to say, that the works of plastic art and architecture address us today with the same immediacy that they have always addressed to human minds, and that they are not restricted to some field of Art that must first be mediated by Philosophy before it can intervene in the domains of religion, politics, every-day life or economy.

To conclude, we should absolutely embrace Malabou's concept of the plasticity of explosion and the ontology of the accident, demonstrated in her reading of Hegel's concept of absolute knowledge. But this plasticity should not be seen as plasticity *par excellence*, as the uncentered, ultimate plasticity. The unity that is expected in every Hegelian concept can also mean a unity of the pack, where plasticities move in unforeseeable ways and overtake one another without any logical-historical order. I hold that the true productiveness of Malabou's concept of plasticity for contemporary Hegelian thought lies precisely in the pack of what she calls productive and destructive plasticity, where one relates to the other but never reduces the other to its dialectical, sublatale counterpart.

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Gregor Moder

Hegel Katrin Malabu: Jedna ili više plastičnosti?

Rezime

Kroz originalno i izuzetno plodno čitanje Hegelove koncepcije negativnosti, Katrin Malabu je razvila pojam plastičnosti na kome uporno radi kao na jednom od svojih kardinalnih pojmova. Angažujući se na problematici jedinstva kod Hegela, tekst pokušava da odgovori na pitanje da li postoji jedna plastičnost ili postoji više plastičnosti. Autor tvrdi da se mora biti oprezan da se ne svede svojstvena višestrukost plastičnosti na jednu plastičnost koja postane plastičnost *par excellence*: plastičnost plastične eksplozije, nagle i apsolutne pauze je potrebno razlikovati od kreativne ili produktivne plastičnosti navike. Malabu tvrdi da je Hegel – suprotno od onoga što je Delez čitao u njemu – filozof konceptulnog mnoštva kao mnoštva koje se ne može svesti samo na jednu sliku, sliku jedinstva. Ako je to tačno, stoga je koncept same plastičnosti sa kojim je ona shvatila suštinu Hegelove dijalektike potrebno razumeti barem kao „jedinstvo u sukobu“, ako ne kao neorgansko, nehomogeno, sastavljeno jedinstvo – a možda čak i kao jedinstvo pakovanja.

**Ključne reči:** plastičnost, negacija, eksplozija, skulptura, kenosis