

Plasticity and Formlessness Between Malabou and Bataille¹

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This article brings Catherine Malabou's concept of *plasticité* into contact with Georges Bataille's *informe*. It thus explores the question of form at the intersections of Malabou's conception of the intrinsic plastic mutability and transformability of aesthetic forms and organic life-forms, and Bataille's insistence on the radical formlessness of the universe. At first glance, Malabou's theory of plastic form and Bataille's insistence on the formless may seem incompatible. Malabou's plasticity insists upon the creative potentialities of form and the impossibility of destroying or doing away with the question of form entirely; in fact, her concept of destructive plasticity ("plasticité destructrice") is precisely an exploration of how the destruction or explosion of form results in the creation of new forms.² Bataille's *informe*, by contrast, celebrates the undoing of, or going beyond, form. What's more, Malabou herself has suggested her concept of plasticity to be incompatible with broader philosophical accounts of formlessness.³ However, I would like to argue the opposite here: that both Malabou's plasticity and Bataille's *informe* intersect intimately, approaching form as something that is constantly mutating, constantly undoing itself, always on the verge of explosion, and that is as intrinsic to art and to aesthetics as it is to living organisms.

In articulating this intersection, this article seeks to demonstrate how a cross-fertilization of Malabou's plasticity and Bataille's *informe* can extend and invigorate scholarship on both Malabou and Bataille respectively. While Bataille's *informe* has been an influential concept in the field of art history and the plastic arts, Malabou's *plasticity* is increasingly receiving urgent critical attention from art historians, critics, and practitioners.⁴ Indeed, the origins of the concept in Malabou are associated with understandings of sculptural form, and initially on a reading of Hegel's *Aesthetics*.⁵ An encounter between Malabou's concept and the aesthetic reception of Bataille's *informe* in the plastic arts can further extend and contribute to theories of art in and through Malabou: theories that deal with aesthetic, sculptural forms on the brink of their dissolution and destruction; and for which aesthetic and organic forms—marble sculptures and human brains, for instance—are intimately linked.

First, I will explore the development of the concepts of plasticity and *informe* in Malabou and Bataille, exploring the former's seeming resistance to conceptualisations of formlessness. I will then consider the reception of Bataille's concept within the plastic arts, in particular as explored by Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in *Formless: A User's Guide* (1996). I will argue that this reception of "plastic Bataille," as I will refer to the

phenomenon, allows us to theorize a greater intimacy between Malabou's and Bataille's approaches to form and formlessness. Finally, I will conduct an analysis of Bataille's famously "formless" text *Histoire de l'œil* (1928), which has been aligned with Bataille's conceptual project of the *informe* again by thinkers like Krauss and Bois (*Formless* 154-55). Readers of *Histoire de l'œil*—most influentially, perhaps, Roland Barthes in "La Métaphore de l'œil" (1963)—have argued that the text is less interested in the activities and psychologies of its human protagonists as it is in the formal mutations and displacements of a central pool of recurring globular images: the eye, a saucer, testicles, the moon, a bullring, etc. I want to argue that the central mutations of these forms can be described as "plastic" in Malabou's sense.

Bringing together Malabou's and Bataille's plastic/formless approaches to the metamorphic potentialities of form enables a reading of Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil* that goes beyond the structural experimentation it is suggested to be in readings such as Barthes'. Instead, the text might be seen to explore forms of plasticity resonant with those at work in organic life as explored by Malabou. The bringing together of Malabou and Bataille further allows for a reading of Malabou's interdisciplinary philosophies of biological metamorphosis through Bataillean notions of excess, eroticism, and transgression.

As Malabou sets out in *Changer de différence*, exploring her own methodological approach to the discovery and conceptualization of plasticity, plasticity emerges through a mode of recovery, in relation to the verb "recouvrer," the multiple meanings of which she activates in her methodology: "guérir, se rétablir, retrouver un objet perdu ou un état normal, reprendre, récupérer" (*Changer* 81).⁶ Malabou's almost archaeological notions of (re)discovering lost objects and of restoration are precisely a methodology that I undertake here in my own recovery of plasticity in Bataille's exploration of form in "Informe" and *Histoire de l'œil*: a recovery that, like Malabou says she did with Hegel's plasticity (*Changer* 85), constitutes both a rediscovery and an invention, or an unearthing that enables plasticity to embark on its next set of transformations.

Malabou's Plasticity after Bataille's *informe*: Resisting Formlessness

Malabou's restless, ever-evolving and ever-expanding concept of plasticity emerges at the crossroads of philosophy, (neuro)biology, feminist and queer studies, technology studies, and beyond as a thinking of the innate and inescapable mutability and morphability of all forms, life-forms, bodies, and structures. For Malabou, the universe is plastic and thus never fixed or stable. However, Malabou's plasticity does not just mean general

mutability or general change; rather, Malabou's plasticity designates particular modalities and characteristics of formal transformation: that which is "plastic" is capable of both molding and being molded (imagine a lump of Play-Doh), but it is also resistant and able to retain certain forms and refuse infinite deformation. In *L'Avenir de Hegel* (1996), differentiating plasticity from the general sense of polymorphism, Malabou gives the example of marble in a sculpture which "une fois configuré, ne peut retrouver sa forme initiale" (21). With reference to the neuroplasticity of the human brain in *Que faire de notre cerveau?*, in a similar way, Malabou differentiates between plasticity and flexibility: "La flexibilité [. . .] n'est pas créatrice. Elle est reproductrice et normative" (146).

Malabou's materialist approach to plasticity retains an inextricable relationship with form which does not conceive of the possibility of the formless or formlessness. This point is perhaps most apparent in Malabou's work on neuroplasticity, neuropathologies and brain injuries in *Les Nouveaux Blessés* (2007) and *Ontologie de l'accident* (2009), for example. Here, Malabou argues that even the explosive element of plasticity—when plasticity becomes a "plasticité destructrice" and explodes—is still the work of form, leading to radically transformed forms rather than an outside of or beyond form. This is observed, for Malabou, in the case of people affected by diverse neuropathologies and brain injuries; in their radically transformed, post-traumatic states, they exhibit not an absence of identity or psychic life, but fundamentally transformed and transfigured identities and psyches.⁷ In *Ontologie de l'accident*, Malabou argues precisely that the formative potential of plastic creation—for instance in the plastic arts—is too often considered to be a purely positive thing, forgetting the destructive-creative force of plasticity:

En science, en médecine, en art, dans le domaine de l'éducation, l'usage que l'on fait du terme "plasticité" est toujours positif. Il désigne un équilibre entre la réception et la donation de forme. La plasticité est conçue comme une sorte de travail de sculpture naturel qui forme notre identité, laquelle se modèle avec l'expérience et fait de nous les sujets d'une histoire, d'une histoire singulière, reconnaissable, identifiable, avec ses événements, ses blancs, son futur. Il ne viendrait à l'idée de personne d'entendre sous la formule de "plasticité cérébrale" par exemple le travail négatif de la destruction La déformation des connexions neuronales, la rupture des liaisons cérébrales ne sont pas considérées en neurologie comme des cas de plasticité. (*Ontologie* 10-11)

And she adds: “Personne ne pense spontanément à un art plastique de la destruction. Pourtant, celle-ci aussi configure.” (*Ontologie* 11) For Malabou, then, even in the most terrifying of neural injuries, the destructive-destroyed neuronal form of the wounded brain does not amount to the absence of form, or something beyond form, but rather constitutes precisely a *form* of destruction. Destruction as a plastic art or artistic practice: “La destruction a ses ciseaux de sculpteur” (11). For Malabou, form, as plastic form, carries no threat of fixity or rigidity or control, but rather contains all the ecstatic, chaotic energy of destruction, and the capacity to create and express forms of this destruction: “Un art plastique très particulier est en jeu, qui ressemble de bien près à la pulsion de mort. Freud savait que la pulsion de mort créait des formes, ce qu’il appelait encore des ‘exemples.’ Simplement il ne parvenait pas, en dehors du sadisme ou du masochisme, à en donner des exemples ni à en citer des espèces. Comment en effet donner à la pulsion de mort sa *visibilité*?” (24) It is precisely this visibility, which Malabou wishes for this deathly, destructive plasticity, that I will argue arises in Bataille’s formless philosophy, and in particular in *Histoire de l’œil*.

And yet, Malabou has critiqued the tendency to reject or to attempt to transcend the question of form in philosophy.⁸ In *Ontologie de l’accident*, Malabou confronts Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Kafka’s metamorphosis, in which Deleuze resists the concept of form at all costs: “Pour Deleuze, ‘tant qu’il y a forme, il y a reterritorialization.’ C’est pourquoi le ‘devenir-animal’ n’est pas ‘devenir *un* animal’; le premier est un agencement, le second une forme, qui ne peut que figer le devenir” (23).⁹ For Malabou, there is no beyond of form, as she specifies further in *La Plasticité au soir de l’écriture*, critiquing the philosophical tendency to want to conceptualize the transcendence of form:

Or c’est avec cette conception de la forme comme quelque chose d’arriéré, quelque chose qui doit, au sens propre, demeurer en arrière, qu’il importe me semble-t-il de rompre. Il m’apparaît de plus en plus nettement en effet qu’il n’est pas possible de “défaire” la forme sans solliciter en même temps et précisément *le concours de la forme*, y compris le concours de sa puissance d’explosion. *Pas de dépassement de la forme qui ne suppose la plasticité de la forme et donc sa convertibilité.* (*La Plasticité* 88-89)

It is precisely this philosophical urge, contested by Malabou, to think of form as “arriéré” or to call for the transcendence or “dépassement” of form that might at first glance make Bataille’s concept of the formless appear incompatible with Malabou’s theorization of form as plastic.

And yet Malabou and Bataille are both thinkers of the instability of form: form's propensity for constant mutation rather than fixedness, for destruction as well as merely positive construction or formation, and for monstrosity as well as beauty. Bataille, like Malabou, resists philosophical fixity. Bataille's notion of the formless, which emerges in a single-paragraph text entitled "Informe" published in *Documents* in 1929, designates "informe" not as an adjective with a fixed meaning, but rather as an active force which undoes forms and meaning:

informe n'est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but: il s'agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'*informe* revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat. ("Informe" 217)

As commentators of Bataille's text have pointed out, *informe* is not something that can be objectified; rather, the formless is a kind of force, an undoing of form itself. Bataille's *informe*, then it seems, is not merely the opposite of form, or the absence of form. As Patrick Crowley and Paul Hegarty ask in their introduction to their edited collection *Formless: Ways In and Out of Form* (2005) when discussing the difficulty of putting to work a concept that necessarily refuses to comply in any productive sense: "What are the implications for those with an interest in formlessness, the formless, informe, *informe*, formless, informe/formless, 'formless,' informing, deforming, deforming, de-figuring, dis-figuring, unforming? The first, we believe, is that none of those can be opposed purely and simply to form. Secondly, formless processes, functions or work, are not necessarily good to form's bad" (14). Furthermore, as Crowley and Hegarty point out, the formless is not just a pure negativity that aims to find form's opposite, but is also a formally *creative* force: "the formless creates as well as (or while) destroying" (14).

Given Bataille's significance for twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophical conceptualizations of form and formlessness,¹⁰ it is striking that Bataille figures so scarcely in Malabou's philosophical oeuvre. And when Bataille does appear in Malabou's writing,¹¹ Bataille is seemingly distanced from any explicit engagement with question of form or *informe*. However, if we can prove that Bataille's *informe* involves the plastic *genius* of form,

rather than form's transcendence, then there might be indeed a future for plastic-destructive explorations of form between Malabou and Bataille after all.¹² To go looking for this plastic genius of form in Bataille, to find a "plastic Bataille," let us move backwards from the origins of Malabou's plasticity in the plastic arts and in sculpture to the intellectual reception of Bataille's *informe* within the plastic arts and art criticism.

Plasticity, Formlessness, and the Plastic Arts

Malabou's plasticity emerges in part in relation to the question of sculpture and the plastic arts. Her first book, *L'Avenir de Hegel*, develops the concept of plasticity as a force of transformation both within and of Hegel's philosophy. Malabou's starting point is Hegel's approach to the plastic arts in his *Aesthetics* (1835). Malabou shows how Hegel develops and extends the sculptural meaning of plasticity in his reference to "*individualités plastiques*" (22), which Hegel sees in Greek figures such as Plato, Sophocles, Socrates, etc. Malabou explains: "Ces 'individualités plastiques' forment la 'corporéité du spirituel (*Körperlichkeit des Geistigen*). Le thème des individualités plastiques constitue par lui-même une médiation entre le premier domaine de sens de la plasticité, la sculpture, et le troisième: la *plasticité philosophique*" (23). Malabou clarifies here in a footnote that Hegel's theorization of these "individualités plastiques" is explicitly in reference to sculpture.

Beyond the sculptural roots of plasticity in and beyond Hegel in *L'Avenir de Hegel*, the sculptural conceptualization of plasticity in relation to the plastic arts continues into Malabou's analysis of biological forms of (neuro)plasticity, such as her evocation in *Ontologie de l'accident* of the "sculpture de soi" described by the French biologist Jean Claude Ameisen in the process of cellular apoptosis (*Ontologie* 11). Indeed, beyond the aesthetic specificity of sculpture, Tyler Williams has drawn attention to the distinctly literary aspect of Malabou's *Ontologie de l'accident*: "It is no mere coincidence that, after announcing the neurological problems of destructive plasticity, the major course of *Ontology of the Accident* comprises sustained readings of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Marguerite Duras, Thomas Mann, Maurice Blanchot, and Ovid" (19). He argues further: "one can ultimately discern a literary facet endemic to plasticity's explosive force. This literary facet would comprise the promise of plasticity's transformation" (19).¹³

It is striking, given Bataille's insistence on the formless (a concept, as I have already suggested, that would denote anti-plasticity for Malabou), that one of the most prominent receptions of Bataille's *informe* is to be found in art criticism, in particular the plastic arts. In *Formless: A User's Guide*, Krauss and Bois seek to activate the

Bataillean formless in relation to postmodernist artworks. They explain their project: “here we will not attempt to define the formless. Of course, the trappings of art history will give a semblance of ‘frock coats to what is’ (we do not try to imitate Bataille, and our dictionary respects the order of the alphabet). But we nonetheless intend to put the formless to work, not only to map certain trajectories, or slippages, but in some small way to ‘perform’ them” (18-21). Further: “We could treat the *informe* as a pure object of historical research But such an approach would run the risk of transforming the formless into a figure, of stabilizing it. That risk is perhaps unavoidable, but, in putting the formless to work in areas far from its place of origin, in displacing it in order to sift modernist production by means of its sieve, we wanted to start it shaking—which is to say, to shake it up” (40). Krauss and Bois seek not to appropriate Bataille’s *informe*, then, but rather to transpose and activate it as a machine, watching the concept performatively at work and seeing the kind of deformations and deprogrammings it will engender. Just as Krauss and Bois do well to emphasize that Bataille’s *informe* cannot be objectified or fully anchored and thus described as a fixed, discrete concept, Malabou’s plasticity exhibits a similarly performative force: plasticity is not an object, nor is it the marble of the sculpture or the neuronal structures of the brain, but rather a live, creative-destructive formative force at work within them.

It is precisely this performative, creative-destructive formative force central to Bataille’s *informe* and Malabou’s plasticity that I now wish to explore by bringing Malabou into contact with Bataille’s infamous short text *Histoire de l’œil*—a text which has been linked both to the concept of the formless and to research and practice in the plastic arts. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate how Malabou’s concept meets a work in which the plastic forces of literature meet the plastic forces of plastic art, so as to witness the emergence of a plastic *informe* and a formless plasticity.

Bataille’s *Histoire de l’œil*: A Plastic Reading

Readings of *Histoire de l’œil* have focused on the question of the text’s relation to form and to the seeming mutability of the forms it describes. The narrative is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who meets a person named Simone, with whom he embarks on a terrifying, disorienting and often surreal journey of transgressive sexual activities and scenarios. These sexual transgressions, in true Bataillean style, avoid normative, reproductive sex at all costs: the narrator and Simone engage in sexual acts with eggs, saucers of milk, gauged-out human eyes, severed bull testicles. They also involve other people in their sexual games, in particular a person

named Marcelle, whom they sexually abuse and terrorize, and who eventually hangs herself.¹⁴ Beyond its human protagonists, however, the *récit* has been influentially interpreted—in particular by Roland Barthes—to be devoid of psychological interiority or evolution and of linear, narrative progression, privileging instead the permutations of central forms or shapes: eyes, eggs, testicles, etc.¹⁵ These central images, Barthes suggests, resemble each other in form, color and texture: they are all globular, white, etc. (489-90). The text is thus read as if it is plastic art, suggesting an almost sculptural logic of the globular, white forms at its center that seem to mold and morph into each other like a lump of Play-Doh being constantly reshaped and reworked. However, the general mutability of the forms central to *Histoire de l'œil*—variably implied by the text's commentators to be fluid, polymorphous, unending—is not immediately comparable to the plasticity put forward by Malabou. In what follows, I will delve further into the plastic resonances in the reception of Bataille's text, in an effort to re-theorize the text's formal dynamism not as *informe* but as plastic.

Roland Barthes and the Eye's Plastic Avatars

In his essay “La métaphore de l'œil,” Roland Barthes argues that, far from being centered on any of its (human) protagonists, Bataille's narrative concerns “l'histoire d'un objet” (488). The story of the eye as object is precisely the account of its various mutations: “son histoire est alors celle d'une migration, le cycle des avatars (au sens propre) qu'il parcourt loin de son être original, selon la pente d'une certaine imagination qui le déforme sans cependant l'abandonner” (488). For Barthes, the text is “la matrice d'un parcours d'objets qui sont comme les différentes ‘stations’ de la métaphore oculaire” (489). Drawing on Barthes' structural account in his own reading of Bataille's text, Patrick ffrench shows how this formal slippage at the center of the narrative is intrinsic to its affective and transgressive impact. ffrench notes in Barthes' account of *Histoire de l'œil* how the narrative is one of “no depth [. . .] which is all surface, which functions horizontally rather than vertically, and which, moreover, does not appeal, in its eroticism, to any basis in sex” (7). Jacques Lacan, for his part, reads the text's formal transfigurations (the eye to the saucer to the testicle, etc.) as the endless avatars of the virtual object of desire, the “objet petit a” (*Séminaire XIII*, 1 June 1966).

The mutability of the central forms of *Histoire de l'œil* suggested by the text's commentators is not theorized in and of itself in the same way that the specific transformative mechanisms involved in plasticity assumes center-stage in Malabou's philosophy. In fact, the mutability commentators have described resonates more, in its

generality, with the descriptions of polymorphism that Malabou contrasts with plasticity in works like *L'Avenir de Hegel*, or with the descriptions of neoliberal flexibility that she contrasts with (neuro)plasticity in *Que faire de notre cerveau?* Indeed, Malabou argues that the plasticity emerging across many disciplines (from the neuroplasticity of the neurosciences to the plasticity of the plastic arts to the plasticity of the genome in epigenetics) demands a thorough conceptualization and a more specific philosophical mobilization of the concept of plasticity: “Un regard plus attentif cependant, une oreille plus fine décèlent sans peine, dans un nombre croissant de discours, l’inscription *pressante* de la plasticité qui, loin d’avoir tout dit, demande instamment la parole. En philosophie, en art . . . , en génétique, en neurobiologie, en ethnologie ou en psychanalyse, la plasticité apparaît comme un schème opératoire de plus en plus prégnant” (“Le vœu de plasticité” 7). And she adds: “Tous les signes sont en effet présents aujourd’hui de ce que *la plasticité demande d’accéder au concept*” (7).

And yet Barthes’ account of the central forms of *Histoire de l’œil* in “La métaphore de l’œil” holds a germ or a blueprint of precisely the kind of conceptualization that Malabou says plasticity requires. Speaking of the “objet” at the center of Bataille’s text, Barthes describes how the object encounters “la pente d’une certaine imagination qui le déforme sans cependant l’abandonner” (488). We recall that, for Malabou, plasticity entails form’s own intrinsic resistance to total deformation, which differentiates plasticity from polymorphism: “Est plastique ce qui garde la forme, comme le marbre de la statue qui, une fois configuré, ne peut retrouver sa forme initiale. ‘Plastique’ désigne donc ce qui cède à la forme tout en *résistant* à la déformation.” (*L’Avenir* 21) Barthes’ insistence on the way in which the text’s “objet” deforms even while not abandoning its form resonates strongly with Malabou’s conceptualization of the mutable-resistant characteristics of plasticity.

Moreover, Barthes’ account of the metaphoric “migration” or “cycle des *avatars*” of the eye itself names a second “chain” of metaphors: that of the liquids that accompany the globular, white forms and the slippages between, or the transfigurations of these forms. Barthes explains:

une chaîne secondaire en dérive, constituée par tous les avatars du liquide dont l’image est aussi bien liée à l’œil, à l’œuf et aux glandes; et ce n’est pas seulement la liqueur elle-même qui varie (larmes, lait de l’assiette-œil de chat, jaune mollet de l’œuf, sperme ou urine), c’est . . . le mode d’apparition de l’humide; la métaphore est ici encore bien plus riche que pour le globuleux; du *mouillé* au *ruissellement*, ce sont toutes les variétés de l’*inonder* qui viennent compléter la métaphore originelle du globe. (490)

The fact that the metaphoric chain of globular, white forms (eyes, eggs, testicles) are accompanied—but not overrun—by this second chain of liquids (the tears, milk, yolk, sperm, urine), suggests a certain insolubility to the globular white forms: they are not polymorphous in that they precisely refuse to dissolve in the liquids that surround them.¹⁶ In her association of “le féminin” with plasticity in *Changer de différence*, Malabou explicitly distances her theorization of plasticity from concepts of the feminine based in appeals to fluids and liquids: “Comment sortir de l’itérabilité de la pensée du féminin comme entrave au concept, comment échapper à la fluidité ou à l’élasticité infinies de la matière femme?” (*Changer* 148). For Malabou, then, the recovery of plasticity or of a plastic form of the feminine also entails the discovery or even the protection of this form’s resistance to total fluidification or liquefaction.

Whilst the white, globular forms central to Bataille’s text do indeed appear to resist dissolution in their accompanying liquids, the liquids, in Barthes’ rendering, do also situate the forms between solidity and fluidity: the forms exist constantly on the brink of dissolution without actually dissolving. Barthes insists on the interweaving of two “chains”—that of primary globular forms and that of secondary liquids: “la double métaphore une fois posée, Bataille fait intervenir une nouvelle technique: il *échange* les deux chaînes” (492). It is not merely that “tout conduit à un discours qui dit que *l’œil pleure, que l’œuf cassé s’écoule* ou que *la lumière (le soleil) se répand*” (492), but that the two chains might be mixed up further (492-93), the eye becoming separated from its tears, the egg separated from its yolk, etc. Indeed, the text is inundated with images of white globes connected to liquids that they would not immediately be associated with, such as the protagonists urinating on the eggs. This interweaving of the two chains—the more-or-less solid forms of the globes, and the liquidity and flow of the fluids—acts to situate the central forms of the text between solidity and liquidity, implying a paradoxical simultaneity of rigidity, flow and migration that echoes Malabou’s compound meaning of plasticity: the parallel *morphing* and *resisting* of plastic form.

Arousing Form, Activating Plasticity

Another resonance between Malabou and Bataille’s approaches to form, is the seeming confluence in both authors between material forms and organic lives: the mutability of forms (marble, cerebral matter, eggs, testicles) affects and *is* the behavior of organic (human) bodies. If French, following Barthes, is correct that human

psychology is bypassed in the text to focus instead on the modulation of the central chains of forms, this is not to say that the human figures are totally forgotten. Indeed, the human figures are seen to be at the service and maintenance of the formal displacements at the text's center. In one particular scene, the narrator and Simone are involved in various games of frenetic play with eggs:

elle prit plaisir à me faire jeter des œufs dans la cuvette du siège, des œufs durs, qui semblaient, et des œufs gobés plus ou moins vides. Elle demeurait assise à regarder ces œufs. Je l'asseyais sur la cuvette: entre ses jambes elle les regardait sous son cul; à la fin je tirais la chasse d'eau.

Un autre jeu consistait à casser un œuf au bord du bidet et à l'y vider sous elle; tantôt elle pissait sur l'œuf, tantôt je me déculottais pour l'avalier au fond du bidet; elle me promit, quand elle serait de nouveau valide, de faire la même chose devant moi puis devant Marcelle. (*Histoire* 585)

Passages such as the above show the human protagonists to be at the service of the plastic forms, in this instance: the eggs. The use of the imperfect tense in phrases such as “Je l'asseyais sur la cuvette: entre ses jambes elle les regardait sous son cul; à la fin je tirais la chasse d'eau” underlines the frenetic repetition and ritualistic nature of the characters' actions in these formal games, whilst the complete absence of explanation as to the origin or aims of these practices again places the forms at the center of the text. The human bodies are primarily involved in the mobilization, the sculpting, and the destruction of the plastic forms. This formal activity carried out by the bodies suggests an endless plastic-destructive sculptural process which resonates with Malabou's materialist conception of the human body as a dynamic (neuro)plastic formation in works like *Que faire de notre cerveau?* and *Ontologie de l'accident*, in which human bodies and neural identities self-mold and self-destruct as organic sculptural works.

Indeed, the bodies at the service of plastic formal disfigurements seem to be creating as well as destroying form. The presence of mud in one particular scene, just after Simone and the narrator discover Marcelle, evokes a plastic formative materiality covering the human bodies, as if they were engaged in a frenzy of artistic creation: “Simone avait trouvé une flaque de boue et s'en barbouillait: elle se branlait avec la terre et jouissait, fouettée par l'averse, ma tête serrée entre ses jambes souillées de terre, le visage vautré dans la flaque où elle agitait le cul de Marcelle enlacée d'un bras derrière les reins, la main tirant la cuisse et l'ouvrant avec force” (*Histoire* 573).

Plastic-Destructive Brain-Body Transformations

It is not just the case, however, that the human bodies of *Histoire de l'œil* are merely at the service of the plastic transformations of the globular forms they come into contact with; rather, these bodies can also be seen to be plastic themselves and to transform parallel to the play of forms at the text's center. Furthermore, the kinds of transformation undergone by the human characters strongly evokes the kinds of traumatic transformation described by Malabou in her analyses of the destructive plasticity at work in diverse traumas, injuries and "accidents," including in cases of neuropathology and brain injury in *Les Nouveaux Blessés* and *Ontologie de l'accident*.¹⁷ In these instances, the destructive plasticity described by Malabou produces not slow, linear development or modulations or deformations of identity, but violent, sudden changes through which a person becomes completely unrecognizable to those around them. Malabou's witnessing of these radical metamorphoses in *Ontologie de l'accident* includes examples from neuropathology and also literary and artistic representations of transformation—from the realities of Alzheimer's disease and brain injury (10) to Franz Kafka's depiction of Gregor Samsa's transformation into a beetle in *The Metamorphosis* (1915) (21-24). This destructive plasticity entails: "la désertion de la subjectivité, l'éloignement de l'individu qui se devient étranger, ne reconnaît plus personne, ne se reconnaît plus lui-même, ne se souvient plus" (*Ontologie* 13).

Such terrifying, plastic-destructive transformations can be seen in *Histoire de l'œil* perhaps most strikingly in the figure of Marcelle. In one scene, the narrator and Simone take place in an orgy, also attended by Marcelle. Marcelle is at first seemingly disturbed by the acts going on around her, until one moment she decides to lock herself in a wardrobe and masturbate. The moment she decides this appears to lead to a profound transformation in Marcelle in which "elle traversa la pièce en somnambule et gagna une armoire normande où elle s'enferma" (575). This "somnambule," sleep-walking state suggests a state of self-absence or self-estrangement in the character of Marcelle that echoes the radical affective detachment of the "new wounded" subjects described by Malabou, who exhibit disaffected or disinterested states as a result of neurological pathologies or traumas, seemingly now detached from their former selves and affective histories.

We then learn of Marcelle's further transformation from inside the wardrobe: "La malheureuse Marcelle pissait dans son armoire en jouissant. L'éclat de rire ivre qui suivit dégénéra en une débauche de chutes de corps, de jambes et de culs en l'air, de jupes mouillées et de foutre. Les rires se produisaient comme des hoquets involontaires, retardant à peine la ruée vers les culs et les queues" (*Histoire* 575). And then, following a violent

break in the narrative of half an hour in during which time the reader is left unsure of the exact events, the narrator goes to help Marcelle out of the wardrobe and discovers the following scene:

Marcelle, demeurée nue, continuait en gesticulant à traduire en cris une souffrance morale et une terreur impossibles; on la vit mordre sa mère au visage, au milieu de bras qui tentaient vainement de la maîtriser.

Cette irruption des parents détruisait ce qui lui restait de raison. (576)

When Marcelle later hangs herself, her body is described as having suddenly transformed to the point of her now appearing as a stranger: “Quand Simone se releva et regarda le corps, Marcelle était une étrangère et Simone elle-même l’était pour moi. Je n’aimais ni Simone ni Marcelle et si l’on m’avait dit que je venais moi-même de mourir, je n’aurais pas été surpris” (592). How not to hear in this evocation of Marcelle’s and Simone’s radical transformations Malabou’s evocation of the radical and total disfigurements of (neural) identity emerging in destructive plasticity, and in particular her engagement with Antonio Damasio’s analysis of the radical transformation of Phineas Gage into someone unrecognizable to those around him following a brain injury (*Nouveaux blessés* 253-56)?

The plasticity of forms displayed at the center of *Histoire de l’œil*, both in terms of the central globes (eggs, eyes, testicles) and in terms of the human bodies interacting with these forms, is not just the plasticity of a straightforwardly sculptural logic of formation and deformation, by which a form, like clay or marble, is molded and shaped into a particular form; rather, the plasticity of *Histoire de l’œil* aligns itself with Malabou’s conception of plasticity in two striking ways. Firstly, as the dramatic and sudden transformations of characters such as Marcelle demonstrate, the text puts forward a conception of plasticity that, like Malabou’s, includes not just the giving and receiving of form, but also the annihilation and explosion of form. Secondly, in Bataille’s detached, de-psychologized account of seemingly alien bodies at the service of globular forms, there is a collapse of organic forms (bodies, whether human or animal; neural forms and identities) into inorganic, sculptural forms (the saucer, sculpture, the mud that Simone and the narrator have sex in, etc.). Plastic form emerges, between Malabou and Bataille, not as abstract geometries or shapes, but as the chaotic, creative-destructive, mutating-resisting forces of how organic bodies live, experience, and undergo radical, often frightening, metamorphoses. If we accept Barthes’ reading of *Histoire de l’œil* as the (hi)story of an object (“Comment un objet peut-il avoir une histoire?” [488]), the

text emerges via Malabou's thought as the (hi)story of living bodies that are themselves no more than forms, but also certainly no less than forms. Are the eyes, the saucers, the bull testicles, etc. of *Histoire de l'œil* not in themselves (neuro)plastic brains, as it were, transforming and inventing (hi)stories as they come into contact with each other?

Conclusion: Mutations in the Making

Malabou's concept of plasticity (which embraces the emancipatory and transformative potential of form) and Bataille's concept of *informe* (which programs the overcoming of form, and warns against the fixity of form) can in fact be seen to be intimately related and in inextricable and dynamic dialogue with one another. When brought to bear on Malabou's interdisciplinary exploration of plasticity, the reception of Bataille's concept of *informe* by art historians and critics of the plastic arts, combined with a plastic reading of Bataille's notorious erotic narrative *Histoire de l'œil*, a new perspective emerges in which Malabou's plasticity embraces the destructive-undoing of form that Bataille lays out in "Informe." As such, Malabou's analysis of neuropathology, with its emphasis on "destructive plasticity" and its ensuing shattering of identity, entails a plasticity of excess that resonates with Bataille's exploration of the explosion of identity through erotic excess in *Histoire de l'œil*. By the same token, it becomes equally clear that Bataille's work—both in his theoretical text "Informe" and his fiction *Histoire de l'œil*—insists not so much on an absence or beyond of form as on a persistence of form expressed in formal mutability and plasticity. Given the dynamic, cross-disciplinary potential of working at the intersection of Malabou's thought and Bataille's writing, new questions can be seen to emerge: what might a neuro-Bataille look like? How might we read further economies of excess and waste, or the movements of eroticism, in Malabou's plastic approach to (neuro)biology and the sciences?

Malabou reminds us throughout her work that plasticity is itself plastic and always undergoing conceptual mutation: "la plasticité ne durera que le temps de ses formes" (*Changer* 78). Is it possible that the Bataillean *informe* mutated into the Malabouian plasticity somewhere along form's own "chain" of mutations and evolutions? Ultimately, it might be in looking back to Bataille's *informe* before Malabou's plasticity, activating the formless as an unruly ghost within plasticity, that plasticity's next mutations and forms might be set in motion.

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¹ Dedicated to my mother, Rosie Dalton (1964-2019).

² Malabou’s “plasticité destructrice” and the idea of formal creation via destruction is elaborated perhaps most poignantly in her works *Les Nouveaux Blessés* (2007) and *Ontologie de l'accident* (2009), as I explore further later.

³ See, for instance, Malabou’s argument against Gilles Deleuze’s rejection of form (*Ontologie* 23), as I detail further later. Malabou also states in the “Afterword” to *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*: “To state that nothing is unconvertible amounts to claiming the philosophical necessity of the thought of a new materialism, which does not believe in the ‘formless’ and implies the vision of a malleable real that challenges the conception of time as a purely messianic process” (“Afterword” 77).

⁴ For Bataille, see Krauss and Bois. For important recent and emerging engagements with Malabou by art historians and theorists, see Boetzkes and Filipowska.

⁵ This elaboration of plasticity through a reading of Hegel first emerges in *L’Avenir de Hegel* (1996).

⁶ These notions of recovery and care resonate strongly in the work of Roksana Filipowska (*Plasticity Against Plastic*, 2019), who explores Malabou’s plasticity through the use of synthetic plastics in artworks from 1960 onwards. Filipowska shows how artworks made of plastic are indeed not fixed and eternal, but degrade and morph over time, requiring specific modes of conservation and care in galleries.

⁷ Malabou outlines “la formation d’une identité de survivant, d’une configuration existentielle et vitale inédite. Identité cérébro-lésée qui, sur le mode de l’absence à soi, demeure bel et bien un psychisme” (*Ontologie* 25).

⁸ “Pas plus qu’à la transcendance, pas plus qu’à l’absence de négativité, je ne crois à l’absence de forme ou à un au-delà possible de la forme. La forme est la barrière métamorphosable mais inamovible de la pensée” (*La Plasticité* 93).

⁹ Malabou is here quoting from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie, 2. Mille Plateaux* (291).

¹⁰ This influence is attested to, for instance, by the breadth of responses to formlessness in Crowley and Hegarty’s edited volume *Formless: Ways In and Out of Form* (2005).

¹¹ See, for example, “Faut-il sacrifier Bataille?” (2016) and “Contagion: State of Exception or Erotic Excess? Agamben, Nancy, and Bataille” (2020).

¹² My reference here to the “genius” of plastic form seeks to echo Malabou’s evocation of plasticity’s “genius”: “Il manque en effet à la flexibilité la ressource de la donation de forme, le pouvoir de *créer*, d’*inventer* ou même d’*effacer* une empreinte, le pouvoir de *styler*. *La flexibilité est la plasticité moins son génie*” (*Que faire* 30).

¹³ I have sought elsewhere to demonstrate both the literary and cinematographic force of Malabou’s plasticity in putting her work into dialogue with contemporary writers and filmmakers; see Dalton, “Cruising,” “Forms,” and “Animating Plastic.”

¹⁴ Indeed, critiques of *Histoire de l’œil* have disagreed on where to categorize the text between literature and pornography, with some critics raising important ethical concerns regarding the text’s depiction of sexual violence. Joey Hornsby has acknowledged the “wide spectrum” of critical responses to the text (108), noting criticism of the text as “misogynistic and violent” on the one hand, whilst signposting structuralist approaches to the text such as Barthes’, for whom “[t]he explicit, sexual elements are incidental” (108). Hornsby’s own reading analyses the formal readings of the text whilst also necessarily “[insisting] on the importance of the specifically sexual, and sexually violent, nature of the text” (109). In my reading of the plasticity of the text’s forms via Malabou, I hope to recognize both the significance of the text’s formal invention and the importance for ethical sensitivity to the realities of its portrayed violence urged by Hornsby, exploring how the text echoes both the

creative side of plastic form in Malabou, but also the traumatic and violent aspects of Malabou's destructive plasticity.

¹⁵ Barthes' focus on the formal and structural design of *Histoire de l'œil* in "La Métaphore de l'œil" is also a key influence in Patrick French's approach to the text (*The Cut* xi-xii).

¹⁶ I have analyzed the proximity of plastic forms to liquids in the films of Alain Guiraudie ("Cruising" 71-72), in particular with reference to the cinematographic centrality of the lake in *L'Inconnu du lac* (2013).

¹⁷ I do not seek to "diagnose" any of the characters according to any of the particular pathologies Malabou examines in relation to destructive plasticity. Indeed, Malabou establishes "une théorie générale du trauma" which does not discriminate between organic and sociopolitical trauma: "Les comportements des sujets victimes de traumatismes dus à la maltraitance, à la guerre, aux attentats terroristes, à la captivité, aux abus sexuels, présentent des points communs frappants avec ceux des cérébro-lésés. La frontière qui sépare traumatismes organiques et traumatismes sociopolitiques est aujourd'hui de plus en plus floue" (*Nouveaux blessés* 29).