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How to Do Things in the Plasticene: Ontopolitics of Plastics in Arendt, Barthes, and Massumi

Abstract: In this paper, I develop three models for understanding plastic in the Plasticene epoch through readings of Arendt, Barthes, and Massumi. In the Ardentian model, plastic is made intransitive. It is withdrawn so far into the background of human experience as that which enables social and individual life of humans that it becomes the unthinkable. It can be argued that it is pushed to the background and made intransitive because of a certain image of the human and cyclical image of nature. The second model is Barthesian, and in it plastic becomes a signifying matter understood through a semiotic model. Plastic and products of plastic become signifiers in the ideological work of discourse. In the Massumian model, plastic is affective; it is a relational body in the process of becoming, simultaneously intensive and multiple in its eventfulness.

Keywords: Plasticene; plastic; ontopolitics; intransitivity; signification; affect.

Introduction

What does the plastic do? Answering this question is becoming increasingly complex, especially when it comes to discussions about plastics in the Anthropocene that fall under the sign of environmental humanities. Most generally, some authors claim that we are better off with different terms than the Anthropocene for naming this new geological epoch we have found ourselves in since a certain point in the past.¹ The name of the epoch will depend on what date we take for its beginning. Some argue that the Anthropocene began with the European colonization of what we now call South and North America when the oxygen levels in the atmosphere surged following the genocide of the native peoples and the consequent reforestation of agricultural

¹ Other names are also proposed besides Plasticene in order to point out particular aspects of human activity or the segment of humanity that is responsible for the planetary changes. These names include Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Androcene, Corporatocene, Petrolcene, Plutocene, Necrocene, Plantationcene, Elahistocene, Entropocene, Neganthropocene, etc.

lands;² others claim that the atom bomb tests mark the beginning, given that the half-life of radioactive elements is thousands of years long.³ The mass consumption of fossil fuels is another marker for some scientists and theorists,⁴ and with it the production of petro-chemical compounds and products, that is the mass production and use of plastic. The name of the new epoch would then be the Plasticene.

How does plastic act and is acted upon in the Plasticene? I develop three models through readings of Arendt, Barthes, and Massumi: In the Ardentian model, plastic is made intransitive and then erased. It is withdrawn so far into the background of human experience, as that which enables social and individual life of humans, that it becomes the unthinkable. It can be argued that it is pushed to the background and made unthinkable because Arendt's philosophical model creates a normative image of the human mirrored in a cyclical image of nature. Plastic in this model disappears in order to enable a particular form of life. The second model is Barthesian, and in it plastic becomes an ideological and signifying matter understood through a semiotic model. Plastic and products of plastic become signifiers in the ideological work of discourse. According to this model, plastic is understood as inextricably tied to the matters of language, so much so that the matter of plastic becomes a discursive effect. The body of plastic exhausts itself in the signifying practice. In the Massumian model, plastic is affective, that is it is a relational being in the process of becoming. It can be thought of as simultaneously intensive and relational with speculative and pragmatic dimensions in the eventfulness of its becoming. Affective model of understanding plastic leads to the opening up of pluritemporal and multimaterial aspects of ontopolitics of plastic in the epoch of Anthropocene.

Intransitive plastic

Hannah Arendt writes about the fourfold conditionality of the human, which is reflected in the concepts of life (in the sense of being born and dying), being-in-the-world, plurality and the Earth. The Earth “is the very quintessence of the human condition”⁵ so decisively that leaving it and colonizing Mars, for example, would mean radical change in the conditions in which human beings become human in Arendt's sense of the term. The claim that the Earth is the uber-condition is even more intriguing from the perspective of the Anthropocene and Plasticene, considering that it is the Earth that is changed by human activity. It follows that the condition for

² Cf. Richard Monastersky, “Anthropocene: The human age,” *Nature* 519 (2015): 146.

³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴ Cf. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and New York: Verso, 2016); Simon Pirani, *Burning Up: A Global History of Fossil Fuel Consumption* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rites: An Archeology of the Fossil Economy* (New York: John Hopkins University Press, 2019).

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.

becoming-human of the humans that is the Earth will change if the human itself is the one that changes the Earth/condition. In a word, *conditio humana* changes because of the very activity of what it produced in a sort of an ontological double-bind effect. Work, labor, and activity change the Earth, and thus change the human condition which consists of work, labor, and activity. What I am interested in here is not just any activity of geological scale of the Anthropos, but one of its aspects reflected in the production and the use of plastic and how it fares in Arendt's philosophy.

To understand the place or, rather, the absence of plastic in Arendt, one has to pay closer theoretical attention to the term *vita activa*, that is difference between labor, work, and activity. Labor is "the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself".⁶ Work is "the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings [...]. The human condition of work is worldliness".⁷ Finally, action is defined as "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world".⁸ Labor, then, is essentially related to the processes that are designed to keep humans alive. It is tied to consumption of natural "goods" and "resources" for the purpose of keeping the *animal laborans* alive and, importantly, reproductive. Labor is performed in order to (re)produce the bare life of human beings. The relation between the *animal laborans* and nature is basically cyclical where the *animal laborans* takes what it needs through labor and, after the consumption, returns to nature the produced waste as a result. This relation is cyclical only so far as nature is conceptualized as the boundless source of things to transform through labor for consumption. Moreover, it is cyclical only if the waste is absorbed back by nature, which we now know is not the case. Matter that has been consumed and metabolized does not just disappear back into nature. It also does not re-appear re-natured and re-formed into the matter ready for further consumption. Waste breaks away with the circular logic Arendt ascribes to the life-sustaining labor of *animal laborans*.

What is permanent or, at least, durable is gained and made through work. *Homo faber* works with his hands, in contradistinction to the labor of the body, to produce things that create the artifice of the human world. In analysis of the world of *homo faber* Arendt writes that "if left to itself or discarded from the human world, the chair will again become wood, and the wood will decay and return to the soil from which the tree sprang before it was cut off to become the material upon which to work

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

and with which to build”⁹ There is an ontological difference between matter and a thing which became an object for human use (not consumption). The object becomes matter through its disuse, and as matter it quickly, according to Arendt, becomes re-cycled through the natural movement of matter. It is easy to imagine a wooden chair decomposing, although after a long time but nevertheless becoming matter for other organisms to consume. But the fact of the Plasticene epoch is that most of our objects for everyday use are not made of wood but plastic and other petro-chemical compounds. Arendt nowhere mentions “artificial” materials in *The Human Condition*, even though she writes about the artificial human world, which it turns out is artificial only in relation to the animal environment not because of the “nature” of materials used.

If we follow the logic of relative stability, which is given by the objects to the human world, to its end, then we can claim that plastic is that which guarantees eternity to the human world considering durability of certain types of plastic. The world of *homo faber* in the Plasticene is the world of plastic, not the world of wood (forests have been cut down). This also changes the supposed cycle of matter in nature, because plastic does not decompose as wood does. It stays for a very long time in the shape of microplastic, which then enters into the composition of other (non)organic bodies. The plastic chair as a guarantee of the durability and stability of the human world actually creates an eternal world, given that the plastic now enters into the composition of an anthropogenic geological layer. Earth and plastic become synonymous in the Plasticene. *Homo faber* is literally built into the very planet.

But why is the role of plastic erased if it plays such a decisive role? In a word, because plastic does not move cyclically, or if it does it does not move quickly and unobstructively enough. While wood and other “natural” materials tend to decompose if left unattended, plastic and related materials decompose over a very long time and can be toxic. The cyclical image of nature and the world is needed in order to maintain the normative image of human. It is clear that both *animal laborans* and *homo faber* labor/work only as far as particular form of life is concerned, despite the plurality Arendt claims to uphold.¹⁰ While *animal laborans* cyclically exchanges matter with nature in order to (re)produce life, *homo faber* gives permanence to the (re)production of such life. We are given an image of a body which cyclically metabolizes natural matter, while the natural matter and nature move cyclically too. Cyclicity is also set at the level of human species with its reproduction and the change of generations. We get the image of circles within circles – individual bodies within species within nature all moving in reciprocally determined cycles. Plastic destroys the eternal return of the same with its intransitivity and potential toxicity.

⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰ “The reward of toil and trouble lies in nature’s fertility, in the quiet confidence that he who in ‘toil and trouble’ has done its part, remains a part of nature in the future of his children and his children’s children”, *ibid.*, 107.

Signifying plastic

Plastic is everywhere, as we know from our own everyday life, despite the occasional efforts to remove it from environmental circulation, as with campaigns against plastic bags or similar single use plastic objects. In most of these campaigns, non-use of plastic products is inextricably tied to the preservation of the normative form of life by discursively connecting futurity with normativity. In similar fashion, as shown above, plastic is made to signify danger to this particular form of life. Besides being a material used in quotidian life, plastic can be used in art, where it can also be used as a metaphor.¹¹ Plastic, then, is a signifying being, producing meaning in everyday life, art, and other areas of human life. It is this signifying plastic that interests Roland Barthes.

Barthes writes about plastic in two texts out of approximately fifty that make the first part of his *Mythologies*. One deals with children's toys, while the other is titled "Plastic". Interestingly enough, in the piece on toys, Barthes laments the replacement of wooden toys with plastic ones. In similar fashion to Arendt, Barthes finds wood a particularly human material. He writes: "Current toys are made of graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature. Many are now molded from complicated mixtures; the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch".¹² Barthes is ostensibly frustrated, in his (non)ironic reading of the petit bourgeois discourse of loss of "nature", by the disappearance of the wood because it offers "firmness", "softness", and "natural warmth of its touch"; furthermore, "it is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor".¹³ As in Arendt, wood in Barthes (non)ironic discourse makes "essential objects, objects for all time",¹⁴ while plastic toys are "chemical in substance and color; their very material introduces one to a coenaesthesia of use, not pleasure".¹⁵ They "quickly die", that is, they are projected to be used in the mass society of consumers and replaced as soon as they break down, while the children themselves are taught to be users through the play with these plastic toys. Again, plastic is cast as a sign of the end times for a certain conception of human being.

Toys aside, plastic itself is a signifying being as Barthes' text dedicated to it testifies. Plastic is "the very idea of its infinite transformation [...] it is ubiquity made visible".¹⁶ Barthes claims that "it is less a thing than the trace of a movement",¹⁷ that is plastic is not a kind of material or matter but a sign for movement and transformation.

¹¹ Mandy Bloomfield, "Widening Gyre: A Poetics of Ocean Plastics," *Configurations* 27 (2019): 501–23.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The New Press, 1972), 54.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Since it is a sign of infinite transformative movement, it is also “a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products”.¹⁸ Plastic, then, is the sign in need of close reading in order to understand its appearance and function which is enacted as social spectacle. The spectacle lies in the relation between the “original” and “single” matter and the multitude of products. It is an ontological conundrum of relation between one and many, but enacted on the level of a sign which is read as transformative power of plastic. Many are plastic products, but one is the ever-transformative plastic. Furthermore, plastic expresses or, even better, belongs as such to the register of “major poetic substances”, where “it figures as a disgraced material, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal”.¹⁹ All substances are, according to Barthes, poetic since they express meaning through their social use, including rubber, metal, minerals, and other “natural” matter. Plastic is anything but natural, it is “something powerless ever to achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature”, nor it can achieve the natural colors managing only “chemical-looking ones” with “aggressive quality”.²⁰

Barthes also connects plastic to what he terms “imitation” materials, which petit bourgeois as they are, serve the purpose of imitating the expensive and rare natural materials such as diamonds, feathers, silk, precious metals, etc. But something else happens in this replacement of other imitation materials with plastic. Namely, the idea of nature changes with the materials that would imitate nature’s rarest substances. As Barthes writes: “The age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, is about to replace her, and to determine the very invention of forms”.²¹ The binary opposition between the luxury and the prosaic implodes under the signifying pressure exercised by plastic. Luxury objects are of various natural origins, and the imitations thereof used to be too. Plastic introduces absolute immanence of the use through the immanence of a single material. Plastic, in a word, kills off any kind of hierarchy: “The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world *can* be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas.”²²

What enables Barthes to write such analysis of plastic? How was he able to conceptualize plastic as signifying matter with an ideological social function? The answer lies in the second part of *Mythologies*. First of all, claims Barthes, “every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things”.²³ What counts then is the *social usage* of “mute” objects and “pure” matter

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibid., 99, italics in original.

²³ Ibid., 107.

in which “even objects will become speech, if they mean something”²⁴ Objects of any kind, as well as matter, become subjects of semiology. According to semiological analysis, a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. But there is also a second-order semiological system where the myth/ideology is found, and where the first-order sign is part of second-order signifier.²⁵ The first level is called language-object, the second one meta-language. Plastic, within this semiotic model, is treated as a sign, as equally as any piece of writing or picture.

Plastic as an ideological signifier can be read as an example, an alibi, or a presence of ideological content depending on what we want to do, to unmask, demystify or consume. The myth distorts, and in this context, we see that plastic becomes a sign of perpetual transformation and malleability while it hides the leveling down of all hierarchy which follows from the creation and spread of mass consumerist society. Plastic is a sign of consumerism, and it serves to naturalize the given state of social affairs, but “any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system”²⁶ Plastic is exhausted in the network of signifiers, signifieds and signs, so much so that there is no outside of language. Moreover, if it appears that there is an outside it is an ideological effect. As Barthes writes, if things appear to mean something by themselves that shows depolitization of speech by the myth; myth “abolishes complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity”²⁷ There is no thing by itself. The idea that there is such a side of the thing is an ideological effect. In other words, plastic does not have a being of its own, it always already *means* something. And not only that it always means something, but its being is exclusively signifying. If it does not mean something, then it does not exist. Or it exists, but as an ideological product, which is understood only through semiotic model. Things and matter are always spoken of, they never do anything by themselves.

Affective plastic

How to approach the body without mediation? How to think-feel it without substantializing it? Is there a theoretical vocabulary for thinking-feeling-with becoming-body? Such theoretical approach can be found in Brian Massumi's work and his idea of speculative pragmatism. The goal, for Massumi, is to find a theoretical framework which would encompass moving of the matter, dynamics of the body, and

²⁴ Ibid., 109.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

the activity of the social so that neither of these loses their particularity even though they make a continuum rather than discrete entities. In Barthes' poststructuralist, and postmodern theoretical approaches, bodies are taken as a position in a sort of a (social) structure, where the material bodyliness of the body is lost considering that such positionality is exhausted in signifying and codifying practices as we have seen above. But for Massumi, "a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own non-present potential to vary".²⁸ Such a relation is simultaneously real and abstract. It is abstract in the sense that such a relation lies in incorporeal dimension of the body, and "this movement-slip gives new urgency to questions of ontology, of ontological difference, inextricably linked to concepts of potential and process and, by extension, event-in a way that bumps 'being' straight into becoming".²⁹ This abstract and incorporeal dimension of the body is also indeterminate, which is defined as openness of the body to the elsewhere and otherwise. This leads Massumi to claim that thing is when it isn't doing, and that concrete is as concrete doesn't.³⁰ Becoming is the keyword, and the "emphasis is on process before signification or coding".³¹

Process is thought through several concepts, the most important being movement, capacity, and affect. Massumi follows Spinoza in thinking about bodies as relations between movement and rest. Moreover, these movements are not extensive but virtual, potentialities for movement and rest. This potential or capacity is power to affect and be affected. These relations between movement and rest are also thought of as transition, since the bodies change their state by affecting and being affected: "Each transition is accompanied by a variation in capacity: a change in which powers to affect and be affected are addressable by a next event and how readily addressable they are – or to what degree they are present as futurities. That 'degree' is a bodily intensity, and its present futurity a tendency".³² Given that the affect as relation between acting and being acted upon is virtual, Massumi claims that affect possesses a particular form of autonomy, which lies in virtual relationality as such. This also reflects on how is body to be thought, and it needs to be thought as "immediately virtual as it is actual",³³ in line with concrete/abstract binary which implodes as any substantialized opposition. This virtuality of affect is supra-linear abstraction, but such an abstraction that directly participates in activity of actual bodies although it is never perceived in sensible experience.

But the body is not one. Considering that the body is defined through its affective virtualities, bodies do not and cannot make a closed unity. As Erin Manning writes, under, inside and above the seeming bodily unity we have a multidimensional

²⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

topological surface which folds in, through, and over the space-time of perception.³⁴ The body is what appears from the multiplicity of relations between different affects, which change incessantly. The body is a point in which multiplicity of potentialities is resolved as an event of actualization. The body is, then, only a temporary moment in the process of becoming of the virtual/actual whole. Manning claims that the body is an ecology of multiplicity of processes, a relational knot that culminates as both unity and difference of complex processes.³⁵ The event of temporary moment of actualized unity is called transduction, and it signifies the moment of passing from the processes of individuation to the individual body.

The body, including the plastic bodies and the body of plastic, is a meta-stable system in the incessant process of becoming, a meta-stable system which consists of virtual-abstract and actual-concrete aspects. But affect is not pre-social. Affective potentialities of the body are as much defined by the social sphere as they are defined by other conditions. The body of plastic, as most of the non-plastic bodies, becomes within the field of contemporary capitalism. One could argue even that the body of plastic is the body of modern and contemporary capitalism considering that plastic enabled cheap production followed by mass consumption. Furthermore, as any other body, the body of capitalism is defined by the processuality and meta-stability. According to Massumi, the contemporary form of capitalism as a process is self-modulating and self-empowering from a position that is immanent to the life itself. Capitalism has fed back its operations into the field of virtuality so much so that it became immanent to it.³⁶ Capitalism is an ontopower because it strengthens the tendencies and intensifies the powers of existence. It serves as a sort of a sieve for what can be actualized and which virtualities will be produced. The contemporary form of capitalism works on both transindividual and infraindividual levels, where transindividual is defined as social and infraindividual as consisting of intensive elements in intra-action.³⁷ Infraindividual level of the body is the affective, virtual dimension. Given that the capitalism colonizes this level through shaping the tendencies that can be actualized (through, for example, pre-emption but also through shaping the collective moods), it can be argued that the body of plastic also participates in these processes.

We have seen that capitalism shapes life at the level of life's virtualities. It does so through colonization of affects that are potential and in the process of actualization. In a word, it does so through colonization of the body's relationality. Plastic has been invented exactly at the point when mass society has started to appear, so it follows that plastic can be understood as a technology for capitalistic colonization of the bodily capacities. And indeed, plastic has enabled novel relations between bodies and between bodies and their environment. In some regards, plastic has made the

³⁴ Cf. Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 12.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 108.

³⁷ Cf. Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of Economy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

lives of the many easier, making production and consumption cheaper. On the other hand, plastic has negatively affected lives of nonhumans and some humans because of its intransitive, durable aspect. Many nonhuman beings suffer the consequences of cheap plastic production and consumption, that is, their potential for relationality has been diminished because of pollution and destruction of environment. Plastic, then, serves as a technology for extraction of profit from (non)human bodies, while it also enables novel forms of relationality. As an affective body, plastic behaves as an *emergent body*, a body that is not a simple by-product of capitalism but a multiple body that acts as a material condition for actualization of a multiplicity of affects. Given the dominance of contemporary capitalism, its absolute colonization of (non)human and (non)organic bodies today, it remains a challenge to imagine affective politics for life decolonized of plastic, as much as it is a challenge to imagine a life without fossil fuels and capitalism as such.

Conclusion

What does it mean to imagine life decolonized of plastic? What kind of ontology and politics – ontopolitics – does such decolonization entail? In this text, I have offered three models for doing things with plastic. In the first model, plastic is made a body intransitive because it refuses to behave according to the cyclical image of nature that normativity requires in order for it to function. The second model gives us plastic as nothing but signifying body. This model refuses to recognize bodily materiality of the plastic body and the potentiality for agency of such a body, all the while insisting on the materiality of the sign. The third model is fully conscious of the agency of the plastic body. So much so that this model ontologically flattens any kind of hierarchy between the bodies, and in doing so reveals the ways bodies are made inextricably interrelated, especially in the times of contemporary form of capitalism.

How to de-link non-plastic bodies from the body of plastic? Should we? This second question is especially pertinent because the idea that plastic is of secondary ontological importance because of its artificiality is part and parcel of normative assemblage. Some forms of non-normative life have found multiple uses of plastic in de-coupling various behaviors from the norm. On the other hand, plastic has made it easier for capitalism to set up a thicker network of relations with human and nonhuman bodies. Perhaps some decolonial tactics can be found in the effort to denaturalize bodies, their behaviors, and naturecultures they produce. Decolonial denaturalization would not mean negation of plastic toxicity but it would be particularly attentive to the intensity of toxicity, so much so that it would tactically use it to poison in order to heal. That is, it would invent new kinds of relationality beyond the one colonized by capitalism in the Plasticene in order to create surplus-value of life.

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