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A Reply to Jun's "Posthuman Subjectivity and Singularity in the Nature-Culture Continuum"

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## Challenging Braidotti's Idea of Posthuman Subjectivity

In his article on “Posthuman Subjectivity and Singularity in the Nature-Culture Continuum” (2020) Hyun-Shik Jun challenges Rosi Braidotti's approach to the emergence and ontology of posthuman subjectivity from the nature-culture continuum. He analyzes the idea of the human as posthuman subjectivity within the framework proposed by the influential posthuman theorist—understood as nomadic and vital, trespassing the limits of nature and culture in the continuum.

In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti describes posthuman subjectivity:

The posthuman nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded - it is firmly located somewhere, according to the radical immanence of the ‘politics of location’ that I have stressed throughout this book. It is a multi-faceted and relational subject, conceptualized within a monistic ontology, through the lenses of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, plus feminist and post-colonial theories. It is a subject actualized by the relational vitality and elemental complexity that mark posthuman thought itself (188).

Jun proposes to redefine the concept of Braidotti's posthuman subject overcoming dualisms in the continuum of nature-culture view by revisiting Hegel's dialectics, Derrida's concept of *différance*, and Giorgio Agamben's description of a paradigm. He criticizes Braidotti for being ontologically monistic (Jun 2020, 2) in bringing about the reconciliation of dialectical opposites. Braidotti consciously makes this move in “Anthropos Redux: A Defence of Monism in the Anthropocene Epoch” (2016b) in which she stays on the side of Spinoza in the discussion with Hegel. Jun claims—rightly in my perspective—that Braidotti's approach is reductive and should be further developed.

It is worth adding to Jun's critique that Braidotti's ontological monism is vitalist. Vitalism hinders the possibility of grasping the ideas of subject and subjectivity that are not to be reduced to matter alive before any categorizations—*zoe* (2016a, 385) Revisiting dialectics benefits how we conceptualize the constant flux and dynamic emergence of the subject that is embodied and embedded in a certain environment. Stressing the vital side of the subject, the contextualized embodiment in the world in which one is immersed, would serve well Jun's line of argument on “[a] transversal subject [which] is not the universal disembodied subject of modernity but a singular paradigmatic embodied subject (...) [each time in some] spacio-temporal context” (Jun 2020, 6).

Braidotti's reduction to monism, for Jun, results from her limited grasp of dialectics. Jun tries to overcome this problem by referring to Hegel, Derrida and Agamben. This is a good try and worthy effort, and I would like to support these endeavors. Catherine Malabou's work provides a way forward. She revises the dialectics present in Hegel's, Heidegger's, and Derrida's writings in a way that allows us to see openness and plasticity that should be added to Jun's considerations.

Although there are always many authors to be referred to in each case, the choice to focus on Malabou is not accidental. Malabou, Derrida's student, deeply rethinks the tradition of continental philosophy in developing the thesis that we are now face the dusk of the text. According to Malabou, plasticity replaces textuality. This move is crucial to describe a posthuman subject which is embodied, located, historical, dynamic, intentional and material in the same moment. Moreover, this move cannot be fully executed if we stay with Derrida's words that "There is nothing outside text" (Derrida 1988, 136)—which Jun also cites.

My reply aims to support Jun's critique of Braidotti's understanding of dialectic and to stress the importance of embodiment by linking it to Hegelian dialectics and Derridian *différance* through Malabou's concept of plasticity. The concept of plasticity remains especially important as it trespasses the division between content and form, presence and the absence, matter and idea, which is essential for Jun's attempt to grasp posthuman subjectivity in the nature-culture continuum and not only in sets of separations.

### Plasticity

Plasticity comes from Greek word *plasein* meaning modelling and refers to two basic meanings: 1) the ability to obtain a form (as for example clay is "plastic"); and, 2) the ability to give form (like in "plastic" arts or "plastic" surgery). Investigating the French meanings of this family of words, Malabou extends semantically the meaning of plasticity towards *plastiquage*—a noun meaning a plastic bomb, and *plastiquer*—a verb meaning to detonate plastic (on the basis of nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose). These meanings place plasticity between two extremes—sensible form and destruction of any form (Malabou 2018, 20).

Plasticity simultaneously brings about the substance and the spirit in the constant process of emergence, development, and change—allowing for trespassing the discussion between presence and absence, coherent form and destructed form, and mind and matter. Plasticity places itself on various levels of human activity and on various levels of being. It has ontological significance pointing at the differences in the heart of whatever exists in some material, biological, logical manner, but it also includes more specific references to the neurobiological plasticity of the human brain (Malabou 2005, 192) giving its phenomenal effects in both a material and a conscious way. In order to arrive at such an understanding of a dialectical processes neither confined to the spirit or some kind of rationality, nor to vital changes of the matter itself, Malabou offers philosophically plastic readings not only of Hegel (primarily), but also of Heidegger and Levinas.

Malabou points out that Hegel himself refers to the notion of plasticity. In *Aesthetics* Hegel writes on plastic arts and, especially, on sculpture which is "the plastic art par excellence" (1975, 709). Plasticity, as understood through art, encourages Hegel to write about plastic individuals that are "exemplary" and "substantial" like Pericles, Phidias, Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, Xenophon and Socrates who are "great and free, grown independently on the soil of their own inherently substantial personality, self-made, and developing into what they (essentially) were and wanted to be" (719). Hegel's understanding of plastic individuals—formed, substantial and exemplary—leads Malabou to extend the understanding of the concept of plasticity from "its first signifying domain, that of sculpture, (...) [to the] third, that of *philosophical* plasticity" (Malabou, 2005, 10).

Negativity or contradiction can be perceived both in synchronic and in diachronic dimensions referring to the self—as differences in one subject between its mental/ spiritual/ intellectual part—and to the material—as differences in one subject in different moments in time. The unfolding is never ultimate and does not find closure. This line follows Martin Heidegger’s criticism of Hegelian dialectics as immobile, unchangeable, and unable to transform anything, although it presents itself as an engine of change (1997, 212). However, Malabou shows that Hegel’s *Aufhebung* is the dialectical process of autopresentation of the other in the same which there already is. Negation, then, is an aspect of change not arriving at the abolition of differentiation. Sublation is not the same as abolition, but it contains the dynamic moments of tension and emergence on entwined spiritual and biological level (Malabou 2018, 51).

Although Heidegger claims that in Hegel’s thought there exists the insurmountable contradiction between formal, logical negativity and phenomenological negativity (Malabou 2018, 47), he also notices that the Hegelian idea of existence is close to the idea of *metabole*; that is, the change taking place is not a certain, defined moment, but the movement of emergence itself funding the ontological sense of experience (Heidegger 1997, 106). Further developing this notion, Malabou shows that sublation (*Aufhebung*) is the effect of the work of creative imagination trespassing the finite subject and opening the door to think, in the same moment, both about the individual subject, in an anthropological sense (2005, 30), and about God’s intellect (2018, 64). She concludes that Hegel’s philosophy, as such, is moldable, focusing on the plasticity of being (which is not the same with the other) which develops into unknown realms.

Turning to Malabou’s reading of Hegel, we arrive at the conclusion that neither text nor context comprises language, life, history, the world and so on, as Jun (2) argues citing Derrida: “There is nothing outside text.” Rather, the plasticity of what comprises texts, matter, mind and so forth, which is not equated and merged into one and which is in constant flux giving unstoppable birth to the new on different levels (not just material or mental but first of all intentional, as described by Joseph Margolis (2004, 120)) that are embodied, historied, and open for interpretation.

The importance of introducing the concept of plasticity into thinking regarding dialectics and deconstruction also recognizes Derrida himself, who writes an introduction to Malabou’s book on *The Future of Hegel*. Derrida claims that Malabou is writing the history of the future by rethinking and reinterpreting Hegel’s dialectics in a way that projects itself into the future in both specific and general dimensions—referring to an individual being-subject and to “becoming-subject of all subjectivity” (Derrida in Malabou 2005, xi).

Derrida is deeply moved by Malabou’s vision and reinterpretation leading us towards the future of plasticity (Derrida in Malabou 2005, xi-xiii) because it trespasses the limits of discourse taking up discourse and text as only moments in a bigger whole, pulsating with internal rhythm—dialectic, transformative, biological and intellectual. This is striking for Derrida especially, perhaps, because this reinterpretation is performed by an exquisite student and philosopher continuing in enriching—but not canonical manner—the ideas of the teacher. In Malabou’s writings, Derridian *différance* also embraces the world outside of

the text. This conception suggests that her ontological and epistemological approach is not far from a posthuman view that reconsiders the concept of subject, its emergence, activity, and openness for transformation. Reference to Malabou's line of thinking can contribute to describing and elaborating posthuman subject, embodied and embedded, but not reducible to vital forces moving it, nomadic and intellectual, spiritual conscious, cultural and intentional. Grounding her reflection on Hegel, Malabou takes up *plastic individuality* which may help us understand the subject and subjectivity in posthumanism.

### **Post-Postmodern Move**

Malabou inscribes herself deeply into discussions on dialectics and deconstruction, not just repeating and analyzing historical positions, but envisioning her own way through. She is not postmodern because she does not continue the line of deconstruction and free play of past elements. Reinterpreting dialectics on simultaneously a vital and a spiritual level, she does not follow easily or straightforwardly the destruction mode, disconnecting and deconstructing. Considering contradictions, she does not propose their annihilation, but proposes plasticity as a new value. I claim, then, that Malabou's move is a post-postmodern one, where the first prefix "post-" refers itself in succession in time, while the second to the trend in 20<sup>th</sup> century humanities—postmodernism. Malabou is post-postmodern because she proposes a kind of continuity both in philosophy as a historical discipline and in being which is both—being-for-itself and being-subject (to the other).

Taking up the discussion with the postmodern tradition is necessary today not just to confirm the destruction and deconstruction it offers, but to develop this negative and contradictory thinking up to its limits—when it becomes something more than just thinking and text, when it enters in the realm of positive-negative creation of the new, not in a rationally planned mode but through chinks and slots, apertures and fissures, joining and diving, being both the end and the beginning. Rosi Braidotti, who may be claimed a postmodern feminist philosopher, often calls for a post-postmodern approach. She suggests that staying with just a postmodern grasp on subjectivity, destructing it and deconstructing, we stay with nothing. Deconstructing subjectivity as hegemonically defined for centuries as white, rational, wealthy men, we do not have anything to propose to women. We take away the possibility of recognizing different kinds of subjects and empowering them in new ways. In contrast, Braidotti proposes a fluid subjectivity not human anymore, but posthuman, which is supposed to be nomadic, dynamic, dialectical and monist.

We may say that Braidotti tries to eat her cake and have it too; that is, to deconstruct subjectivity and to have it still. The way out she finds for this puzzle is to make a move from human to posthuman by referring to subjectivity. Braidotti makes a conceptual move, a move in our understanding of subjectivity, made possible by abandoning the idea of human. Humans were in the world well before Plato and Descartes. Human history does not equate to the history of Western definitions of human over the last less than two and a half millennia. I agree with Braidotti and many other contemporary posthuman (and not only) writers that the Western concept of the human should be revised, but I do not agree with throwing it away completely (Lukaszewicz Alcaraz 2019, 17-18). Such a move raises difficulty in thinking who is posthuman.

Resigning from the human, Braidotti also loses the understanding of agency and personhood—which might not be human but of a different kind—which Ilia Delio (2020) points to in her response to Jun. The monistic “self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter” (Braidotti 2013, 3) is the way she understands subjectivity, what is emblematic for posthuman vitalism and posthuman vitalist ethics advocated by her. However, from this point of view, it is not possible to say on an ethical level who is responsible, who is an agent, who is a person, and on ontological level it is closed and monist. In order to trespass dualism, the only answer is not to turn to monism, which might be compared to a kind of Schopenhauerian version of perceiving everything as the appearance of a will-in-itself (Lukaszewicz Alcaraz 2019, 97-100). Jun, then, is right to criticize Braidotti’s approach to dialectics which tries to reconcile opposites of nature and culture in one nature-culture continuum.

## Conclusion

Hyun-Shik Jun’s “Posthuman Subjectivity and Singularity in the Nature-Culture Continuum” offers an interesting presentation of the posthuman subjectivity of Rosi Braidotti. Revisiting Hegelian dialectics and Derridian *différance* in order to trespass the limits of Braidotti’s thought remains a good idea. The development of the argument is reasonable although the concepts of singularity and embodiment require further elaboration outside the borders of text and context in a more plastic way. The article calls for polemics and for development of this important issue in the ontological function of the posthuman subject—less underlining semiotics from one side and better defining it as an individual and a common subject on the other. To achieve this aim, Catherine Malabou’s grasp on plasticity as the new effect of rethinking Hegelian dialectics and trespassing the limitations of Derrida’s thought, may serve us well.

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