

BECOMING HORROR IN THE PLASTICENE

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Upon visiting an exhibition of plastic in Paris in the mid 1950s, Roland Barthes wrote a short essay on the metaphoric qualities of the 20th century wonder material:

More than a substance plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance.¹

Barthes' *Mythologies* collection, from which his *Plastic* essay is taken, was an elegy on the everyday. In banal capitalist commodities and pop cultural clichés Barthes sought out the magical, revealing the everyday as the fountain of secular mythology.² Plastic is seemingly infinite in its capacity to be formed and used, and it is this feature which renders plastic meaningless in itself, able to take on *completely* any gesture or idea that is breathed into it. The substance's descent to prosaic, crass, cheap, and expendable is – for Barthes – precisely what marks it as miraculous. The transformations plastic is capable of going through give us, according to Barthes, a measure of our power, 'since the very itinerary of plastic gives [us] the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through nature.' With remarkable prescience, and in retrospect, breath-taking ecological ignorance, Barthes foresaw a time where 'ultimately objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them.'³

A substance of unrivaled utility and acquiescence, the miraculous, 'sudden transformation' of plastic, soon gives way to the mundane, through the rituals of use and waste that organize our collective hyperconsumptive disregard. We swaddle our food in plastic, and place it in babies' mouths to aid in their weaning. It protects and insulates the surface of our bodies, and its nonreactive properties see it plunged inside us during medical procedures. But plastic is ultimately ready to be discarded as soon as it is produced, one of the many pathologies of our capitalist yearning for comfort and economic renewal. As Felix Guattari noted, 'capitalism remains a formidable desiring machine. The monetary flux, the means of production, of manpower, of new markets, all that is the flow of desire.'⁴

Digging through landfill middens produced by capitalist accumulation over the last century, future archaeologists will peel at layer beneath layer of plastic food packaging, baby pacifiers, and unfixable kitchen appliances in a journey back through our times. This kipple indicates and organizes the fashions of each decade, not only in testimony to what consumers once valued, but 'as a material enactment of forgetting.'⁵ As Myra J. Hird observes:

Landfills swell with things we once wanted and now do not want, once valued and no longer value. What remains *after* our disgorgement is what we (want to) consider our *real* self.⁶

Our obsession with forgetting, Hird suggests, is ritualized through the separation, organization and eventual dumping of waste. Calling on Mary Douglas' work on impurity and pollution, Greg Kennedy defines waste as that which 'settles outside the ruled lines of our conceptual schema,'⁷ remarking further that 'a society preoccupied with concealing its wastes must have something important to hide from itself.'⁸

'Calling out Roland Barthes' obsession with plastic as a substance of instantaneity, Heather Davis regards oil and its plastic miscellany as a form of *slow violence* of inexplicable, drawn out, material consequence. 'Plastic,' Heather Davis suggests, 'is the ultimate material of tempophagy, or time-eating, one that consumes the compressed bodies of ancient plants and animals, a process that took thousands of years, only to be transformed into a single-use take-out container.'⁹ One of many precocious children conceived by crude oil and industrial capitalism, plastic is composed of long strings of organic polymers separated by fractioning processes. Oil itself is what Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis call 'fossilized death,'¹⁰ a fluid, concentrated remainder of entire ecosystems, coalescing over millions of years into the lifeblood of capitalist causes. Once disposed of and disregarded, plastic enters into a further, distended relationship with microscopic flora and fauna. Broken down into microplastic fragments by exposure to the sun and tidal forces, plastic become an ecosystem for bacterial colonies and viruses, locking themselves to its smooth surfaces. As it disperses even further, plastics leach their chemical constituents, perhaps most infamously *Bisphenol A*, which mimics the effects of the hormone estrogen, and has been shown to impact on the fertility of fish, amphibians, and some evidence suggests, human beings. As Erik

1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009).

2 Ben Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* (Psychology Press, 2002), 305.

3 Barthes, *Mythologies*.

4 Jane Bennett, 'Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter' (Lecture, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, 26 September 2011)

5 Myra J. Hird, 'Knowing Waste: Towards an Inhuman Epistemology', *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 3–4 (October 2012): 456

6 *Ibid.*, 457

7 Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash: The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 6.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 Heather Davis, 'Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures', *philoSOPHIA* 5, no. 2 (2015): 235

10 Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, 'Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil' *E-Flux*, *E-Flux*, no. 47 (September 2013),

Swyngedouw persuasively argues, we cannot escape, “‘producing nature’... [forcing] us to make choices about what socio-natural worlds we wish to inhabit... a qualitative transformation of BOTH society AND nature has to be envisaged.”¹¹

Today, perhaps the most iconic testament to planetary forgetting is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. ‘The creation,’ theorist Jane Bennett explains, ‘of the conjoint actions of water currents, capitalist accumulation, a fervent ideology of economic growth and free markets, and the trillions of plastic bags, toys, packagings, machines, tools, bottles that humans manufacture, use and discard every minute.’¹² In the Great Pacific Garbage Patch ritualistic forgetting becomes monumentalized at a scale difficult for us to comprehend. It is what Timothy Morton refers to as a ‘hyperobject’, an entity of such size and magnitude that it dwarfs our perceptual schema. For Morton hyperobjects like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or Global Warming, the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima, or The Gulf Oil Spill of 2010, are cataclysms that *close the beyond*.¹³ There is no ‘away’ anymore, no ‘Outside’ into which we can ritually cast those things we wish to rule out of the schema of ourselves. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a distributed testimony of forgetting that plasticizes the entire planet, and will remain etched into the geological record long after we are gone. The horror of The Plasticene is one impossible to escape, and it binds humans and critters in ways that far exceed the provisional title of ‘we’.

The Plasticene is an action being carried out on itself; a wave molding the very substrate that carries it, as it crashes against its own defenses. This is, echoing theorist Eugene Thacker, the promise of *horror*: to be able to take ‘aim at the presuppositions of philosophical inquiry – that the world is always the world-for-us – and [make] of those blind spots its central concern, expressing them not in abstract concepts but in a whole bestiary of impossible life forms – mists, ooze, blobs, slime, clouds, and muck.’¹⁴ Within these ‘impossible life forms’ cultural norms are disturbed as monsters, and unstoppable, invisible forces battle for supremacy at the edges of human imagination. And because these horrors are themselves plastic, malleable forms, able to incorporate all manner of mutated beings and disturbances, they are ‘as unstoppable as the transformations [they] mirror’.¹⁵ That is, as Rosi Braidotti argues, only horrific figures can keep up with, represent, and perhaps combat, the horror of our times.

The world that The Plasticene brings into being has no outside, no beyond. It swells to oceanic proportions, and dwells in the guts of microflora, fish and amphibians,

shifting their hormonal make-up to amplify human causes to a planetary scale. In an ironic turn, Roland Barthes’ proclamations on plastic have become an indicator of the kind of mutual morphologies our planet sustains. For just as Barthes marked out plastic’s seemingly infinite capacity to be molded into any mundane and/or horrific shape humans willed upon it, so in the era of The Plasticene the roles have been reversed. ‘Nature’ becomes, for plastic and other waste materials that bubble and leach at the echelons of civilization, a mere substrate to be lent form through chemical muddlings and additivistic altercations. By tracing just one material consequence of our hyperconsumptive civilization it is possible to see an alternative becoming of nature qua human that ‘weaves all beings into the interdependent context of the manifest world.’¹⁶ A world that exceeds any ‘we’ any ‘us’ that confronts it; a world showing itself to have always already been plastic in its capacity to constantly reform and envelope itself.

11 Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures’, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24, no. 1 (March 2013): 18

12 Bennett, ‘Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter’.

13 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, *Posthumanities* 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 94.

14 Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* (Ropley: Zero, 2011), 9.

15 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Wiley, 2002), 185.

16 Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash*, 162.