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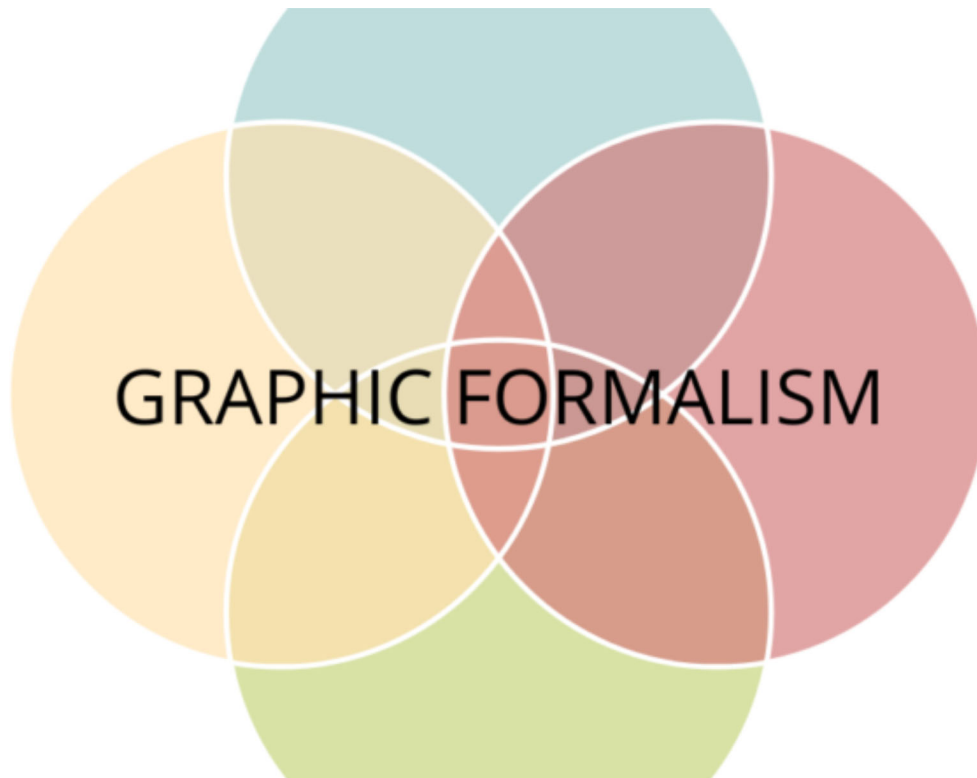
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## Graphic Formalism / *The Line of the Impossibility of Flight:* *Eisenstein, Disney, Malabou* / Abraham Geil

📅 March 27, 2023 (<https://asapjournal.com/graphic-formalism-the-line-of-the-impossibility-of-flight-eisenstein-disney-malabou-abraham-geil/>) 👤 Abraham Geil (<https://asapjournal.com/author/ageil/>)



\*

*It is not a question of how to escape closure but rather how to escape within closure itself.*<sup>1</sup>

—Catherine Malabou

*Literal. And therefore comic.*<sup>2</sup>

—Sergei Eisenstein

In one of his more audacious accusations of plagiarism by anticipation, Sergei Eisenstein asserts that

certain pages from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* are obviously copied from Walt Disney's early animations. This remark appears in Eisenstein's essay on Disney that he intended to form part of his great unfinished book *Method*, the idea for which he conceived in Mexico where he had resumed with a new intensity his life-long practice of drawing. And indeed, Eisenstein's writings on Disney give the distinct impression of a self-portrait. The graphic core of this (self)recognition of Disney lies in the uninterrupted movement of the line, what Eisenstein calls "that typical Disney coiling quality," a quality of movement that likewise marks Eisenstein's style of contour or continuous-line drawing.<sup>3</sup> Both enact a formal principle whereby movement precedes the object that moves. The movement of the eye as it follows the line is at one with the movement of the line itself, immersed in a mode of sensory thought that precedes the logical separation of subject and object. This "pre-logical attractiveness" cuts across time and culture to magnetize Eisenstein's associational montage of names arrayed throughout his Disney essay—Walter Trier, Utagawa Toyohiro, Grandville, Olaf Gulbransson, Saul Steinberg, William Steig, La Fontaine, Charles Darwin, Maxim Gorky, Émile Zola, Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, among others—whose drawings and writings share an elective affinity with Disney and himself through their wildly different expressions of the same "protean thirst."<sup>4</sup> *Plasmaticity* is Eisenstein's name for this elective affinity. It is the "prevailing" *in* form over "the fetters of form," the capacity latent in a given form "to take on any form dynamically."<sup>5</sup>

The French philosopher Catherine Malabou is another name that today begs addition to Eisenstein's capacious list of artists and thinkers of the plasmatic. There is a generative proximity between Eisenstein's formal principle of plasmaticity and Malabou's signature concept of plasticity: the motor scheme or image of thought by which she has for more than two decades radically thought the past and future of Continental philosophy along with contemporary neurobiology. From the Greek *plassein*, to mold, plasticity refers to the capacity to receive form (as in clay) and the capacity to bestow form (as in plastic surgery). To these two familiar senses, Malabou adds a crucial third: the capacity to explode form (as in *plastique*).<sup>6</sup> Although this destructive dimension of plasticity appears the antinomy of form—indeed, its annihilation—it must nevertheless be understood not as the simple negation of the first two "positive" capacities but rather as their condition. Destructive plasticity is not an event that befalls form from the outside. It is the active principle of immanent disruption that gives plasticity its force and consistency as a concept, as opposed to being simply a word for the malleability of raw material. Hence the essential distinction Malabou draws between plasticity and its "mistaken cognate, *flexibility*."<sup>7</sup> That latter term designates an elastic adaptability to circumstance, the ability to submit to whatever changes in form without transforming its own identity, ultimately "to be docile, to not explode."<sup>8</sup> If flexibility is "plasticity minus its genius," as Malabou puts it, the genius of plasticity as a concept lies in the way that it has enabled her to transform a philosophical formation that she could neither abide nor escape. She describes her book *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2005) as a portrait in a double sense: of the concept of plasticity and of her own intellectual itinerary. What links the two sides of this portrait is precisely the way that plasticity thinks "the impossibility of fleeing" in moments when "it is necessary to flee this impossibility," where there is an extreme pressure toward an outside that does not exist.<sup>9</sup> Plasticity grasps this impossibility precisely as a structure of formation and transformation.

The form of the impossibility of fleeing. This enigmatic conceptual figure takes on a certain concreteness, even literalness, when seen in light of the relation Eisenstein posits between Disney's interwar animations and their socio-historical context.<sup>10</sup> Although Eisenstein understands Disney's very emergence in his time and place as a revolt against the Fordist standardization and fragmentation of the "social structure of the advanced capitalist state," it is nevertheless a strictly "lyrical revolt."<sup>11</sup> Disney does not point the way out of "that hell of social burdens, injustices and torments in which his American viewers are hopelessly trapped."<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of mass revolution, his animations are "[f]ruitless and drained of consequences."<sup>13</sup> No future proletariat of the United States will raise statues of Walt. But nor is he complicit or quietist in Eisenstein's eyes. He neither "unmasks" nor offers the "oblivion" of "happy endings."<sup>14</sup> "Disney is simply 'beyond good and evil.'"<sup>15</sup> Eisenstein's Disney thus exists at a marked distance from the one found in the roughly contemporaneous writings of Frankfurt School theorists: it is neither Walter Benjamin's redemptive picture of the "globe-encircling Mickey Mouse" as the basis for a waking "collective dream"; nor is it Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's Donald Duck who receives his "beatings" in the cartoons "so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs" in the hammering tempo and ceaseless repetition of industrial work and life.<sup>16</sup>

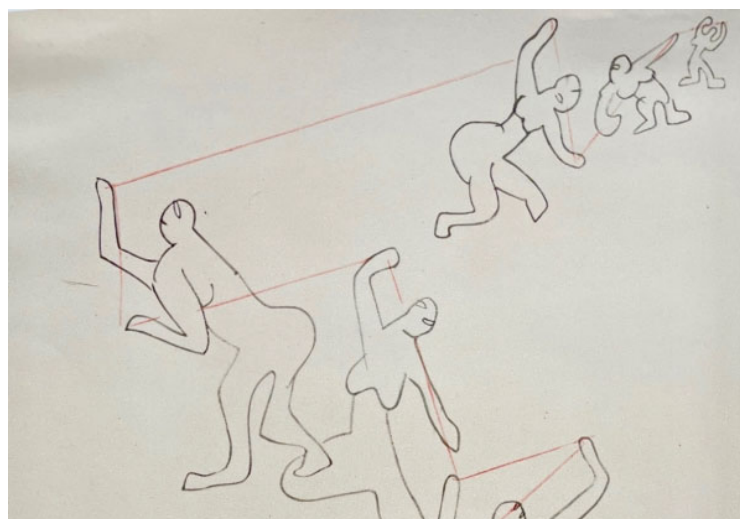
By virtue of bracketing the ideological content of Disney's animations along with the Fordist organization of their production, Eisenstein identifies a principle captured quite concisely by Malabou's definition of plasticity as "the form of alterity without transcendence."<sup>17</sup> Following the logic of Malabou's distinction between plasticity and flexibility, Eisenstein's concept of the plasmatic is not reducible to the mere elasticity of animated forms that stretch and contract. In what he calls the "unhinged flight of extremities in Disney's drawings" there is an internal excess pushing toward an outside that is not there.<sup>18</sup> Speaking through Malabou, we can say that Eisenstein wishes to see in Disney "the formation of a way out in the absence of a way out, within the closure [...] a sudden transformation without any change of ground, a mutation that produces a new form of identity and makes the former one explode."<sup>19</sup> Octopuses become elephants and fish become donkeys in Eisenstein's beloved *Merebabies* (1938), as if the "very game of 'becoming something else' is now 'becoming the impossible.'"<sup>20</sup> Against the historical horizon Eisenstein repeatedly describes as the immutable logic of an inescapable social structure, the illogic of these plasmatic forms unfolds "in displacement, combination, and idiosyncratic protest against metaphysical inertness established once and for all."<sup>21</sup> Here metaphysics is not overcome so much as it is metamorphized.

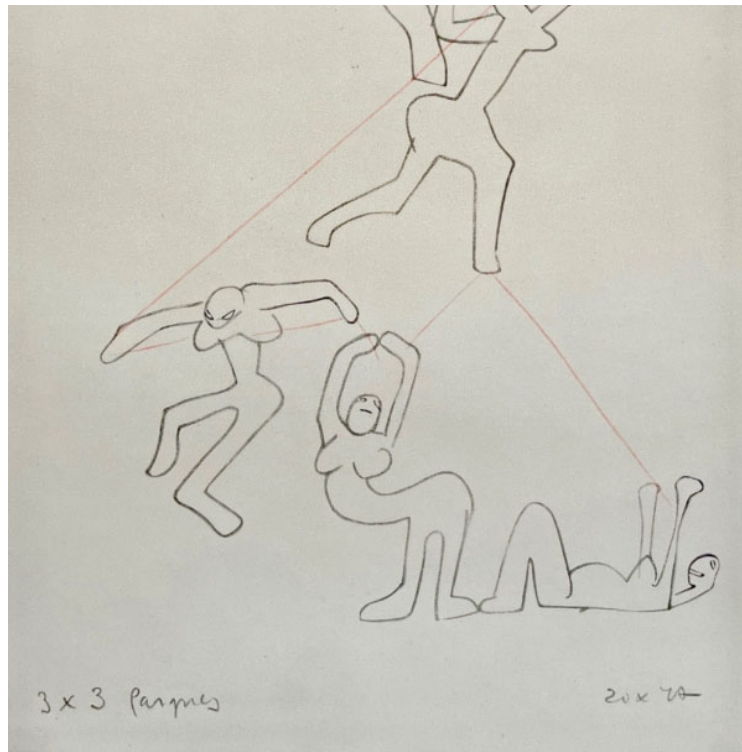
A "*metamorphosized metaphysics*" is precisely how Malabou's "plastic analysis" grasps the form of a philosophical inheritance that she can neither embrace nor flee.<sup>22</sup> It is philosophy after its destruction (Heidegger) and deconstruction (Derrida), a metamorphic structuralism in which structure is what comes after, not a point of origin but a result. Something akin to this retroactive dynamic is also at play in the temporal displacements of Eisenstein's writing. It is what enables him to freely locate Disney's drawings as the original to Ovid's copy. At the register of form, it is the principle whereby movement precedes the object moving, a principle rendered graphically in the closed line of Eisenstein's contour drawing and the "coiling quality" of Disney's animations.

Just as plasticity is the image of thought by which Malabou metamorphizes the philosophical inheritance of her intellectual formation, it also works upon the very concept of metamorphosis found within that inheritance. In even the most extreme examples of metamorphosis from Ovid to Kafka she detects a substantialist core: “Form transforms; substance remains.”<sup>23</sup> What remains is an identity that subjectivizes its own metamorphosis. To break fully from this picture would mean imagining “a Gregor perfectly indifferent to his transformation.”<sup>24</sup> If there is no outside of form for Malabou, neither is there an inside. Nor is this plastic conception of metamorphosis to be understood as a pure leap or phase shift from one monad to another. The “secret, primitive connection that bonds” transformation and substitution is itself always double: it marks at once the impossibility of form to be purely self-identical and the “impossibility for this non-self-coincidence or rupture [...] to give itself in any other way than as a becoming of form.”<sup>25</sup>

*Ex-stasis*—form standing beside itself—is Eisenstein’s term for this immanent rupture that dynamizes the movement of form’s becoming. It names the motive force and effect of plasmaticity: “Ecstasy is the sense and experience of the primary ‘all-possible’ – of the element of ‘formation’ – of the plasmaticity of existence from which all can arise.”<sup>26</sup> What Eisenstein sees in Disney’s early animations is an “instance of *formal ecstasy*.”<sup>27</sup> For him, this direct representation of the ecstatic process in form (which he also calls its literalization) has a specifically comic force. By pushing the conflictual unity of form to a limit, the comic effect is produced by making explicit the truth that “every representation exists dually: as a collection of lines and as an image that grows out of them.”<sup>28</sup> When for example “the *line of the neck* [of an animated figure] elongates beyond the limits of possibility for *necks* to elongate,” the “object and the form of its representation are pulled apart” even as they are held together in the movement of the figure.<sup>29</sup> The disuniting of essence and form is given literal figuration in the unity of a single form.

This picture of plasmatic form returns us finally to Eisenstein’s own drawing practice in which the pencil, without breaking contact with the paper, traces the ecstatic movement of a single uninterrupted line. If the closed line of Eisenstein’s contour drawings seems like a reductive, (comically) literal rendering of Malabou’s philosophical conception of plasticity as the form of escape within closure rather than from it, of alterity without an outside—good! This literalness, this reduction to form, lies at the graphic heart of their formalist kinship.





3 x 3 Parques from Sergei Eisenstein's 'Les parques' cycle (1947)



Still from Merebabies (Disney, 1938)

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## Endnotes

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24. Malabou, *Ontology*, 18.
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28. Eisenstein, *Disney*, 55.
29. Eisenstein, *Disney*, 55.

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