

MEMORY AS FORM AND AS TRACE:
AN ACCOUNT OF MALABOU'S RUPTURE WITH
DERRIDA IN *MEMORY ASSEMBLAGES*

Pedro Guimarães Pinho

I.

I propose to examine Catherine Malabou's rupture with Jacques Derrida through one of its main threads: their dispute over the concept of memory — an approach I consider particularly appropriate to the context of this publication. In doing so, I aim to position *Memory Assemblages* by Shajara Bensusan within this debate, highlighting the concept of memory that emerges from it, defined as the articulation between retention and retrieval.

The centre of this rupture is the critique of the concept of *trace*. To follow the terms in which this rupture operates, I must first provide a schematic definition of this concept. For this purpose, one of the sources in which this concept was forged is particularly relevant — namely, Freud's work. After that, we will move on to Malabou's critique.

In order to understand the concept of trace, it is also necessary to comprehend the concept of writing. The two are intimately connected, for the historical devaluation of writing within the history of philosophy occurs as a reduction of writing to the trace. Their connection is further reinforced through Derrida's analysis of Freud's work.

In "Freud and the Scene of Writing", Derrida traces the progressive refinement, throughout Freud's work, of a topographical model. This development begins in "Project for a Scientific Psychology", where Freud employs a "neurological fable" to explain memory from the standpoint of the natural sciences, which culminates in "Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad". According to Derrida, this refinement is guided by Freud's search for a

description of memory in terms of writing and trace.¹ I will now define what these terms mean.

To explain the phenomenon of memory, Freud elaborates the image of a neurological system initially divided into two directions: on the one hand, there would be neurons in charge of perception; on the other, there would be those responsible for the retention of some of these perceptions — that is, responsible for memory. For Derrida, from that moment on, Freud was already moving toward a conception of memory as trace.

Without anticipating too much of the definition of the concept, the movement of memory toward the trace can already be found in a certain duplicity within the concept of memory, one that was prefigured even before the emergence of psychoanalysis. According to Derrida, Freud comes to understand that, to approach the phenomenon of memory, it is necessary to account for the coexistence of two opposing tendencies within the psyche.

The first tendency points to the capacity of perception — the source of memory — to remain open to an uninterrupted flow of experiences. Derrida describes this nature of perception as the “always intact nakedness of the receptive or perceptive surface.” The second tendency concerns the retention of some of these perceptions, authorized by a certain preference or selection — a constitutive capacity of memory which presupposes an alteration of the very same structures responsible for perception. As Derrida observes, the neurons must simultaneously be shaped and transformed, yet remain unchanged, immutable.²

Even though the “Project for a Scientific Psychology” seeks to avoid the contradiction between the two tendencies — preventing them from colliding — the gradual refinement toward a single structure in which they may coincide indicates, paradoxically, a desire to reinforce that very contradiction. This, as prefigured from the outset, is accomplished in “Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad”. Before the Mystic Writing Pad, however, the concept of memory had already united these two directions divided through the classification of neurons. What, then, is the significance of insisting on this contradiction?

For Derrida, the contradictory coexistence of these two terms reveals a

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 270.

² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 251-153.

relation of supplementation between memory and perception, toward which Freud wished to point.³ This implies that memory indicates at once both an intensification of the functions of perception and a lack inscribed within perception itself, of which memory bears witness. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida defines the supplement as something that “adds itself, it is a surplus [...] it cumulates and accumulates presence” while at the same time it “supplies,” “adds itself only in order to replace,” and “if it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence.”⁴

When applied to the relation between perception and memory, the logic of the supplement subverts the traditional view that confines the function of memory to the retrieval of experiences first gathered in perception. This reversal entails a questioning of the status of perception as a pure and simple “continuous flow of full experiences in the present instant”—a questioning reinforced by the union of vectors in Freud’s topological model. According to Derrida, if perception allows itself to be replaced by memory, it is because memory challenges the presumed plenitude of experience.

It is thus, finally, that memory is defined through the notions of trace and by writing. Derrida argues that both have assumed a downgraded position within the history of philosophy, since, in opposition to speech, they call into question the possibility of a full presence, the plenitude of the present moment. In his reading of *Phaedrus*, Derrida notes that the emergence of writing is narrated as the introduction of a *pharmakon* — a term whose translation preserves the duplicity between “remedy” and “poison.” Writing would therefore be the supplement par excellence: it enables speech to be preserved and restored, yet at the same time it replaces speech, rendering it dispensable. Moreover, writing bears an ambivalence and a “seductive power” absent from speech uttered in the present instant. In writing, meaning never fully presents itself in the present; words are “deferred, reserved, enveloped, folded up”—they “make us wait for them.”⁵

The same can be said of memory—especially insofar as, in Freud, it seems to

3 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 282.

4 Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 144-145.

5 Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 71.

be defined through a topological model, a form of writing in the proper sense. Even if the capacity to concentrate within a single structure the ambivalence inscribed at the core of memory were not enough to convince one of the written nature of Freud's nervous system, the privilege accorded to the trace over the present instant leaves little room for doubt. Despite the provisional solution offered by the classification of neurons, the operation of those neurons responsible for memory still remains as evidence of the privilege of the written trace.

This is because Freud describes the procedure of retaining memories in the body of these neurons precisely as the formation of a mnemonic trace. Certain neurons are suited for retention because in them are inscribed the impressions of events that occur in perception. Memories are thus inscriptions, explorations. Recorded in the body of the neurons, memories are sustained by traces. For this reason, perceptions never occur in a full present instant; they vanish at the very moment they arise.

In Derrida's reading, what could be seen as a problem to be overcome by a neuroscience to come, Freud treats as the fundamental condition of memory. The inscription of a perception within the body of a neuron stumbles upon the difficulty of explaining how the nervous system can identify the same experience across a multiplicity of perceptions. Upon this capacity would depend the possibility of accounting for the reinforcement of a certain memory through the repetition of that same experience. As Derrida observes, it remains unexplained how one experience can be added to another so as to reinforce it. This difficulty leads back to the nature of the present instant, which cannot subsist in order to join with other instants; it can subsist only as trace, as an erasure of itself. Repetition adds "no quantity of force" in the present, "no intensity," it only "reissues the same impression." The reinforcement of an impression presupposes the consolidation of that which it is meant to consolidate.⁶

Notwithstanding this problem remains only insofar as one maintains a conception of memory founded upon full presence, upon the retention of a full perception, capable of rendering present the identity of an experience. If, however, one takes the erasure of memory at its source — perception itself — as a point of departure, a different conception of memory becomes possible: one

6 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 253.

built upon the impossibility of the full presence of experience, and on its fundamental difference as trace.

As Derrida argues, only by appealing to *différance* — to a “pure difference” — can one account for the formation of memory. Memories are not constructed upon the identity of an experience but upon the differences between experiences — differences that are neither quantitative nor qualitative, but simply differences, traces.⁷ A memory that presupposes its own erasure is thus a memory grounded in the concepts of trace and of writing.

We can see here the emergence of yet another term in the chain of concepts through which Derrida defines memory: alongside writing, supplement, and trace stands difference, understood as *différance*. As I intend to argue further on, while *différance* occupies a central role in Derrida’s work — a term to which all others ultimately refer — it also conceals a certain decision that is not restricted to the economy of the trace, a decision that, I suggest, may be able to challenge the structure of Derrida’s thought.

II.

Before turning to this conclusion, I would like to point out how the articulation of these concepts underlies the definition of memory found in Bensusan’s book. In my view, this articulation informs a somewhat imprecise reading of Malabou’s critique of Derrida. Although subtle, this imprecision leads Bensusan to overlook fundamental aspects of Malabou’s argument.

Bensusan does not take long to highlight the Derridean inspiration of the book. Already in the opening gestures of the first chapter, the influence of Derrida on the idea of “addition” becomes evident, as when the “aport of deconstruction to the research on addition” is introduced as the guiding thread of the book.⁸ Within the panorama he sketches, memory is grounded in the interplay between addition and two other ideas or operations: retention and retrieval. As Bensusan contends, there is no reality beyond the incessant retrieval of what has been retained in any form or for any purpose, stemming from an addition.

At the basis of this scheme lies a sort of mutual dependency between the

⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 256.

⁸ Bensusan, Hilan. *Memory Assemblages*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, p. 20.

notions of retention and retrieval, which renders both subordinate to the more fundamental concept of addition. In this view, there is no retention that does not call for retrieval, and retrieval, in turn, does nothing but retain a new demand for retrieval — that is, an addition. Because of its constitutive insufficiency, retention is structured by this very demand: it exists only through this movement of retrieval, of a pure addition.⁹

We can easily recall some of Derrida's ideas discussed in the previous section. As mentioned earlier, the supplement must be precisely that which emerges from a prior lack of presence, from its irreducible *différance*—an operation that summarizes the economy of the trace, whose very presupposition consists in its erasure. The same holds true for addition: retrieval arises from the incapacity of retention to name itself. Returning to the terms of the first chapter, Bensusan appeals to another of Derrida's concepts to ground addition—iterability—which nonetheless reintroduces the same issues of the supplement, the trace, and *différance*.

In a passage that explicitly weaves these ideas together, Bensusan writes: “Derrida structures his deconstruction of significance on the iteration that makes the sign what it is.” Iterability, she notes, reveals that reality “is made of the insistence of addends — a written structure is a record of previous additions.” The text, in this sense, “is a consignation,” since “to read it is to add something to it.” What has been written “is retrieved, but only by means of addends.” A few pages later, Bensusan concludes: “retention and retrieval both depend on a syntax of traces that allows the former to wait indefinitely for the latter.”¹⁰

In my view, this connection with Derrida's thought underlies Bensusan's approach to Malabou's rupture—an approach I will now address. Although Malabou's critique is undoubtedly pertinent, it does not seem capable of unsettling Derrida's principles to which Bensusan anchors his idea of addition. Throughout the book, everything unfolds as if Malabou could not truly challenge concepts such as the supplement, iterability, *différance*, writing, and trace. Malabou's critique appears to be restricted to the idea of “*arche-writing*”—conceived as an excessive version of writing itself.

⁹ Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 36.

Above all, Bensusan relies on the article “The End of Writing”, in which Malabou retraces Derrida’s argument in *Of Grammatology*, revisiting the shift from the ordinary sense of “writing” to the redefined sense proposed by Derrida. Bensusan notes that, according to Malabou, “plasticity is what enables this modification and extension and therefore the dynamics or the logic of writing is insufficient to explain what is crucial in the way Derrida thinks about how through which writing reveals an arche-writing — how it dwells syntax of traces.”¹¹ Plasticity, in this view, is what makes possible the transformation of the concept of writing proposed in *Of Grammatology*; it would therefore precede writing itself.

Bensusan quickly makes clear, however, that in his view the concept of “writing” or “trace” implicit in Malabou’s subversion should not be equated with the one previously associated with the concept of addition. This becomes evident when, in contrast to the development outlined in earlier pages, the concepts of addition and writing are now placed in opposition. Formerly synonymous with consignation, writing is redefined as a specific figure of retention, thus susceptible to the more fundamental concept of addition.

The scope of addition—and with it the dynamic between retention and retrieval —is expanded beyond the domain of writing, which then, as “arche-writing,” comes to be understood, it seems, as a restriction of the idea of retention. “Because addition works upon a sequence of memory assemblages, retention is not simply writing (or arche-writing) but can involve the plasticity that is added when a memory assemblage comes engages with (written) traces; the addends operate upon what has already been affected by assemblages. They operate upon the forms that may have erased and transformed traces.”¹²

I believe this serves to narrow the scope of Malabou’s critique, as well as to allow Bensusan to equate plasticity with a more restricted concept of writing that then comes to stand in opposition. About plasticity, Bensusan writes: “It is an operation upon form, and not upon graphisms, that makes any signification possible — and that enables any registration. What is placed in retention is primarily forms, and not traces.” Shortly thereafter, she proposes defining

¹¹ Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 37.

¹² Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 159.

plasticity as a “way of retrieving what has been in retention in the memory of writing.” Conceived in this way—as a limited version of retention—plasticity leads to the conclusion that it is “the product of parcels that make possible the retrieval of something beyond arche-writing; neither arche-writing nor plasticity are relevant beginnings immune to addition.”¹³

I will attempt to argue that this conception of plasticity does not fully capture Malabou’s critique of Derrida, which targets the “economy of the trace” as a whole—precisely the one to which the concept of addition is tied. In Derrida, this economy is governed by a double operation, very similar to that of the *Zusammengehörigkeit* between retention and retrieval, and expressed through the double sense of the concept of *différance*. Malabou’s rupture, along with her critique of this double operation, becomes clearer when we return to the very discussion concerning memory.

III.

By drawing on a text by Malabou on the question entitled “Are There Still Traces?”, one can oppose the pair of form and plasticity with the way it is addressed in *Memory Assemblages*—namely, as analogous to an excessive version of writing, a restricted form of retention. This text has the advantage of indicating that Malabou’s critique goes beyond that interpretation—reaching the broader conception to which Bensusan subscribes—and that, therefore, plasticity cannot be properly framed within the approach proposed by the book.

The concept of writing that appears in this text is not confined to a strict model of retention. Malabou refers to the essay mentioned before, “Freud and the Scene of Writing”, contrasting the Freudian neuronal schema with recent neurological discoveries—while also acknowledging that Derrida does not rely on this schema to extract from Freud an idea of the trace. On the contrary, she recognizes that Derrida’s argument unfolds around the claim that only in the *Mystic Writing Pad* is memory definitively grounded in writing and trace. For Malabou, writing is not limited to a usual quality or to a restricted model of retention; rather, it extends beyond the neuronal fable. In this sense, she argues that “a trace is not necessarily ‘graphic’ in the usual sense of the term: The (pure)

¹³ Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 37-38.

trace is *différance*. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, whether sonorous or visible, phonic or Graphic.”¹⁴

The problem, however, lies in the fact that memory—as *différance*, trace, and writing—is marked by an operation, or rather a “double operation”, that Malabou considers as only presupposed, but never justified. Faced with the incapacity of neurons to be marked by a perception—since no perception is ever fully present so as to be subsequently retrieved—memory must always return to an original site from which all meanings unfold. Derrida, in the same text, describes this when speaking of a “fundamental property of writing”: “we have elsewhere defined the fundamental property of writing, in a difficult sense of the word, as spacing: diastema and time becoming space; an unfolding, in an original site, of meanings.”¹⁵

When speaking of “origin” in Derrida, one must always proceed with caution, for the concept is thoroughly subverted in his work. As he writes in *Of Grammatology*, the trace is not only the “disappearance of origin,” but also the indication that “the origin did not even disappear,” since it was never constituted “except reciprocally by a nonorigin.”¹⁶

Yet origin persists, albeit is under the sign of its erasure: the double operation begins from the recognition that this absence entails that every text is subjected to remission, to deferral and to inexhaustible additions, to borrow the vocabulary of *Memory Assemblages*. Moreover, Derrida argues, memory is defined by the remission that arises in response to the default of presence, oriented toward a “scene” in which this absence is shown in a “privileged” way, as suggested by the title of the text on Freud. This absence manifests both in the neuron’s incapacity to retain perceptions in the present and in the Mystic Writing Pad’s necessity to erase itself in order to receive new inscriptions. There is, therefore, no adherence to a strict model: the scene disseminates meaning rather than presents it; it never fully presents itself in the present. It remains, nonetheless, a scene of a “inscription, something that both sustains itself and breaks a path.”¹⁷

In a text such as “Freud and the Scene of Writing”, the link between this

14 Malabou, Catherine. *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022, p. 288.

15 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 272.

16 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 61.

17 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 289.

“double operation” and the (incessant) return to a (subverted) place of origin is not as explicit as in another of Derrida’s writings on memory. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida emphasizes that abandoning the etymological association of the “archive” with the “ontological” sense of the Greek *arkhê* (“origin,” “first,” “principal,” etc.) in favor of its “nomological” sense, *arkheion* (“house,” “domicile,” “address,” “the residence of the superior magistrates, archons, those who commanded,” etc.), leads to the recognition that, endowed with “such a status,” archives neither store nor classify “except by virtue of a privileged topology.” This means that they “inhabit this particular place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in privilege,” a “scene of domiciliation” that “becomes, at once, visible and invisible.” This “archontic property of domiciliation” cannot, according to Derrida, be separated from the archive, since without it “no archive would come into play or appear as such.”¹⁸ The critique of the concept of origin thus occurs only through the insistence upon a “place of origin,” even if as such this place is entirely distorted.

It is not my intention to pursue a deeper reading of these texts, but rather to draw attention to a device to which Derrida consistently resorts, one that he assumes as presupposed and which, at the same time, may constitute the point of Malabou’s rupture with deconstruction. In my view, this device, which I have named “double operation,” is rooted in the double operation constitutive of the concept of *différance*, as Derrida formulates it on numerous occasions, and which is reflected in notions I have already discussed, such as trace, iterability, supplement, and so forth. In the text “La différence,” employing the Latin etymology of *differre*, Derrida notes that the term bears two meanings: not only the “most common” and “most easily identifiable” sense—namely, “not to be identical,” “to be other,” “discernible”—but also “the action of deferring,” a “delay,” a “postponement.”¹⁹

This double meaning is drawn from the Heideggerian concept of “difference,” in which a similar duplicity is at work. In “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (Geschlecht IV),” Derrida recalls Heidegger’s translation of the Greek *διαφορά*—

18 Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 22.

19 Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 7-8.

usually rendered as “difference” in English, or *Unterschied* in German—as *Austrag*, a term meant to convey the twofold meaning Heidegger discerns in the Greek: not only difference, but also deferral, the “*dis-* by which one is carried to one side, by which one is separated while being carried along in discord,” evoking its proximity to *Tragen* and *Austragen* (to carry, to bear).²⁰ This operation of deferral and bearing is indeed privileged by deconstruction, since it informs the very origin of the word “deconstruction” as a translation of Heidegger’s *Destruktion*. In the same text, Derrida revisits the scene of this translation, noting, in his reading of *Sein und Zeit*, that *Destruktion* does not mean “demolition that reduces to ruins,” but “deconstruction (*Abbauen*),” “removal” or “carrying out (*déport*),” “displacement in order to remove.”²¹

Returning to the question of memory, Malabou seems to dispute the connection between the two operations that *différance* holds together. For her, the difficulty of grounding memory in the neuron’s capacity to retain perceptions in a present instant does not imply that remission, displacement, or deferral are necessary operations.²² From the impossibility of full retention, one cannot infer the necessity of remission or retrieval. According to Malabou, the connection between these two operations depends on a paradigm in which the discovery of the impossibility of presence, governing the inscription of memories, remains subordinated to a presupposed anteriority of “idea” over inscription itself.

In *Memory Assemblages*, this anteriority is more clearly rooted in the double operation than Derrida himself ever articulates. Throughout the book, Bensusan makes explicit the precedence of addition over difference: “It is addition, or, better, a type of addition that acts as a principle that barely governs—but makes a difference. Further, it is the addition that forges difference.”²³ The privileging of “deferral” over “difference” thus results in this incessant return to a past—to a scene that, although it never “happened” and was never “present,” continues and subsists as “trace,” allowing the “eternal return of interpretation, of reading, of infinite conversation.” As an index of non-presence, the “trace is older than what

20 Derrida, Jacques. “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (Geschlecht IV).” In *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, edited by John Sallis, 163–218. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 168, 180.

21 Derrida, *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, p. 180.

22 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 287.

23 Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 20.

it traces,” guaranteeing an anteriority over itself, an anteriority of one of its senses over the other, exceeding mere testimony toward an instance that persists as “undeconstructible”.²⁴ The first side of this double operation, in which the absence of presence in the act of inscription of memories is observed, is subverted by the second, in which the anteriority of remission, deferral, and delay is affirmed. This structure is no less evident in Bensusan than in Derrida: in the face of the impossibility of a proper retention, there emerges the necessity of retrieval—an incessant demand incorporated into the inexorability of addition.

For Malabou, however, there must be a leap that links the two senses of the concept of *différance*, surpassed only by means of a spontaneous decision that is not restricted to any remission—but instead marks a simple passage. This decision, according to her, relies on a supposed anteriority of the trace over itself: “Understood in this sense, the trace would always be originary.”²⁵

IV.

Plasticity, for its part, operates according to a different economy. The rupture with the link uniting the two movements of the double operation signals the defense of an instance that exceeds retention, retrieval, and *différance*. In contrast to the Freudian neurological model—pointed out as exemplary of writing—Malabou, drawing on recent neurological discoveries, argues that memories do not leave traces in neurons; rather they are constituted through “modifications in size and volume” of neuronal connections.²⁶

The consolidation of memories, made possible by mechanisms of “selection and stabilization” of neurotransmitters, neither reinforces, refers back to nor sediments itself upon a privileged scene of inscription, nor does it obey a principle of “stratification,” like a palimpsest. Rather, it each time modifies the form of these connections. As Malabou contends, memories appear “in the manner in which neuronal connections change form, develop or decrease.”²⁷ They are inscribed through the reorganization they incite in a “distributed economy” of neuronal connections, their effects spreading across different areas and regions of

24 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 292.

25 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 292.

26 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 288.

27 Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 295.

the brain.

According to a Derridean version, the entire schema of neuronal modifications could once again be reduced to an economy of the trace, for it would suffice to conclude that, in the end, these neuronal reorganizations refer back to an original structure or event—one from which every modification is at once constrained and made possible. From this perspective, the project of plasticity would appear redundant: to reconcile it with deconstruction, one need only replace “trace” with “form,” “remission” with “transformation.” At bottom, they would remain the same operations, the same play—a conclusion that would return us to Bensusan’s position. All transformation, in truth, arises from the coexistence between the capacity to receive form which, in order not to be reduced to a mere flexibility or docility, must coexist with the power to give form: a third possibility between preformism and skepticism, in the terms of the debate carried out in *Before Tomorrow*, to which I will shortly return shortly. This, precisely, recalls what Derrida says of the trace and its double operation, or what Bensusan evokes the dynamic between retention and retrieval.

Undoing this confusion is an unavoidable step in order to understand Malabou’s argument, since form and trace cannot belong to the same economy. It is impossible to determine with certainty the development of a cerebral structure according to reasons external to it, for there exists the power to style, the capacity to give form. This capacity cannot nonetheless be explained by, nor reduced to, a scene of inscription, since memories inscribe themselves in the brain in the manner of trauma, transforming the entire neuronal structure—something that is not merely an indication of the diffuse material nature of this storage. From this it follows that there is no return to the scene of trauma, not even a spectral one: constitutive of trauma, in relation to the trace, is precisely that it has no scene to which one might return, even indefinitely.

I will now attempt to retrace, step by step, the path leading to this conclusion. An important starting point is to understand why, in Malabou’s conception, the modifications that occur in the brain never present themselves in a fully present instant. In this regard, Malabou largely inherits the legacy of deconstruction, and it is crucial to register this affiliation in order to make her rupture with it more visible.

According to Malabou, transformation understood as a “local movement” —

a passage from one position to another, or from one instant to the next (movement understood as the movement of a moving being) — cannot, in fact, constitute change. Such an interpretation reduces its meaning, in the wake of the reduction of *μεταβολή* to *φορά* that Heidegger identifies in the history of philosophy, as Malabou recalls in *The Heidegger Change*.²⁸ Every attempt to reduce change to a displacement from one state to another ultimately reconducts it to the present instant from which a change becomes determined, premeditated. As Malabou argues, each such attempt isolates one of the sides of plastic form: on the one hand, the capacity to receive form; on the other, the capacity to give form.

On the one hand, the capacity to receive form allows for a mechanism in which actions produce determined reactions. It becomes possible to situate oneself within the present instant that links the transformation of a form to the stimulus that provokes it—for example, an experience that triggers a certain reorganization of the neuronal structure. This instant subsists because it enables the mapping of that linkage. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, Malabou names this “flexibility”: a “docility” of form entirely deprived of any “resource of giving form,” of all “power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression,” “to style.” “Flexibility”, she writes, “is plasticity minus its genius.”²⁹

On the other hand, the capacity to give form subordinates any transformation and any movement to predetermination, to a pre-established harmony that unfolds solely according to a previously given structure. In *Before Tomorrow*, this capacity is found in the hypothesis of preformatism, according to which the development of an organism is informed exclusively by the conditions present at its origin, without interaction with the environment or any kind of metamorphosis. Although ancient, the dispute between preformatism and its rival hypothesis, epigenesis, persists for Malabou in the debate between the “genetic” thesis—elevated to the level of consensus in the latter half of the twentieth century through the Human Genome Project and the notion of “program”—and the “epigenetic” thesis, which gained strength in the twenty-first century. The notion of “program” implied in The Human Genome Project

28 Malabou, Catherine. *The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*. Trans. Peter Skafish. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, p. 41.

29 Malabou, Catherine. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Trans. Sebastian Rand. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 12.

rests on the hope of explaining complex phenomena by reducing them to pure unfoldings of the genetic code inherited at birth; for this reason, it may be understood as a “resurgence of preformationism.”³⁰

This hope harks to ancient scientific hypotheses that sought to trace the development of organisms to structures presumed to exist since their origin. The moment of birth thus takes on the role of a fully present instant that never truly erases itself—its development becomes merely a series of reinforcements of the same structure. As Malabou argues, each activity obeys the dynamics of “formation-deformation,” altering “the initial categorial form for a time by stretching it out in order to confirm its structure once it is coupled with it.”³¹

Transformation, however, can be conceived only at the intersection of these two vectors. In both cases, it remains subordinated to the stability of the present instant, which ultimately restricts its unfolding. The shared form of these vectors cannot even be reduced to a dualism, according to which form could follow only one of the two directions, without our knowing in advance which one. In truth, the encounter of these directions produces something far beyond any dualism: what is at stake is an “explosion of form,” which introduces itself as the third term of the idea of plasticity. Transformation cannot take place in the present instant because it arises from this explosion — every emergence of form is grounded in an absolute instability that simultaneously governs its birth and its death.

Neurons and their role in the formation of memories perfectly illustrate this other economy. The form of neuronal connections cannot be explained by any displacement, by any *φορά*; the neuron is not a moving being that passes from one state to another. It is explained and grounded in a transformability whose future is diachronic — these connections have an explosive capacity, not yet present and never effectively present. While synaptic efficacy “grows or declines under the impact of strictly individual experience,” making the modeling of neuronal connections through the power of impression unfold “in a different way from one individual to the next,” it also displays an “adherence to a common model” tied to a “genetic necessity.”³²

One observes the transformation of a neuron only in a *voir venir*, to borrow

³⁰ Malabou, Catherine. *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 80.

³¹ Malabou, *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*, p. 31.

³² Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p.7-8.

the term Malabou invokes in her rereading of the concept of the future in Hegel in *The Future of Hegel*. Transformation comes but does not occur in the present instant; it is promised as the crossing of these two directions. Its *Stimmung* is a mixture of “being sure of what is coming” and “not knowing what is coming.”³³ Its possibilities, however, are infinite and cannot be reduced to an operation of remission.

Therefore, while one acknowledges the heritage of deconstruction, the challenge to the present instant posed by the diachronic future introduced by transformation results in an important rupture with that heritage — a rupture with the operation of remission, which, as I have argued, is implicated in the concept of *différance*. I return to a point mentioned earlier: a Derridean response that still considers it possible to reduce transformation to the trace arbitrarily believes that, from transformation’s default of presence, it follows that it cannot be a transformation at all, but only a return to the original absence of presence.

Yet this link between deferral and difference, as discussed above, is arbitrary: diachronicity does not depend on an origin that persists through remission; it can instead be the contingency of a transformation to come, found in a plastic form, as in the case of neuronal connections. This transformation — which has not yet come, which may come, which may never come — carries the capacity to erase, once and for all, any trace, whether material or merely iterated, iterable. It challenges the necessity of iteration, supplementarity, remission, and the spectre as privileged mechanisms in the critique of the metaphysics of presence.

It is not that plastic form, or even plasticity, lacks an origin. Again, in the terms of *The Heidegger Change*, substitution or transformation are originary; they simultaneously govern the birth and death of a form. Yet this conceptualization yields in an idea of origin far removed from the notion of origin as arche-trace found in deconstruction. If the future of a form is irreducible to remission or deferral, its past is likewise incapable of being retrieved — one must think of an irretrievable past, insusceptible to return: something less than a spectre. If the complete contingency of the future indicated by neuronal connections cannot convince us of its irreducibility to any return, remission, or deferral, the

³³ Malabou, Catherine. *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*. Trans. Lisabeth During. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 13.

examination of its past leaves no doubts. Drawing once on scientific discoveries, Malabou argues that, given the way cerebral regeneration works, “the possibility of a subject, be it individual or collective, to appropriate or reappropriate their own wounds or traumas, to constitute and read their own archive, finds itself profoundly and definitely challenged.” For Malabou, this points to an “ontological impossibility of inscribing the world”: the world in general is “perfectly indifferent to the possibility of being thought, remembered, deciphered, read or interpreted.”³⁴

Thus, the precedence of transformation over the trace occurs not only within the restricted limits of cerebral structure, nor is it confined to its “deep history,” a concept that refers to the scientific discovery that “modules,” such as “basic fears, urges and other predispositions,” were “laid down in the strata of the brain a long time ago and preserved against the ravages of time.” This discovery attests to a past of this structure insusceptible to inscription, impossible to retrieve through the process of memory formation.³⁵ It also appears in the incapacity — and, indeed, the lack of interest — of a subject to retrieve their wounds and traumas. This is the case of the *nouveaux blessés*, or “new wounded”; the object of Malabou’s investigation to which attention should be turned on another occasion, in works such as *The New Wounded*.

Transformation as origin is something radically different from origin as postponement or deferral. Forms do not arise from postponement; they arise, in the Kantian terms that Malabou employs in *Before Tomorrow*, from a sheer “spontaneity,” from an evident and obvious arbitrariness that subjects them, from the outset, to caducity, to death. This arbitrariness is far closer to the decision that underlies deconstruction — the binding together of the two senses of *différance* — than to remission. I take this to be Malabou’s interpretation of the origin of deconstruction in *The End of Writing*, and, perhaps the indication of the conceptual superiority of transformation over the trace.

V.

In the terms of *Memory Assemblages*, taking Malabou’s lesson seriously would

³⁴ Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 292.

³⁵ Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, p. 295.

require thinking the possibility that there may no longer be retention or retrieval — thinking of memory assemblages as an explosive form, one that cannot rely on its own continuity and must confront its own death. Although the conclusions proposed here may serve as a response to Bensusan's approach to Malabou and plasticity, they may also enrich and give movement to the dialogue between Malabou and Bensusan.

In summary: I argue that Bensusan reduces plasticity to a restricted form of retention, supposedly equivalent to the trace, while at the same time grounding the dynamic between retention and retrieval that constitutes memory assemblages in Derridean terms — in concepts such as iterability, supplementarity, *différance*, and the specter. By recognizing the ways in which plasticity exceeds the logic imposed by these concepts, I contend that it cannot be reduced to them, insofar as it challenges their underlying assumptions. Ultimately, delving into plasticity enables one to perceive the foundations of Bensusan's project and to formulate important questions for it.

pedroguimaraespinho@gmail.com