

## Imperceptibility and Accumulation: Political Strategies of Plastic

**Heather Davis** *Camera Obscura* 92, Volume 31, Number 2 doi 10.1215/02705346-3592543 © 2016 by *Camera Obscura* Published by Duke University Press 187 **INPRACTICE:OPACITIES** *Camera Obscura* Published by Duke University Press

I glide my fingers across the surface, finding it sleek and smooth. This surface that seems to coat nearly everything in the world becomes a world unto itself, its surface creating an impenetrable depth while also rendering other objects impermeable, sealing them off from the outside and forcing a slowing down, a stasis, a living death. This invisible, transparent surface that can mold itself into any kind of object carries a queer particularity, one that flirts with death and accepts its fate as at once desired and derided. This surface gives nothing away, except its shape. It is a kind of black box: there is no mysterious inside, no treasure to pry open.<sup>1</sup> Its surface extends all the way through. Plastic is an opacity that hides nothing.

I gently touch its end, pulling my fingers around it, feeling its cold, odd texture. I push my hand downward, encircling its full girth. Your body shudders as I place my mouth upon it, making it warm and wet, rubbing my tongue along its surface. I hear your breathing quicken. You pull me by the hair and flip me over, pushing me down, thrusting into my body. The leather harness gently beats my ass. We take full advantage of our chemically engineered present, with its wonderful array of malleable objects. There is a link here between sex, plastic, and nonreproductivity that goes beyond the use of plastics and silicones as sex toys. There is an uncanny resemblance between the modalities of queerness and plastic's expression, despite the fact that one emerges from liberatory struggle and the other from advanced "petrocapi-talism." Like plastic, "there is nothing to discover in sex or in sexual identity; there is no *inside*. The truth about sex is not a disclosure; it is *sexdesign*."<sup>2</sup> There is no mystery, no identity, no ontology, only a carefully crafted seduction. In what feminist writer and theorist Paul B. Preciado calls the "pharmacopornographic era," capitalism, pornography, and the pharmaceutical industry merge to form a control society that infiltrates, penetrates, and mutates, engineering our desires from the level of hormones to pervasive media images. Queerness teaches us to love the surface, to play on it and with it. It is opaque; there is no secret to reveal. The objects of plastic obey a similar logic: they are plastic all the way through, proudly displaying their designed surfaces that conceal nothing, creating uniform and impenetrable entities while quietly leaching and breaking down, imperceptibly but irreversibly changing our environment.

Objects of sexual pleasure are chemically linked to plastics of all kinds that make possible and attenuate other sexual *indifferences*. Plastics carry their queerness into sex, inhibiting sexual reproduction, evoking the fear and reality of extinction. Feminist philosopher Claire Colebrook theorizes "necessary extinction," calling attention to the way in which sexual difference itself may not have a future. She says, "This logic of necessary and positive extinction — this necessary production of differences that will not survive . . . is repressed in the shrill affirmation of the vitality of sexual binary difference."<sup>3</sup> Colebrook suggests an evolutionary becoming that does not assume the sexual reproductive ability of organic creatures: a future at once more technological and bacterial. Plastic is contributing to this queer technobacterial future, helping to actualize it. Plastics are composed of an array of chemicals. In addition

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to the molecules commonly referred to as *plastic*, one or several of eighty thousand chemicals known as *plasticizers* are added to make plastic pliable, or hot pink, or heat resistant. Perhaps the most infamous of these is bisphenol A (BPA), one of numerous chemicals known for its reproductive toxicity.<sup>4</sup> BPA literally blocks the human ability to reproduce through both an overexposure to the hormone estrogen and by way of endocrine disruptors that mimic hormones in the body and replace their functions, sometimes queering the gender of the body in which it resides. These chemicals cannot be tasted, smelled, or directly perceived by our human sensorium.

They are imperceptible at many levels but have quite specific and sometimes drastic effects on our, and multiple other species', bodies. Plastic seems to herald this queer future — already a reality due to biotechnology and given the reproductive systems of many creatures who can change sex or reproduce by cellular division (such as meiosis). This suggests that queer new worlds are being birthed inadvertently from our quest for separation and cleanliness, for “better living through chemistry.”<sup>5</sup> This situation asks us to reimagine the futures that we are ushering in, demanding new strategies of extinction and survival. What political lessons might plastic hold, despite its connection to so many systems of death and disparity? In the space left, I will sketch some odd ways in which plastic might suggest certain kinds of queer political formation that dovetail with contemporary trends in political organizing. What might be learned from plastic in order to create political resiliency in the face of massively accelerating forms of biological, climatic, geologic, social, and technological change?

### **Imperceptibility**

Plastic's effects are not immediately perceptible. They operate through the logic of dispersion and accumulation. Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis articulate the links between petrocapiatalism and plastic, claiming that “plastic is less a substance than its antithesis, a paradigm in which substance is transformed into a way of being unmoored from the coordinates that stabilize presence and meaning.”<sup>6</sup> In an era in which surveillance and biopolitics feel all-encompassing, in which every particular position seems to already have been captured, the lesson of imperceptibility is not a call for invisibility or an imperative to drop out. It is, rather, the lesson of shape-shifting, of assuming identities that defy coherent forms and change with and in response to particular contexts — to abandon ontology and its promises. Imperceptibility means appearing in unlocalizable formations, myriad forms, and identities that resist a “suspicious hermeneutic impulse whereby sexuality [or other political categories of identity are] understood as concealed meaning that can nonetheless be made transparent to scrutiny.”<sup>7</sup> Imperceptibility is about creating structures and ways of being that are at once immediately apparent, at once immediately understood, but yet reveal nothing, containing no truth, no depth. Surface all the way through, hidden in plain sight. This is a politics of passing that exists in the singularity of form, of existence that cannot be extrapolated or generalized but only related, put into relation, into commonality through shared practices. Such a politics, in this way, preserves a certain opacity.

### **Proliferation**

Plastics do not biodegrade; they break apart, becoming smaller and smaller while remaining integral to themselves. In other words, the molecular components of plastic do not change over time. In their reduced size, they affect increasingly larger areas of the world. For example, whenever a single piece of synthetic clothing is washed, more than nineteen hundred microfilaments of plastic are shed. Since microfilaments are not filtered by water-processing plants, they eventually find their way to the ocean.<sup>8</sup> There is now no place on earth that can claim to be plastic free. Similarly, we must find ways of remaining, to a certain degree, impermeable, resistant, and consistent, while extending into all and every point on earth. The smaller and less obvious our political forms can become, the more they can travel, proliferate, and, in the end, exert a much larger influence on the system as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Accumulation**

Plastics, because of their molecular base in oil, accumulate toxic potency as they move through the world. This is because they are similar in structure to persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which bioaccumulate as they move up the food chain, a situation that has resulted in Inuit women being warned against breast-feeding their children due to dangerous levels of dioxins in their breast milk.<sup>10</sup> These horrors need to become the basis for a wide-ranging solidarity politics that similarly accumulates as it moves through the world. We need to be ready to accept unlikely allies, recognizing that our struggles are indeed common, or at least oriented toward the common enemies of neoliberalism, austerity measures, and extractivism. We need to reorient accumulation away from wealth and toward life.

## Nonfilial Progeny

The world that we are inadvertently birthing may have little in common with the one that we currently inhabit. We need to develop strategies, affects, and politics that can account for our terrible inheritances and legacies. One of the worlds that is coming into being (and, in the process, foreclosing others) is the plastisphere. The plastisphere exists on tiny pieces of plastic — microplastics that are less than five millimeters long — and it is composed of over a thousand different species of bacteria and viruses.<sup>11</sup> In 100,000 years, the predicted life span of plastic, what might these ecologies develop into? The water's surface may become saturated with forms of life — living rafts, pallets of microbial biodiversity — to the exclusion of the megafauna that used to exist. And all the way through the water column, where the oxygen has been sucked out, these new multiverses will come into existence, the anthropogenic substrate birthing vibrant attached communities in the caves and cavities of plastic surfaces. These complex bacterial societies may flourish on their synthetic surfaces, eating each other, mutating and evolving, developing into complex organisms entirely dependent on the vast sources of energy unlocked by carbon and wholly adapted to the acidic

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oceans in which they float. Just as plastics are inadvertently creating all kinds of new worlds such as the plastisphere in order to move effectively, we must also learn to accept strange life forms, both human and nonhuman.

Without wanting to celebrate these new toxicities, we must find ways of living with them. They are not going away. The desire to create for ourselves pristine environments has either dangerously backfired — as in the case of the (over)use of pesticides, herbicides, and antibiotics — or has been dumped elsewhere, where toxicities are accumulated at unprecedented rates by racialized, feminized, and impoverished bodies. To live ethically in the present moment means finding creative strategies for living with toxicity — to accept it as a new queer future and to find ways of navigating horror while resisting the policies, governments, and corporations that would like to see our lives foreclosed.

## Notes

1. Alexander R. Galloway, "Black Box, Black Bloc," in *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2011), 237 – 52.
2. Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), 35, emphases in original.
3. Claire Colebrook, "Sexual Indifference," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, vol. 1, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor, MI: MPublishing/Open Humanities Press, 2012), 177.
4. Marla Cone, "California Intends to Declare BPA a Reproductive Hazard," *Environmental Health News*, 25 January 2013, [www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2013/california-bpa](http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2013/california-bpa).
5. This phrase is a variant of "better things for better living through chemistry," which was an advertising slogan used by DuPont in the 1940s. See "Our Company History," DuPont, [www2.dupont.com/Phoenix\\_Heritage/en\\_US/1939\\_b\\_detail.html](http://www2.dupont.com/Phoenix_Heritage/en_US/1939_b_detail.html) (accessed 28 February 2016).
6. Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, "Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil," *e-flux*, no. 47 (2013), [www.e-flux.com/journal/visions-of-eternity-plastic-and-the-ontology-of-oil/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/visions-of-eternity-plastic-and-the-ontology-of-oil/).
7. Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2.
8. Mark Anthony Browne et al., "Accumulation of Microplastic on Shorelines Worldwide: Sources and Sinks," *Environmental Science and Technology* 45, no. 21 (2011): 9175 – 79.
9. For example, the Autonomia movement in Italy used this structure. Particularly active between 1976 and 1978, it consisted of a number of small hubs distributed throughout the country and held together through a similar ideological structure as the free radio movement. For an excellent collection that discusses the rise and fall of this movement, see Sylvère Lotringer and

Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

10. For an excellent analysis of the relationship between dioxin and other POP accumulation in the north and its effects on indigenous people and culture, see Bruce E. Johansen, “The Inuit’s Struggle with Dioxins and Other Organic Pollutants,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2002): 479 – 90. For a more extended exploration, see Marla Cone, *Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic* (New York: Grove, 2005), as well as the online and film resources at [www.silentsnow.org](http://www.silentsnow.org).

11. Erik R. Zettler, Tracy J. Mincer, and Linda A. Amaral-Zettler, “Life in the ‘Plastisphere’: Microbial Communities on Plastic Marine Debris,” *Environmental Science and Technology* 47, no. 13 (2013): 7137 – 46.

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