

The Plastic Family

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BS: When I watched your animation, *A Global Positioning System*, exploring the places, lives and materials squeezed into industrial production, my mind kept dwelling on the literal space of your animation and how much white space you leave. I began to think about this in relation to plastic, as a material and as a metaphor. Moving, drawn lines mould the space of the screen, so that things and people solidify out of formlessness. The people and the products seem to be made out of the same stuff; congealed white plastic with dabs of pure, bright digital colour. This made me think anew about Karl Marx's 'secret of the commodity fetish' where, in capitalism, objects become more like people because they have social lives through circulation, and, at the same time, people are rendered static and mute, like objects. In your animation there is this same sense of objectivity, as though everything has become the same: plasticized.

In his 1957 essay, *Plastic*, Roland Barthes explores how plastic eradicates its connection to its mined origins, writing that 'it embodies none of the genuine produce of the mineral world: foam, fibres, strata'. I'm interested in this in relation to *A Global Positioning System* and wondering if this abstraction that plastic performs (and that perhaps you are performing too) is a perfect example of capitalism rendering everything into exchange values rather than substance. In the questions following your lecture an audience member asked whether it was acceptable to treat human subjects in this way. Rather than being a problem, I see this reflection on the abstracting processes of capitalism as an important intention in the work that animation allows you to articulate.

The author, Esther Leslie, referencing Walter Benjamin, describes how there are more 'hollowed out'ⁱⁱⁱ objects than ever before. I wondered how this metaphor fits the people and the objects in your animation. Does it seem like you hollow them out or are they more like Marx's 'phantasmagorical' table emerging?

MJ: Many of the working roles (pictured by figures at labour in the work) are mute in relation to the industrial complex, and to the consumer. They do emerge as spectres from these abstracted relations. They meld and fold back into the picture space. There is a kind of inexpressiveness on the faces because I didn't want to project a fantasized intimacy onto them. I didn't assume to ventriloquise, or substantiate the individuals I drew, but of course that does not mean to say I believe them to be insubstantial. In regard to this representation, Rachel Withers writes:

' "Chaste compactness" seems to characterise this tactical inexpressiveness pretty well, yet its effect is certainly not that of seamlessly integrating the story into our own experience. Psychological projection is not precluded; it is asked of us, but with significant caveats.

A Global Positioning System's animation technique and stylistic decisions work similarly, like a filter, mobilising viewers' drive to imagine and sympathise yet heightening their awareness of distance from the subjects shown. For example, a short sequence briefly shows us an African child of maybe ten or twelve years old. His large watchful eyes swivel this way and that in his impassive face. The necessary simplifications of the graphic technique emphasise the youthful sweetness of his features, but his image is ultimately very disturbing. He is policing a coltan mine with a gun on his shoulder'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The minute scale and enormous complexity of the gps microchip was fascinating to me, as was the scale and reach of the industrial complex. I was moved by the paradox that an international infrastructure implicates thousands in the production of a device designed to locate a single individual. The scale of resources and wild disparities in working conditions are absorbed into that complex. I wanted to find a schema that would make this network of unseen or unknown relations visible, and register all of these bifurcated strands of activity and disparities as part of a single production cycle. I felt that the picture space shared this paradox - it is simultaneously elastic and pliable, yet uniform, 'hollowed out'. I like the analogies you draw - it is plasticized - but there are moments when it also retains the capacity to disrupt. There are hesitations and flicker, jumps and stutters: moments where the labour of making the animation and my grasp of the technology falters and co-incides with the labour and representation on screen. Rachel Withers also explores this,

' In the finished work, the character's facial image and mouth movements don't lip-synch neatly with the recorded voice. Via Jackson's animation technique, the tiny marks and lines that form his mouth shatter and regroup, solidify and liquefy. Albeit fleeting, the effect of the disconnection is subtle but decisive: something is not quite right, yet exactly right in its elusiveness. This man seems friendly and trustworthy and what he's saying is perfectly reasonable. But connections are now visibly unhitched. The facts are dispersed and decentralised and can only be grasped collectively. This seems a cause for both optimism and anxiety. Technological production hinges on the sharing of practical expertise across collaborative networks. But part of the network may fail, or be destroyed, or opt to withhold its knowledge. What then?'^{iv}

BS: I'm reminded again of Barthes, and how he describes plastic as 'the very idea of its infinite transformation'. Plastic has no shape of its own, but always receives form from something else, usually through moulding. I am reminded of an object, a paperweight, that my father made, when he worked in the 'Technical Services' department at British Industrial Plastics (BIP) in Oldbury, West Midlands. It is resin, rather than precisely plastic, but I've been thinking about its plastic qualities

for a while. The paperweight was made at a time when companies like BIP had relatively relaxed laboratories where people like my father could make daft things in the name of exploring the properties of the company products. Unlike the resin which, once liquid was then made solid in a mould, BIP has gone through countless reliquidations and series' of administrators. Today, the company always seems to be in freefall, although the website does a very good job at conveying that all is static and reliable. In contrast to the fluid state of the company, the flexible working life allowed to my dad in the 70s seems to be long gone. I wonder if we are both nostalgic for a certain type of working life, or, a belief in transformation that is out of touch with the spirit of the age?

MJ: By co-incidence my family are also from the West Midlands and both my grandfathers spent their working lives in manufacturing industries there; one involved in chemical engineering and one in aerospace. They had a love and respect for material and the men and machines who could work it, transform it, and think ideas through with their hands. The scientists and designers and machine operators seemed to share a sense of purpose through material – if not through the management and the organisation of their labour. Today there is very little manufacturing in the West Midlands, and there is no museum of industry either. I have no family left in Birmingham and no photographs of the factory works where my grandparents spent most of their lives. I have no nostalgia for the working life *per se*, but making and thinking through an intimate knowledge of the behaviour of materials was extremely meaningful to them, and it seems extraordinary that there is no trace or possibility of that now.

I am obsessed, at the moment, with some new work I'm making, that examines Goethe's idea of The Urpflanze - a primordial plant that could unlock the secrets of all plants, real and illusory – and all of nature as well. Walter Benjamin incorporated this into his theory of 'ur-form's'; whirls of revolutionary potential inside present forms, and the transformative potential of technology. Plants can be used to make plastic now of course, and they are working on techniques to 'grow' synthetic materials. In its consultation document 'Plants Of The Future' The European Union wants us to re-imagine plants as 'green factories', situating them as the manufacturing base of the future. The document predicts the emergence of a new agrarian class, to act as gatekeepers of a bio-based economy.

"The primordial plant would be the most wonderful creation of the world, for which nature itself should envy me. With this model and the key that it contains, one could invent an infinite number of plants, ones that despite their imaginary existence could possibly be real, thus which are not solely literary and painterly shadows and illusions, but which possess an inner truth and necessity. This same principle would be applicable to every other aspect of life as well."

J. W. von Goethe, (Italienische Reise in a letter to Herder on the 17th May, 1787).

On top of all this, in the 1980's there was a shift in thinking that was eventually to propel plant genetics onto an entirely new plane. This shift was based on a unifying idea, proposing that all plants are essentially as one, as different species of plant have more in

common than they do that divides them. The cacti, tree-ferns, redwoods, oats and sunflowers are more similar than different. The idea was that concentration of effort on the study of a single species would advance understanding of all^{vi}.

N.Harberd, *Seed to Seed: The Secret Life of Plants*, Bloomsbury, 2006

BS: So, it seems that plants, then, are also 'plastic'?

One of BIP's core contemporary businesses is the recycling of plastic moulding powders (once one of their key products, and used to make things like plug sockets for new houses- hence the serious impact of the housing slump on the company). Instead of making this stuff, now BIP breaks it down into small beads used for cleaning equipment in other large-scale international chemical industries. In contrast to the public image of the chemical industry as filthy dumper of poisonous waste, this type of recycling and 'breaking down' of materials is actually very common. This cycle of fixity and fluidity reminds me of my work and yours too, but I sometimes wonder if it reveals a reticence to make things 'solid'- a desire to stay amongst ideas rather than committing to final works?

MJ: Neither of us produces finished work prolifically – but I do think we turn over and generate a lot of ideas. I don't think it is reticence about commitment – but I certainly wouldn't want to have to produce a minimum quota to try and meet the rent. For me the fluidity is in the work as a device or a set of ideas. Its quite a massive commitment to make an animation in terms of the work and time involved and a lot of it is static and repetitive.

BS: If my dad's paperweight had been glass it would have had an internal refractive index. It doesn't have this but it still distorts the world around it, morphing it and blending it amongst streaks of colour. I'm reminded of plastic's fictional nature, and how it has often been used to imitate other (often natural) things. As Barthes describes, plastic belongs to the world of 'appearances' and 'pretension'. This imitative function seems another (probably very obvious) reason why you use animation. I should add that, in relationship to ideas of fiction, I learned, recently, that my dad didn't actually make the paperweight.

MJ: I am very interested in animation's ability to explain complex information. Because of this it is often used in science as it has such a capacity to describe abstract processes and actions, rendering things that otherwise are un-seeable. Animation can simultaneously describe behaviours and events that are real, but threatens to go off into flights of fantasy, or (literally) draw out abstractions. Esther Leslie also describes animation's ability to subvert behaviours, stretch and defy known laws of physics. It can reconfigure time and space, and obey the will of the animator – as well as incorporating the topographical, and the documentary.

'Animation is 'different nature' (Benjamin) because it is different to ours, but not distinct from it... Animation is 'non-indifferent nature' (Eisenstein), because it appeals to us, invites us into its particular small world. Its appeal is mediated via technology and is a shuttle between the image world of a new or second nature and us, addressed too as nature.'^{vii}

BS: In conversation, we have talked about the difficulty of exploring plastic in a black and white publication. You describe how the development of plastic created and fed a desire for extreme colour- a chromophilia. Of late, colour has become very important to me, as a universal language of optimism, whereby the desire to make things beautiful is employed in the most difficult of circumstances. I'm also interested in colour as a chemical phenomena that can only exist through other substances. As it has 'no form of its own' it seems to articulate perfectly the problem of material vs idea. I'm also fascinated by the transformations colour must undergo when moved between mediums, eg from textiles, to a photograph of the same textiles, to a print using pantone, to an html reproduction. How do you think about colour in your animation works?

MJ: Its interesting isn't it how blocks of bright primary colours are used as ciphers of hope in social architecture? I am interested in colour – but something particularly about this use of colour to punctuate a landscape (or picture space). I remember dozing through a lecture on Constable at school, and waking up when they explored his use of red as an intoxicant, an intense point of focus, a small area of a violent complementary to the expanses of green – often linked to human intervention or activity. I get the same sense from all the high-visibility jackets and vehicles in the city. I perceive the street like a page of text struck through with a fluorescent pen - highlighting all the points of vulnerability and danger in the urban landscape. In *A GPS* I wanted to make use of the computers ability to make colour almost luminesce. In some digital software like Flash there is a tendency to express extreme colour as you describe - colour as solid, acid fields. Early plastics emulated wood and earthenware and horn, they were dark and simulated versions of the real, more expensive, more fragile 'authentic' material. To draw out its status as a synthetic, science based material to fulfil visions of modernity and future – a lot of work was done to make it 'accept' colour, and it radiates a kind of synthetic assertion of colour. I wanted to draw in Flash because it does *plasticise* the picture space with its high contrast glowing palette, and however sensitively one draws it asserts a digital glow over the space. There are moments where I inserted other textures – such as the photograph in the coltan mine, or in the lab because I needed the landscape/context to emerge through activity taking place as part of the cycle of production. I was thinking about the ways in which colour film and photography was developed to make representations more 'real', alongside simultaneous technologies to create colour that edges between optimism and violence or warning.

Incidentally as part of my *Urpflanze* project I'm working with scientists who work with the new ability to transfer genes from jellyfish into plants so they can act as bio-sensors. They are working to make them fluoresce when they are in or can detect danger, such as oestrogens leached from plastic in the water supply.

BS: We are both plastic enthusiasts. This can be perceived as a deliberately ironic stance in favour of kitsch and, or, as a fashionably nihilistic stance against environmentalism. For me its neither of these things, I genuinely believe in the human transformation that plastic exemplifies. However I'm interested in the way plastic is caught up in social issues and how producers who use plastic respond to this. There is a moral weight stacked against plastic, exemplified, for me by a contemporary disapproval of plastic children's toys, amongst the chattering classes. This distaste involves an historic snobbishness against plastic's use to make cheap imitations, as well as a contemporary discomfort about cheap mass production in foreign climes, and the perception that plastic is environmentally unfriendly. Obviously some of these critical positions are understandable responses to some unpleasant truths, but at the same time, some are moral positions, based on a middle class need to separate its values from those of the masses. Whatever the root of these views, in a classic act of Marxian fetishism, plastic as a substance gets blamed for what are actually social relationships underlying its development , production and use. However, I am interested in the technical realities, particularly concerning how plastic can or can't be recycled, and how it might sit amongst Bataille's ideas of excess and constant breakdown.

MJ: During the cold war, SED Party leader Walter Ulbricht declared plastic to be 'an essential element of the socialist cultural revolution'. Its also interesting that Barthes' essay was written before we knew about phthalates and oestrogens, and ways in which plastic is a much 'dirtier' substance than he might have forecast. I had been thinking about Bataille and his idea of formless too. Plastic has a magical possibility of assuming any form, it is a shapeshifter –it fades and breaks down but never fully decays. It never becomes shit in the true sense, but photodegrades. It has a power to haunt us; its decaying form is a spectre of dioxins and defiant matter. However, recently I spoke to a materials scientist who said that the technology has long been in place to regulate the decay of plastic. Technically, it seems, biodegradable plastics are not only possible but the rate of degradation could be timed precisely. I'm in total agreement though – I'm interested in it as of a trope transformative potential, it's intrinsic and extrinsic qualities, including it's characteristic as ideological barometer.



Becky Shaw 2004 (British Industrial Plastics 1972) (?)



‘What’s left stays right’

Tupperware, 1972

Trabant-Kombiwagen

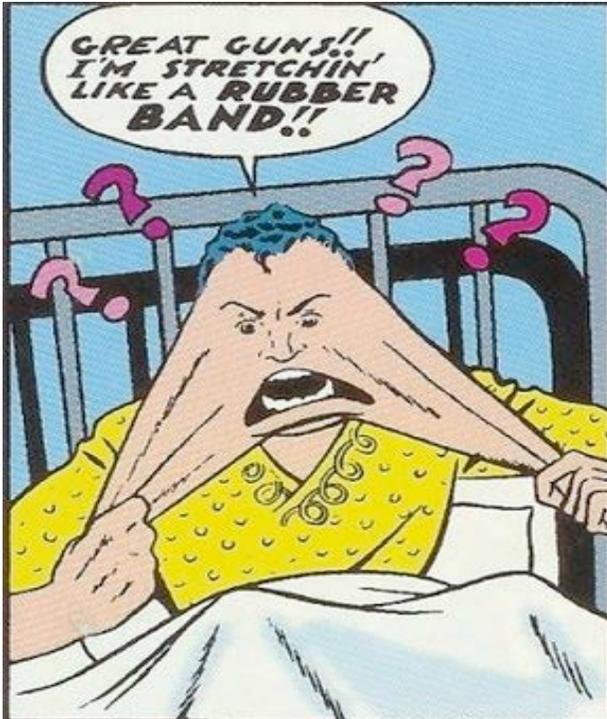


The Trabant was supplied with a body fabricated from Duroplast. It was named 'Trabant' or Satellite in homage to the launch of Sputnik in the USSR in 1957.



Toyota i-unit concept car 2008

Constructed from plant based plastics.
Toyota Motor Company



Plastic Man,
Quality Comics, 1949
later becoming *The Plastic Man Comedy/Adventure Show*
featuring **The Plastic Family** 1979-1981 ABC Network

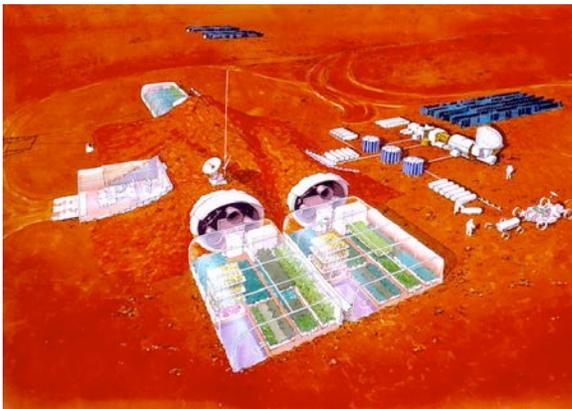


Yolanda and The Plastic Family

Stonewall Society Pride In The Arts Music Awards Transgendered favourite 2002.



Children's modular toy
Transparent Marble Run 46pc
Treasure Trove Toys & Gifts



NASA 2004
'An artist's concept of greenhouses on Mars'.



Anya Hindmarch 2007

ⁱ R.Barthes 'Plastic' in *Mythologies*, Vintage Classic, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Esther Leslie, collected essays on Walter Benjamin,
<http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/waltbenj/benjp.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ R.Withers, *A Storyteller's Map: Six Signposts (after Benjamin)*, 2008.
<http://www.melaniejackson.net/publications/essays-press/a-storytellers-map-six-signposts-after-benjamin-by-rachel-withers>

^{iv} *ibid*

^v J. W. von Goethe, (Italienische Reise in a letter to Herder on the 17th May, 1787).
European Union, 'Plants of the Future' Consultation document. 2004.
<http://www.europabio.org/relatedinfo/Plantgenbrochure.pdf>

^{vi} N.Harberd, *Seed to Seed: The Secret Life of Plants*, Bloomsbury,2006

^{vii} E Leslie, 'Flux and flurry , Stillness and Hypermovement in animated worlds'
Radical Philosophy 152 November/December 2008.