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The Future of Nothingness: Plastic apocalypticism or an insistent messianic?

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Abstract

Tentatively emerging from a global pandemic, we are confronted with a horizon of immanent adversities: (1) the closing window for altering the trajectory of our climate crisis, (2) the political antagonisms that exacerbate greater polarization, and (3) the effects of late-stage capitalism that service these first two interconnected configurations. Far from indulging a doomsday pessimism or comfortable misanthropy, this article pursues two continental philosophers, situating them within the tradition of "negative political theology" to think through a *future of nothingness*. Developing and then distinguishing between what is called the "plastic apocalypticism" of the philosopher Catherine Malabou, which thinks the end of the world as such, and an "insistent messianic" of the radical theologian, John D. Caputo, which takes the end of the world as the condition for saving it, an argument is made in favour of a mutual compatibility – recognizing the passing away of this world, its absolute contingency, but also the "event" of God's *insistence*. This messianic insistence and plastic revelation both resist divine intervention and instead look toward the formation of a new future, just as such a future (of nothingness) is the condition for the persistent interrogative of all concrete political arrangements.

Keywords

Apocalypticism; negative political theology; Catherine Malabou; John D. Caputo

Introduction: apocalypse and revelation

When the 2020 pandemic lockdown brought the world to a halt, drone footage of empty streets from our most populous cities surely provoked an apocalyptic imagination. The scramble to stockpile foods and essentials

seemed like a prequel to a darker ecology, mirrored by the psychological desolation of the grey landscapes in something like a Cormac McCarthy dystopia. The economic discrepancies and political opportunism so constitutive of this genre became inflected as the pandemic went on. Global vaccination efforts demarcated those who would be "rescued" and those who would not, while libertarian impulses began to flourish even among our most nuanced theoretical luminaries.[1] It truly seemed we had entered the not-so-subtle panoramas of the world's – or better – *a* world's end. While there has always been an equally seductive curiosity for *the* terminus, one should not conceal the perennial anxiety that accompanies a confrontation with the terror of an apocalypse, or one could say a nothingness, meaninglessness, or death – as thinkers from Cicero all the way to Sartre reminds us to this day. And yet, we are far from the moderation of "philosophical death" in which one "learns how to die" (Montaigne).[2] Instead we are led by neurosis into a distinctive paranoia heard in anti-vaxxing conspiracy theories and cynical pronouncements of political reactionaries. The American historian, Richard Hofstadter's 1964 classic essay, on the "Paranoid Style in American Politics", captures this strikingly still: "the paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point."[3]

The stakes of the failure to properly account for our own mortality, then, are not being overexaggerated in this "trafficking of worlds", for this is not only the terrain of a headlong frenzy into material accumulation, but also evidently of religious and political fantasies which promise salvation into

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1 See for example, Giorgio Agamben's pandemic screeds which alarmed intellectuals and devoted readers of his oeuvre for their excessive conflation of governmental medical authorities with oppressive practices of reduction to "bare life". Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (London: Eris, 2021).

2 See Michel de Montaigne's, "That to philosophize is to learn to die", in *Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters,* trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 67–82.

3 The text was first delivered as the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford in November 1963, and then published in an abridged form in 1964 by *Harper's Magazine*. The quotation is drawn from the lead essay of the later volume published under the same name, see Richard Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1964] 1996), 29–30.

immortality. In a little-known but powerful text of Sigmund Freud's, "Our Attitude Towards Death", written after the outbreak of the First World War and prescient for us today – given the phantasmagorical ambitions of Russian expansionism – he writes that "at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing another way, that *in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.*"[4] For Freud, unlike the death of loved ones that remind us of our own death, the horrors of war impinge on this ambivalence, making it easier for us to project death onto the other: "[war] compels us once more to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps strangers as enemies, whose death is to be brought about or desired."[5] As with Freud, the task for our own time is to face the apocalypse which takes place at the eschaton of the world and of the world of our own life – as Freud formulaically concludes: "*Si vis vitam, para mortem*. If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death."[6]

Preparation and questioning at the end of the world (the apocalypse) and of our own death, necessarily includes, therefore, a search for a "future of nothingness" – a future which perdures in the midst of the entanglement of our political and existential situation.[7] Given such features, the discussion which follows is to be taken in a political-theological register, insofar as the political is clearly visible in the sense of our anthropogenically inspired crises, as well as the always implicit philosophical-theological operations

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4 First published in 1915 as "Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod". See Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for The Times on War and Death" in James Strachey and Anna Freud, eds., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement. Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 289. Emphasis added.

5 Freud, "Thoughts for The Times on War and Death", 299.

6 Ibid., 300. Given the lacunae of the topic of "death" in Freud's psychoanalysis – apart from a treatment in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – this concluding fragment of Freud's text has become the site of intense scholarly interest, especially for it's over all "existentially orientated" nature. For a critical commentary on this essay in particular see, Liran Razinsky, *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 6.

7 An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference: "South African Spiritualities: Experiencing God in Everything and Nothingness", hosted by Hugenote College at *The Andrew Murray Centre for Spirituality*, Wellington, South Africa, November 24–26, 2021.

which are at work in motivating or responding to them.[8] To put this another way: we have on the one hand our precipitated anthropogenic end (apocalypse) – which Heidegger already forewarned as the technicist *Gestell* more than half a century ago[9] – and on the other, a theological hypothesis of the end initiated by God (whatever this may mean). If the former encompasses a position of contemporary atheism, then the latter appears here as its responsive counterpart. Crucial for this discussion, however, is that if we were to take seriously the paradigmatic theological meditation on the end – i.e., the Book of Revelation, for example – then in no way does "theology" purport to simply guarantee any literal saving return of a Messiah (Rev. 19:11–21). In this sense, the theological is perhaps closer to the atheistic, in as much as it does not obfuscate a pronouncement of an end as such.[10] One must then come to think the apocalypse in these a/theistic terms for our time today – what will be framed below in terms of a "negative political theology".

Before continuing, we should first note the amphibology of the term *apocalypse* and *revelation*: the former from the Greek *apokalupsis* and the latter from the Latin *revelatio*. The semantic significations here remain slippery: *apokalupsis* certainly implies revelation or "manifestation" as in the *Apokalupsis Iêsou Christou* – the "Revelation of Christ" (Rev. 1:1) – but it must also mean "the end" to capture its specific Christian meaning, the *apocalypse of a genesis* as the Bible's canonical ordering demonstrates. To deny an end would be to deny the historicity of the manifestation and thus would take on the character of a perhaps more Jewish understanding of

8 It goes almost without saying that this understanding of political theology follows the legacy of interpretation in the wake of Carl Schmitt, see fn. 19.

9 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 19–23.

10 Heidegger once claimed in a note in *Being and Time* that the "anthropology worked out in Christian theology – from Paul to Calvin's meditatio futurae vitae – has always already viewed death together with its interpretation of 'life'." Despite his super-added theological account, Emmanuel Falque responds to this claim by showing in vivid philosophical terms, that it is not the case that Christianity is unable to think the extremity of death. On the contrary, the Christian following Christ's passion, definitively "lives through, to the very end, the sense of an absence, of a kind that simply living through expectation would not eliminate." See Emmanuel Falque, *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anxiety, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 1, 44, 45–56.

the not-yet-realized messianic. At the same time, *revelatio* in the Jewish sense of "removing the veil", can neither simply imply a truth fully nor unambiguously waiting to be given, perhaps in the Greek sense of truth (*aletheia*). In phenomenological terms, therefore, the strength of a Christian understanding of apocalypse must reside in the fact that it signals the phenomenality of a concept which does not forget the content which it seeks to target, which is to say, that apocalypse is a term that means revelation, while revelation cannot at the same time be divorced from the literary genre of the end.[11] The confluence of the political and theological, thus, finds its force for our moment in the inflection of the phenomenon of apocalypse or revelation with respect to the various political theologies (Christian or Jewish, broadly construed) which are not inconsequential for what it means to think a "future of nothingness."[12]

For the sake of the aims of this article, the question of the future of nothingness, of the apocalypse, and of revelation, therefore, can take the form of at least three political theologies: either a political theology of messianism, a political theology of the messianic, and a political theology of the apocalyptic. The immanent dangers of the first version, the so-called political theology of messianism, have already been discussed at great length with its varying iterations of revolutionary or more sporadic violence, and will not concern us here – since, on well-established philosophical and theological grounds, this type of messianism presupposes (and ultimately

11 I have here, once again, greatly benefitted from Emmanuel Falque's discussion of revelation and apocalypse. See Emmanuel Falque, "Apocalypse or Revelation?" in *The Experience of Atheism: Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion*, eds. Claude Romano and Robyn Horner (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 87–101.

12 I want to resist the temptation here to seek absolute definitional clarity in what is meant by "the future" and "nothingness". Indeed, the double genitive is deliberate in the title: on the one hand we have the "the future *of nothingness*" i.e., the immanent possibilities that are expressed out of the force of "no-thing-ness" – and on the other hand, "*the future* of nothingness" – i.e., the impossible possibility of nothingness becoming something, or rather, the always arriving event of a no-thing. We might say that the former represents the historicity of nothingness (e.g. iterations of material politics) while the latter points to diverse ontological forms nothingness can take (death, the apocalyptic, destructive plasticity, etc.). In a very deliberate sense, then, it is the aim of this article to both articulate and perform this relation: e.g., in Malabou's account of nothingness as "destructive plasticity" (one of the possible futures of nothingness) expressed in the force of a futural feature of nothingness, namely, an imminent "apocalyptic political theology".

promotes) a Gnosticism with respect to the phenomenon of truth.[13] Nevertheless, one could say that it is precisely the attempt to resist slipping into this Gnosticism that partly motivates the task of an "apocalyptic" and "messianic" political theology in the latter two forms occupying the remaining contents of this article. Particularly, with respect to two thinkers who are not usually associated with contemporary discussions of political theology. The first is generated from the contributions of the French philosopher Catherine Malabou, and her various writings which integrate continental philosophy and studies into neurobiology, and the second, from the American philosopher-theologian John D. Caputo, whose later writings in a "radical" theological mode have attracted significant interest in the field of contemporary continental philosophy of religion. As a prelude to examining these respective approaches, however, it is first incumbent on us to frame in greater detail our "situation", which is, as already alluded, at once political and ontological. Indeed, it would be remiss to attribute to the pandemic *alone* the sets of conditions which have made us aware of the future's nothingness – i.e., the lack of a perceivable alternative in which human society can dwell in just harmony together and with the natural world. Moreover, to profit from this vulnerable moment, would not only be to align with a reactionary alarmism, but also to obfuscate what has *already been* a slow process of the erosion of the future.[14]

The loss of the future

The pandemic was not just an incidental medical phenomenon, but one which is also a pandemic of mental anguish that has afflicted not just

13 Literature on the forms of apocalyptic and messianic figures as well as their historical consequences is, of course, a vast field of intellectual interest. For a classic philosophical-historical account see Jacob Taubes ground-breaking doctoral dissertation *Abendländische Eschatologie* (1947) published in English as *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). More recently, see the vast historical survey which posits "millennialism" as a trans-cultural feature of human civilization, of Richard Landes', *Heaven on Earth: The varieties of Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

14 One can note here, parenthetically, that there has even recently been established at the University of Heidelberg a new *Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies* (CAPAS), the intellectual roots of which I shall return to later.

private individuals but society collectively.[15] Perhaps no other greater contemporary articulation of the new *la condition humaine*, more generally construed, can be found than in the work of the late cultural theorist, philosopher, and music critic, Mark Fisher. Fisher's landmark and widely popular book, *Capitalist Realism* (2004), was a condensed reflection which synthesized important twentieth century philosophy to argue that the rigid parameters of the economic order in post-Fordist societies had left us with a peculiar sort of realism, one in which the ideological weight of contemporary capitalism renders an almost metaphysical impossibility of turning toward a future outside of itself, since our very social being is now so intimately connected to the system of reproductions and profits – what he called a "business ontology."[16] Fisher's book could thus have been said to popularize the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson, that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." We have heard this before, but of interest for our purposes are the avenues in which Fisher took his reflections to detail new subjectivities and experiences of depression, nostalgia, and the future, more than a decade later.

In his follow-up text, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), published just three years before his tragic suicide, Fisher investigated new themes of depression, hauntology and lost futures, the subtitle of the work. According to him what marks the twenty-first century as unique is precisely its lack of uniqueness, whereas for example, we can easily distinguish and place certain cultural forms within previous time periods – Led Zepplin in the 70s, Bon Jovi in the 80s, and Nirvana in the 90s – by contrast, the twenty-first century is locked in an endless anachronism and stasis of recycled cultural productions.[17] In the frenzy of "newness", and the paradoxical "acceleration" of movement

15 For a series of theological reflections from the South African context, see the special issue in *HTS Teologie Studies / Theological Studies*, 76 no. 1 (2020). [Online]. Available: https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/issue/view/263. For some critical interventions from a German context (in which this author is also partly located), see Michael Volkmer and Karin Werner, eds., *Die Corona-Gesellschaft. Analysen zur Lage und Perspektiven für die Zukunft* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020).

16 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 17.

17 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 5.

according to the terminology of the sociologist, Hartmut Rosa,[18] there is indeed *nothing* new: on the contrary, it is an experience of time that can no longer accommodate the genuine shock of the future.[19] Fisher's thesis is not that of an older generation nostalgically lamenting after the good times of social democracy, but rather of what he calls a *formal* nostalgia, suggesting the reliance and thus endless iteration of previous artistic innovations.[20] Essential to this analysis of the "slow cancellation of the future"[21] under the neoliberal programme of flux and hyper-mobility of tele-communicative technologies of the digital age, is that culture has lost the ability not only to produce something genuinely new, but perhaps because of this phenomenological experience of time, cannot articulate or accurately grasp the present. Retrospection and pastiche, which characterise this flattened temporal pathology, are the consequences of over-worked cultures now desperate for relief through retro entertainment and fluorescent consumerism, on the one hand, while the deprivation of public services that no longer allow the space and time to produce work not immediately assimilable for profiteering, on the other, means that cultural productions become nothing more than cultural conservatisms. The naturalization of time's flattening, the diminishment of our expectations, in short, the disappearance and nothingness of the future, im-potentializes the possibility for any change to the present at all.

Whatever reasons we ascribe to this loss and death of the future, the question becomes how we are to resurrect it, bring it back to life, but without reasserting it in dogmatic fashion or simply waiting for it to revive

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18 See Hartmut Rosa's normative sociological analysis in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

19 This view would also resonate with thesis of the cultural theorist, Aleida Assmann, who suggests that modernity's "time regime" which had a future-orientated focus, has now been lost and replaced by the rise of nostalgia. See Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fügen?* (2013), recently translated by Sarah Clift, *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

20 The rise of the category of nostalgia as temporal frame for speech-acts and its relation to visions of hope, has been a topic of interest in the South African context especially, see Robert Vosloo and Helgard Pretorius, "Heaven is Yesterday: On the Quest for a Grammar for Life Together in the Age of Nostalgia" in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 529(3):247–264.

21 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 6–16.

itself from a position of political acedia that occupies so much of the left today. This is of course the realm of Jacques Derrida's famous concept of *hauntology*, drawn from his *Specters of Marx* (1994) book published after the fall of communism. A later development of his early concepts of *différrance* and "trace", hauntology emphasized the temporal and political dimension of deconstruction more explicitly than before. For Derrida, in response to the apparently closed horizon of capitalist realism, hauntology, or the ghost of Marxism always haunts the ontology of presence, with both an immemorial past that is no longer (like communism) as well as a futurity that is still to come, though still a "virtuality" that remains effectual for the present.[22] The force of Fisher's thesis for our analysis, however, resides in the spin that he gives to Derrida's hauntology. For Fisher, it is no longer the case that the spectre of Marxism haunts the present state of capitalist realism, but what haunts is the very loss of communism as an alternative altogether – its disappearance, the nothingness of the future, not only has not arrived, but seems impossible that it ever will. (In fact, it would be necessary, though beyond the bounds of this article, to expand this thesis even further, not only to revise approaches to metabolic rift theory [Marx] according to the new virtual fiefdoms of techno-feudalism,[23] but also to what seems like the inescapable antagonisms of race under the hegemonies of whiteness, as powerfully articulated by afro-pessimists).[24] Nevertheless, whatever dystopia we choose, the specific sense of the hauntological for Fisher remains: namely, that the acknowledgement of the loss of the future is itself the experience of a melancholia which suggests a persistent desire, and thus political refusal, to give up on it.[25] Melancholy, loss, nothingness, are then not simply positions of resignation but political acts of resistance.

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22 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, [1994] 2006), 10, 63, 202.

23 See Yanis Varoufakis, *Another Now: Dispatches from and Alternative Present* (New York: Vintage, 2021).

24 See Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

25 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 22–25.

(Negative) political theology

Let us now circle back to political theology, for the possibilities afforded by this field not only complexify these matters of time and ontology, but also when placed under the rubrics of political-theological analysis, alight differences that, though subtle, are consequential for the ways in which we come to interpret "the end" and our responsiveness to it. This will not be the place to deliberate on the wide variety of perspectives that refer to "political theology" – whether theologically normative political critique, politically motivated religion, or that which investigates the relationships between law, religion, and politics.[26] The context of this discussion, rather, is the mode of political theology which operates according to a narrower methodological distinctiveness, with its roots in the "sociology of concepts" first defined by the German jurist, Carl Schmitt, in order to critique and make sense of existing political structures and arrangements.[27] An important moment in this tradition which follows Schmitt, turns us to the Jewish thinker Jacob Taubes, where in Heidelberg at the FEST, he first presented his now famous lectures in 1987 on *The Political Theology of Paul*.[28]

In what Taubes then called the "nihilistic passages", he referred to the "as if not" clauses in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (7:29–31) where the apostle instructs his readers to live "as if not" for the time is growing short and the *world is passing away*.[29] In the afterword to the English edition, the editors call this a "negative political theology", because on their account

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26 There are several fruitful and wide-ranging volumes that address these various perspectives, see for example: Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds., (*The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) and Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (ed.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

27 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 37. For helpful commentary, see Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 92–101.

28 These lectures at the *Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft* were later translated and published as *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

29 Ibid., 53.

Taubes' application of Paul is to deny not only the Roman empire but even the Jewish appeal to divine law. For Taubes, who is closely reading Walter Benjamin and his enigmatic *Theologico-Political Fragment* (1921), Paul's writing in the letter to the Corinthians and also to the Romans in chapter eight, is a denial not only of a divine economy for profane politics but also of the legal use of force for political order, such that the Lutheran compromise read into Romans thirteen between church and state is unthinkable for Paul.[30] This influential interpretation has become a site of much debate, and a catalyst for several subsequent studies undertaken predominantly by secular philosophers, including Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Simon Critchley.[31] Their readings move in several political directions from radical democratic theory, to anarchism, as well as other socialist alternatives, but at their heart is a common adherence to type of *negative political theology* which relativizes politics outside of the co-ordinates of the state and the logic of late-capitalist and neo-colonial society. To put it slightly differently, they are united in the analysis of the slow cancellation and nothingness of the future but differ in their understanding and implementation of the future of nothingness.

The secondary literature which has emerged, not least generated from the work of Taubes explicitly, but also from these thinker's own departures and internal differences, has become a vast field of intellectual inquiry and debate. To demarcate the contribution of this article, one can bracket the aforementioned authors, not only because they have already received

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30 Ibid., 72. See also the important essay by Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, "No Spiritual Investment in the World as it is: Jacob Taubes' Negative Political Theology," in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilse N. Bulhof & Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 320–353.

31 Giorgio Agamben, Patricia Daley (trans.) *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier (trans.) *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, "The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul", in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Core of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), and Žižek's, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012). The secondary literary here is also extensive, for introductions see: Jon Simons (ed.) *From Agamben to Žižek: Contemporary Critical Theorists* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

extensive engagements in the literature, but also because they can, on my reading (with the exception of Critchley), roughly be situated in the broad camp of a *certain* apocalyptic political theology, i.e., their thought is marked by tendencies or inclinations that lean into unrealistic universalisms, supersessionisms, and even authoritarian postures. In short, in as much as they continue a trajectory of political theology which refuses a transcendent source for genuine novelty, they nevertheless offer visions of a future which betrays a formalist universal abstracted from the material conditions of our world. The emphasis on notions of grace, revolution, terror, or pure violence, correctly speak to the pessimism of our age, but their solutions seem to require either a spectacular voluntarist moment of the subject, in the case of Badiou, a hard dichotomizing between law and grace in Agamben, and either a political withdrawal or a revolutionary event, in the case of Žižek.[32] Instead, for the remainder of this article we draw our attention to the thought of Catherine Malabou and John D. Caputo, both philosophers for whom theological-political reflections have not always been an explicit task of their work, but which, through an exploration by way of comparison, can be said to deserve a hearing for their contributions toward the future of nothingness.[33]

Plastic apocalypticism in Catherine Malabou

The French philosopher, Catherine Malabou (1959–) a former student of Derrida, works predominantly within the continental tradition and has pioneered a mode of reading which traverses the ground of thinkers from Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Deleuze, Foucault, and Freud,

32 For a significant study which attends these thinkers and makes these arguments in greater detail, see Jayne Svenungsson, *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*, trans. Stephen Donovan (New York: Berghahn, 2016), esp. chapter five. See also similar arguments made by Simon Critchley in his *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012).

33 Some exceptions in terms of their political-theological importance, see Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), chap. 2 and 8; Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), chap. 6 and 7. See also my own, Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

to inaugurate a "new materialism",[34] building on innovations within contemporary neuroscience and neurobiology. The underlying energy of her work is expressed by the conviction that the immanent form of thought today is one which captures the ontologically dynamic (or plastic) and metamorphic potential of all form itself. More simply put, that self-transformation is built into the very fabric of reality. The question behind our brief examination here is to determine the extent to which her approach renders an internal and material response to the loss of the future, without thereby requiring another violence of novelty – that is to say, a novelty that is not simply discontinuous with previous modes of being but neither just another extreme reconfiguration of the present. The discussion intends to demonstrate that the structure of Malabou's key concept of "plasticity" is of a negative political theology that advances, following the terminology of Thomas Lynch, a "plastic apocalypticism."[35]

To ask after the future of nothingness in Malabou is to ask after *The Future of Hegel* (1996), the title of her landmark doctoral study completed under Derrida, and which presents her core retrieval of the notion of "plasticity" against the anti-Hegelianism and anti-biologism of continental philosophy after Heidegger.[36] From a few opaque references to plasticity in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*, Malabou draws inspiration for the three traits she assigns to her interpretation of plasticity that are shared between subjectivity, the dialectical process, and being. As she explains, the term plasticity names the capacity of "being at once capable of receiving and of giving form" and is "an explosive material . . . that can set off violent detonations".[37] Plasticity is metamorphosizing, indeed plastic

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34 This is the way in which Malabou self-describes her project according to Ian James, see his *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 83.

35 See Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), chapter 4. I will be drawing on Lynch's reading in parts of this section, but will in the end, come to criticize the Malabou he represents.

36 Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialect*, trans. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005), translated from the French, *L'Avenir de Hegel* (Paris: Vrin, 1996); Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 2–3.

37 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 9.

term indicating "concrete shapes in which form is crystallized (sculpture) and to the annihilation of all form (the bomb)."[38]

The purposes of plasticity for a negative political theology are naturally best understood in terms of a discussion of temporality in the dialectical process. For Malabou, against caricatures of totalization and territorial thinking, Hegel's absolute Spirit *does* admit of genuine contingency, in the sense of events that occur through the Spirit's auto-transformative movements through time. If one were to end the analysis here, one could correctly point to a traditional theological criticism of Hegel's God, i.e., the implication that God, out of a "lack", requires a necessary temporalization, leading to a weakening of God's transcendence and subsequent deprivation of a freely given generosity and novelty. This is clearly seen and rightly criticized in the political theology of figures like Jürgen Moltmann.[39] In this sense, God would not have a future because God is locked into the necessary process of contingency. But for Malabou, the description of plasticity means that the *Spirit's* necessary contingency, or in Christological language, the way God sees Godself coming into history as a temporal intuition of the Absolute, is not a lack but a kenotic presentation of God's self. What Malabou calls "speculative hermeneutics"[40] is, thus, the art of discerning the Absolute incarnationally in the multiplicity and contingency of the various forms of life – the emergence of the forms of the essential in the figures of the accidental. What this implies for the concept of the future, is a move away from any teleological structure of temporal anticipation, where the present is the future which has not yet happened, but rather, a temporal anticipation that is constitutive of the Absolute itself. To put this another way, what is actual (God or the Absolute) is the possibility of becoming, which is necessary – so the Actual is the possibility of necessary becoming, which means that it can always become otherwise.

Distilling these turns of phrase, what Malabou's concept of plasticity essentially articulates is the possibility of transformation that is immanent to a system itself. A system that transforms itself from the inside, supports

38 Ibid.

39 See Johann Baptist Metz's famous criticism, "Suffering unto God", *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 611–22.

40 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 167.

her interest in neurobiology because the latest neuroscience suggests, for example in the work of Jean-Pierre Changeux, that our brains are not just organs determined by stimulation and reflex. While our brains in relation to each other's do have similar structures, they are not identical, because they keep transforming themselves forever until we die – there is an internal dynamism and movement to our brains.[41] This is true for Malabou for the whole of reality, namely, that it is a part of the very structure of reality to be open to the possibility of immanent transformation. But plasticity is also a risk: endless novelty or change expresses a rather utopic sense of the future, whereas the innovation of plasticity – as Malabou conceives it – is that it harbours the destructive and traumatic quality of the plastic, for, after all, nitro-glycerine is an explosive material capable of causing extensive deflagrations. The explosive quality of plasticity, thus, involves the auto-annihilation of form. This explosive annihilation is necessary for repair, for healing, and for growth of neuroplastic cells. In her later book, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008) she argues, that "the sculpture of the self is born from the deflagration of an original biological matrix, which does not mean that this matrix is disowned or forgotten but that it cancels itself."[42] Plasticity, therefore, takes place between shaping of form and destruction of that form, meaning that destruction of form is an intrinsic part of the process of formation.

Malabou's synthesis of continental philosophy and neurobiology presents a non-reductionist materialism, which locates transformation in immanence and the full scope of the "stuff" of everyday life which includes both the risks and challenges as well as destructions and creativities. We can now see why Malabou's thought might be resourceful for thinking about the future of nothingness as a kind of plastic apocalypticism, since what is central to her understanding of the world is the possibility of a "destructive revelation" which does not reveal the future in any fixed sense but reveals that what is now the necessity of the world, may become an impossibility (nothingness), and this nothingness or impossibility which cannot be thought, may become necessary. This means that the sense of a

41 Jean-Pierre Changeux, and in particular his *L'Homme neuronal* (1979), is often cited by Malabou. See Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 2, 8.

42 Ibid., 74.

transformation of our present conditions does not come from the outside but denotes – and detonates – forms of novelty that emerge within an immanent plane. And yet, throughout Malabou's texts she is clear about not wanting to give up on the concept of the Absolute and claims in the end to be a systematic thinker. This is important because it distinguishes her, in my reading, from someone like John D. Caputo who is following Derrida and the other post-structuralists.

Caputo on Malabou

While Malabou's work shares several continuities with Derrida,[43] she nevertheless rejects Derrida's "messianic without messianism", since for her this notion – tied as it is to (a version of) the Derridean reading of "event" – is a form of transcendence that occurs as an external alterity.[44] Moreover, the criticisms of Hegel, emblematic of French post-war philosophy, obscures for her what is central to Hegel's project – acutely summarized in the famous line from the *Phenomenology's* preface: "the true is the whole."[45] As Thomas Lynch rightly suggests, however, for Malabou "the Absolute may be complete and closed, but only in the sense that it is a complete understanding of incompleteness and a closed system in the sense that it accounts for the negativity that can never be overcome."[46] Thus, even though it is natural that eschatological ideas give rise to fixation on the transcendent as the location of the infinite and the source of hope in another world, Hegel's philosophy no longer requires this transcendence. In rejecting a transcendent understanding of the Absolute, Malabou is arguing for an immanent absolute within the boundaries of history. It is only on such an understanding of the absolute that it can be constitutive of human freedom. For Malabou, the final philosophical and political

43 See for example their collaborative project which focuses on the notion of "accidentality" or in their idiom, *destinerrance*: Catharine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath*, trans. David Wills (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

44 See Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialect, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 44, 67.

45 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.

46 Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 108.

expression of such freedom, as she takes up in her recent work, is that of (post-)anarchism.[47]

What one must appreciate of Malabou in the context of this discussion, is that she offers intellectual resources to think about the future that is not pre-determined and which accounts for a freedom rooted in material biological reality – often undermined in overly linguistic and symbolic accounts – and which also does not reject the contingency of change that can be both transformative but also risky and destructive. If Malabou offers what can be called a form of apocalyptic political theology, she then helps us think the end of the world not as an event that we passively wait for leading us out of this world, but instead as a future which sees the potential for a process that can lead us *from* the world-as-it-is. Malabou captures this apocalyptic political theology in a lucid passage from *Ontology of the Accident* (2012): "Destructive plasticity", she writes, "enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self."[48]

Insofar as Malabou situates herself in proximity to, though uniquely distanced from Derrida, in a kind of post-deconstructive materialism, the question is now raised to what extent her account of the future of nothingness either accords or diverges from that of John D. Caputo? – another, if not *the* preeminent interpreter of Derrida in continental philosophy of religion today. There are at least two instances, to this author's knowledge, where Caputo and Malabou's respective projects have been directly brought into conversation with one another. The first occurs when Caputo himself refashions his own position to Hegel in his *Insistence*

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47 Catherine Malabou, "Politics of Plasticity: Cooperation without Chains", in *Unchaining Solidarity: On Mutual Aid and Anarchism with Catherine Malabou*, eds. Dan Swain, Petr Urban, Catherine Malabou, Petr Kouba (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 15–28. See also the recent volume, with several essay contributions from Malabou and other critical engagements with her philosophy in an explicitly political register: Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, eds., *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the work of Catherine Malabou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

48 Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 11.

of God (2013) and devotes an entire chapter to Malabou.[49] The second case is Clayton Crockett's more recent study, *Derrida at the end of Writing* (2018). In the latter, Crockett reads Derrida's later work "materialistically" through Malabou and Caputo. He suggests against recent caricatures of linguistic idealism and constructivism, that the "motor scheme" of writing (Malabou) is replaced by plasticity or the biological in the context of Derrida's later interest in ethics, politics, and religion.[50] For Crockett, Caputo is really the first to recognize this shift in Derrida's work, going as far as to call his "theo-poetic" interpretation of Derrida a "materialist religion", albeit conceived non-reductively and with some significant reservation. Nevertheless, if ultimately read from the perspective of our discussion, Crockett's treatment of Caputo is meant to serve as mostly an earlier demonstration of the "materialist Derrida", followed by Malabou as the culmination of this deconstructive materialism.[51] Crockett does, however, make two important points with respect to Malabou and Caputo which raise both an agreement and a disagreement, which I will return to below. Let us then briefly turn to Caputo's own reading of Malabou.

After a generous presentation of Malabou's *The Future of Hegel*, Caputo endorses her project to the extent that she replicates the best of "death-of-God" theology.[52] Hegel's God is God's own self-distancing in time, God's self-alienation in Christ which allows us to immanently draw near to him. Where Caputo begins to hesitate, is when this is placed within an interpretation of the speculative framework. If the transitions of *Spirit* in the phenomenology are not arbitrary, but indicative of Hegel's awareness of the necessity of contingency, of the incarnational becoming accidental (Christ) of the essential (Absolute/God), then the interpretation of these various accidental forms of history are, indeed, following Heidegger, "absolute

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49 John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), chap. 6.

50 Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing*, 6–9.

51 Although he includes others from Lacan to various proponents of Object-Orientated-Ontology, Speculative Realism, and New Materialist voices (particularly Karan Barad), and apart from the chapter dedicated to Malabou, the concept of "motor-scheme", explicitly taken from Malabou, is the hermeneutic key Crockett deploys for the entire book. Indeed, he writes, "[Malabou] is perhaps the most brilliant and creative contemporary philosopher in her own right", 5.

52 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 103–114.

facts" (*Faktizität*) – unpredictable, unprogrammable, and unforeseeable. However, this hermeneutics is not radical enough for Caputo, because however contingent, it is still speculative. Speculative hermeneutics may allow for the play of Spirit in history – the future is always open, new forms can come into being after explosive moments – but it is always the Spirit which is moving with a felt necessity in the contingency of these accidental forms. To put this in a Caputian formulation: "nothing is going to happen that does not fulfil the destination of the Spirit. If 'eventually' the Spirit can see these unforseeables coming, this undoes the 'event'."[53] Caputo, thus, in the end agrees that Malabou has rendered Hegel's philosophy beyond caricatures and driven it to the limits, even if she is not explicit that this limit is actually reached by reading Hegel through Heidegger. However, he still thinks that plasticity does not extend to Spirit itself, for this would not be the nature of Spirit.[54] Caputo thus shares Derrida's reservations about Malabou's Hegel in the preface to *The Future of Hegel*, that Spirit itself cannot explode – we do not bid adieu to God, but rather au revoir, that is, "until we meet again." There is no radical possibility of no Spirit at all.

Following our own discussion of Malabou's philosophy above, one can probably agree with Crockett that Caputo's criticism is limited here by following Derrida's own concerns from the preface to *The Future of Hegel*. Indeed, Caputo does not consider Malabou's subsequent work, where the plasticity of her apocalypticism really comes to the fore in her reflections on contemporary neurobiology.[55] In works like *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and the *Ontology of Accident*, for example, the deformation of the brain in a radically discontinuous trauma, can become the condition for a radically new form, one that is still in some way "continuous", albeit

53 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 125.

54 Ibid., 126–27.

55 Caputo does make reference to two subsequent works in his footnotes, Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and *Ontology of Accident: An Essay in Destructive Plasticity*. The former involves a critical comment drawn from a book review by Pete Mandik concerning some scepticism about the actual "explosivity" of the "plastic" in contemporary neurobiology, which Mandik argues is not really what plasticity means. In the latter, Caputo is affirmative about "a radically negative plasticity" where Malabou is "clear that she is making room for the risk, for what I am calling 'perhaps'." Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 278 fn.14, 18.

completely different[56] (think PTSD or Alzheimer's Disease).[57] We have then not a structure that ultimately aims at reconciliation supposedly, but rather a structure of novelty that is both immanently and materially constituted as well as not wholly discontinuous with the form that it re-forms. One could possibly *disagree*, however, with Crockett's overall positive assessment of Malabou. For while it is quite clear that Malabou's subject is deeply destabilized by a negative possibility (i.e., a *negative plasticity* – not "flexibility" or "fluidity" – terms given over, for Malabou, too easily to manipulation by passively formed subjects under contemporary capitalism),[58] there is a type of resistance in plasticity which nevertheless remains in the reserve *of* and *for* the (human) Self.[59] If there is a subtle reassertion of subjectivity in Malabou for the sake of actually forming a future out of the nothingness of the present, then it is still not clear why we should include Caputo's "insistent messianic" into this conceptual basket for a contemporary negative political theology.

Conclusion: An insistent messianic?

A place to find an answer, beyond merely restating Caputo's argument in the *Insistence of God*, would be to return to the stakes of the criticism he levels against Malabou's reading of Hegel. If Malabou's perennial claim is that plasticity is the conceptual apparatus which denotes the giving and receiving of form and that it also harbours an explosive potential for deformation, then it is also true that plasticity is itself a plastic concept. In fact, Malabou makes this point in several places: it is not just that she has happened upon a descriptive term suitable for her purposes, but also that

56 Malabou describes this paradoxicality as a "formative contradiction", see *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 74.

57 Ibid., 28. See also Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 15, 17–18.

58 Ibid., 12–14.

59 See an insightful discussion by Christopher Watkin, particularly what he calls Malabou's "host-substance" paradigm – i.e., the cerebral matter – which localizes human autonomy and identity. Christopher Watkin, *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 127.

this concept is the very form her own thought takes.[60] The implications of this for Malabou is that what becomes of plasticity in her thought can always be unpredictable and change within different contexts (e.g., she receives the "form" of plasticity in Hegel and then transforms it). It is of the nature of plasticity to be plastic, which means that for it to remain itself it must continue to transform itself. Malabou thus begins to fail to account for the principle of non-contradiction: plasticity incorporates all possible change – including the plastic change of plasticity – into itself, any and all rivals or difference are but moments of plasticity. If it then follows that plasticity is absolute and necessary, as this implies, then how can plasticity *qua* plastic remain plasticity if it cannot ever be anything other than itself? One can hopefully now see – in parallel with Caputo's argument about there being no true "event" in Hegel – why there is no ultimate resistance to plasticity in Malabou, and therefore only a future of nothingness in a certain circumscribed sense; where nothingness is not in the end nothing, but a something, the felt necessity of a plastic God/Absolute. In human terms, our humanity is both static and changing – for these conditions are both a part of the life of plasticity, but this plasticity of being human remains constant and cannot itself ever be questioned.

By contrast, Caputo's vision of an insistent messianic charges that without the radical possibility of even plasticity itself becoming nothing, there is no future for the present. The messianic risk is not the passivity of an alterity, but the *insistent* disposition by means of which the present is given the chance to look toward a better future. The "future of nothingness" in the Caputian sense, then, is this: the messianic risk as the risk of no messianic – and this is the way in which we can be assured of the future's openness and take responsibility for it. Caputo's words here are stark: "For there to be a future for God, a future in the radical sense, God would have to be at risk, and God would have to face the future just like the rest of us, with fear and trembling, uncertain of and unable to see what was coming, no guarantees, praying and weeping over the future of God, forced to make

60 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, 5; Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 13, 21, 24–27, 37. See her comments here on the development of "plasticity" to "metamorphosis" in her book *The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, trans. Peter Skafish (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).

a leap of faith with an uncertain outcome."[61] Caputo has the advantage of writing explicitly in a Christian idiom, so it is perhaps easier to approximate his thought to a "radical" or "negative" political theology.[62] Yet, while the dissimilar discursive registers in Caputo and Malabou's writing can be superficially discerned, it is hoped that their philosophical contributions (particularly that of plasticity in Malabou), though not identical and still of a difference in degree, can be harnessed together as both fecund and creative innovations for thinking our present conditions and beyond to the future of nothingness.

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61 Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 133.

62 I have attempted to articulate this in my previous work. For a more recent contribution see my chapter, Calvin D. Ullrich, "Radical Theology as Political Theology: Exploring the Fragments of God's Weak Power" in Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koči, eds. *The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Weak Theology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

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