

## Disastrous Dialogue

Plastic Productions of Agency–meaning Relationships

Just, Sine Nørholm; Berg, Kristine Marie

*Document Version*

Accepted author manuscript

*Published in:*

Rhetoric Society Quarterly

*DOI:*

[10.1080/02773945.2015.1106008](https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2015.1106008)

*Publication date:*

2016

*License*

Unspecified

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Just, S. N., & Berg, K. M. (2016). Disastrous Dialogue: Plastic Productions of Agency–meaning Relationships. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 46(1), 28-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2015.1106008>

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Download date: 18. Jun. 2025



# *Disastrous Dialogue:* Plastic Productions of Agency–Meaning Relationships

**Sine Nørholm Just and Kristine Marie Bang**

Journal article (Post print version)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in  
Rhetoric Society Quarterly on 06 Jan 2016, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02773945.2015.1106008>.

Uploaded to [Research@CBS](#): Februar 2016

## ***Disastrous Dialogue* – Plastic productions of agency-meaning relationships**

*“The world as we know it will soon come to an end”*

*-Roland Emmerich, 2012*

In the fall of 2010 Danish artist and film director Søren Thilo Funder was in Cairo to gather material for what was to become the artwork *Disastrous Dialogue – The Roland Emmerich Speech Act*.<sup>1</sup> An explicitly intertextual and particularly open work (Eco), *Disastrous Dialogue* is an art film that relocates recurrent themes of Hollywood disaster movies to a Middle Eastern context. More specifically, the film consists of a collage of scenes in which eight different Egyptian actors take turns reciting various lines, translated into Arabic from the Roland Emmerich productions *Independence Day* (1996), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009), against the backdrop of a ramshackle Cairo mansion. As Funder prepared to shoot the many hours of scenes, which would eventually be turned into a ten-minute short film, he engaged with the buzzing city and its multitudes. Sensing a tension in the air, he became aware that the socio-political context was not only influencing the production of the film, but might also affect its reception. When in February 2011 the artist was ready to cut the film, however, events had already exceeded even his most fateful premonitions, reshaping the premises of the film. While Funder did not shoot new scenes, the advent of the Arab Spring and the concomitant changes in Egyptian society altered the content and possible interpretations of the finished work considerably.

In this paper we use *Disastrous Dialogue* as a poignant starting point for exploring and substantiating what might be termed ‘the relational turn’ in the study of rhetorical agency. Thus, we begin from a definition of agency as both a potential for action and a capacity to act (Campbell; Miller; Leff “Tradition”) that emerges from the dynamic relationships between the constituent elements of rhetorical processes. Agency is not a property of any one situational element, but emerges in and through the relations between these elements (Emirbayer & Mische). Furthermore, agency and meaning formation, defined as an equally fluid process that is

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<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank Søren Thilo Funder for his willingness to share with us not only a copy of the finished work, but also his personal experience of its making. Furthermore, we are indebted to the two anonymous reviewers who provided very helpful comments to an earlier version of this paper. Any remaining mistakes and misunderstandings are, of course, our own.

always already under way and continuously moving elsewhere (Burke 110-111; Bakhtin 91), are intrinsically related, thoroughly entwined. Introducing Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity, we perceive the agency-meaning relationship as plastic in not only the dual sense of being at once formed and formative, but also in the third sense of the plastic explosive (Malabou & Butler 623).

For analytical purposes one may maintain the distinction between agency-as-potential and agency-as-realization; the *textual potential* to mean something, on the one hand, and the *situational realization* of a certain meaning, on the other (see e.g. Altieri 478). This distinction highlights how the enactment of rhetorical agency – rhetorical artifacts put to a certain use and/or causing a certain effect – is precipitated upon a closure or fixation of the meaning potential of the artifact. The enactment of one meaning with one set of effects provisionally defers the artifact's potential to mean and do otherwise, but – and this is our main point – this deferral is never permanent. Rather, the relations between the constituent elements of the agency-meaning relationship are ever shifting, allowing for destabilizations of agential realizations and emergences of new meaning potentials that may, in turn, become realized and, hence, stabilized in new ways. Whatever an artifact means and does at a given time, in a given place, then, is the result of more or less stabilized relations that may always, anywhere become destabilized. This process of de- and re-stabilization, we propose, is not the result of a causal chain of events that can be fully represented by linear chronologies. Instead, it is contingently, but not arbitrarily linked to reconfigurations of agency-meaning relationships in and as events. The process is plastic. Our argument, in sum, is that relational agency is a plastic process of meaning formation. Or, to push the point, *agency is plasticity*.

The argument will unfold as follows: first, we will present the process of production and reception of *Disastrous Dialogue*, as well as the artifact itself, at some length. By suggesting how the potential and realized meanings of the film have shifted – and continue to shift – throughout the process, we arrive at the claim that existing theories cannot thoroughly account for the relationships of agency and meaning. To compensate for this lack we then offer the concept of plasticity as a key to more adequate explanations. The theoretical discussion will be illustrated by a conceptually guided re-reading of *Disastrous Dialogue*, and we end the paper by

considering the specific contribution and broader implications of introducing the notion of plasticity into the rhetorical discussion of the notion of agency.

### **A linear account of *Disastrous Dialogue***

The classical distinction between a quantitative (*chronos*) and a qualitative (*kairos*) notion of time (Kinneavy & Eskin 433) recurs in current discussions of temporality: should rhetorical processes be observed as singularly situated in space and time or is it better to perceive such processes as variable events? (Edbauer). The issue of temporality is central to the conceptualization of the agency-meaning relationship because it touches upon the issue of causality – does one precede and give rise to the other? Again, we believe that the notion of plasticity may enhance our understanding of agential meaning formation/meaningful agency as not only unfolding linearly as action-reaction, but as being able to fold back upon and even blow up established chronologies and causalities. As a preface to this argument we will, indeed, present a linear account of the agencies and meanings of *Disastrous Dialogue*, but in so doing we will pay special attention to the blind spots and empty spaces of this account; to the issues it raises, but cannot address.

The construction of the linear account relies on Stuart Hall's notion of the encoding and decoding of meaningful discourse as separate and equally active moments in the process of meaning formation (Hall).<sup>2</sup> In order to uncover the encoded meaning of *Disastrous Dialogue*, the meaning potentials of the artifact as these were envisioned and enacted at its moment of production, we conducted an interview with Søren Thilo Funder, the artist and director, in which we asked him to describe the making of the film.<sup>3</sup> We will attend to the film as meaningful

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<sup>2</sup> This application of the two concepts does not do full justice to Hall as one of his main points is to argue against the view of communication as a process of transmission from sender through message to receiver. Thus, we identify deeply with Hall's idea that production and reception are not to be seen as causally linked sequences and we wish to extend this notion to broader processes of communication/interpretation that may unfold in and through space and time, but are not spatio-temporal in any linearly causal sense. Rather, each new communicative moment – or event – should be seen as just as independently active as its predecessors. The entirety of our argument, then, holds more affinity to Hall's position than might be assumed from the above gloss of the (ab)used encoding/decoding pair.

<sup>3</sup> Using interview data raises the issue of the interviewee's reliability as a source. In this case, however, the interview is treated on a par with the other studied texts; we do not see Thilo Funder as an authoritative source of the

discourse by performing a close reading of the ‘text’ (Leff “Things”; see also Warnick). Finally, we will get at the decoding of the artwork, its potential and realized meanings at the moment of reception, through an adaptation of Leah Ceccarelli’s textual-intertextual analysis (Ceccarelli). This step will be facilitated through publically available information related to screenings of the film (e.g. exhibition programs and other presentations) as well as reviews and other media records of its reception, just as we will rely on our own initial experience of viewing *Disastrous Dialogue* at an exhibition – and observing other visitors’ interaction with the piece.<sup>4</sup>

### *Encoding – From a question of underrepresentation to a revolutionary statement*

This section is primarily based on our interview with Søren Thilo Funder and presents his account of the production of *Disastrous Dialogue* as well as his interpretation of its meaning potentials. Before moving into this account a short background note on the artist may be in order. Søren Thilo Funder is a Danish artist, who works primarily with the film medium. The general themes of his work include the investigation of power relations in present-day society and a focus on the invisible and the underrepresented. While, as will be seen below, Funder is careful not to present particular political messages in his works, he does have an explicitly political agenda; seeking to interrogate the conditions of the “lifeworld of the political subject” (Funder) he invites the audience to reflect upon that which is often taken for granted or goes unnoticed in every-day life.

As mentioned above, *Disastrous Dialogue* was filmed in Cairo in the fall of 2010. Søren Thilo Funder was in Cairo on a residency that was partially funded by the Danish Art Council; he was required to produce a film work during his stay, but there were no inherent restrictions or prior agreements as to what the work should be about. In 2010 Thilo Funder had recently become

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‘true meaning’ of the text, but present and analyze his interpretation of the text in the context of its production just as we study the textually established meaning potential and the interpretations of it in the context(s) of reception.

<sup>4</sup> This part of the linear account, then, returns us to our memories of and notes from our first encounter with *Disastrous Dialogue* – to the experience of the film that came before our close reading of it. It is, of course, not quite possible for us now to perceive and convey the meaning as it appeared to us initially, a fact that highlights the constructed character of the linear account. Drawing on the intertextual material partially frees us from our own built-up biases, but it is, nevertheless, important to reiterate that we do not aim to provide a neutral description of the transfer of meaning from ‘sender’ through ‘message’ to ‘receiver’, but rather a partial and partisan reconstruction of a much more complicated, dynamic and open-ended process (Smith).

interested in survivalism, in different notions of life beyond the end of the world. This interest, combined with the more general focus of his art, gave him the idea to work with the underrepresented groups of Hollywood disaster movies. More specifically, the question arose as to what would happen to such films, particularly those of the director Roland Emmerich, if they were relocated to the Cairo context. Although Thilo Funder had several ideas concerning the possible meanings of this relocation, his overriding ambition was to create, in his own words, an ‘empty container’ that would be open to varying audiences’ multiple interpretations.

With these ideas and aspirations in mind Funder and his team of actors, camera operators and interpreters began filming in a deserted house in Cairo. However, the scene was not only chosen as a non-specific backdrop to the Egyptian actors’ recitations of lines from the Emmerich movies. It was also chosen for practical purposes; because Egyptians could not interact freely with foreigners at the time of the film shoot, the team had to choose a setting to and from which its Egyptian members could go without being seen with the Danish director. This created a certain tension that was exacerbated by the general feel of the city of Cairo. Funder sensed that something was afoot, but as he wrapped up the shooting and returned to Copenhagen and the task of turning the 4-500 recorded scenes into a short film, he had no idea of how deep the stir was. When the editing process began, the artist merely reflected that he had enough material to tell many different stories. The onset of the Arab Spring significantly altered the available options.

One event in particular shaped the rest of the production process: the news that Sally Zahran, one of the eight actors who appear in the film, had been killed while participating in the protests on Tahrir Square that marked the epicenter of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.<sup>5</sup> Thilo Funder first contemplated ending the project completely, then cut a version of the film that was so overtaken by the Egyptian Revolution that the people to see and comment on this first ‘draft’ told the artist

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<sup>5</sup> Locally known as the January 25 Revolution, this revolt was part of the Arab Spring, the wave of uprisings that swept across Northern Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011. In Egypt the immediate result of the protests was that President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011, handing over power to the army. Popular demands for political change continued, however, and in December 2011-January 2012 parliamentary elections were finally held. Islamist parties emerged victorious, just as the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi won the presidential election of June 2012. This did not set a stop to political protests and social unrest, and in July 2013 the army once again took control of the Egyptian state. In May 2014 a new presidential election gave former army chief Abdul Fatah al-Sisi a democratic mandate, but the political climate in Egypt remains highly volatile, and protests marking the anniversary of the initial uprising of January 25 2011 are especially prone to get violent as the army strikes down people’s continued displays of dissatisfaction with the regime.

he had all but disappeared from his own production. The second and final version seeks to balance the new meaning potentials of the film, revolutionary criticism of Egyptian society and a contemplation of change as a renewing/destructive force, with the original ideas of exploring issues of underrepresenting ‘the other’ in disaster films. That is, the film was always meant to be political in a general sense, but because of the changes in the external context it became political in an unforeseen and more specific way. Thilo Funder sought to maintain at least some of the more open, undetermined potential in the final version of the film while also recognizing and paying tribute to its new and more focused potentialities. Specifically, he chose to dedicate the film to the dead actress without spelling out the reason for doing so; just after the final scene the words “For Sally Zahran” appear in white on an entirely black background, then the names of the actors and the rest of the credits follow in the same format. Thus, it is not explained within the film why one of the actors is singled out for dedication. One can find this out in the accompanying material, but it is still possible to view and interpret the film independently of the dedication – and the specific context it evokes.

#### Disastrous Dialogue *as meaningful discourse* – The Roland Emmerich Speech Act

Just as any other interpretation, the interpretation of a film is not a neutral report on textual cues, but involves an active construction of meaning on the basis of these cues (see Bordwell 3). Thus, the following may be seen as our account of *Disastrous Dialogue*, the meaning we have made of its potentiality through our close reading of it. However, we initially seek to resist interpretation and instead aim at providing a representation of the film that may serve as a basis for the following discussion; in doing so, we spell out a number of cues that may or may not have occurred to individual viewers depending on their prior knowledge of the work of Roland Emmerich (and that of Søren Thilo Funder), the genre of disaster movies (and of video art), the Arab Spring (and the recent history of Egyptian society), etc.

*Disastrous Dialogue* explicitly thematizes issues of inter- and contextuality as it translates lines from the German film director Roland Emmerich’s Hollywood productions *Independence Day* (1996), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009) to an Egyptian context. This is done



in both the specific linguistic sense of translating the lines into Arabic – and back to English in subtitles – and in the broader social sense of having eight Egyptian actors recite the lines against the backdrop of a desolate building. One might say that the lines are taken out of context: the Egyptian actors are not ‘in character’ nor do they interact with each other; instead each actor is alone in a different room, wearing what appears to be his or her everyday clothes, the lines are read rather than played out, and as the readings unfold the scene shifts between actors/rooms, seemingly at random; lines from the three movies are interspersed with each other; and the readings are punctuated by wordless scenes, either with images of destruction (tidal waves, falling buildings, etc.) that are also taken from the Emmerich films or showing the Egyptian actors’ reactions to these images. For example, after a wordless clip of landmasses sliding into the ocean a male actor, still in the same austere and dilapidated room, is seen moving as if being engulfed by water. It appears as though he is acting in front of a blue screen in order for him later to be added to the disaster images. The film, then, is also out of context in this sense, and the viewer is seemingly invited to (re-)insert the actors from the Cairo mansion into the scenes from the Emmerich movies.

The actors appear in *Disastrous Dialogue* with their role ascriptions written in the corner of the screen. They change roles throughout the film and are at times ascribed rather surprising roles, as when for instance a man is “mother” and an elderly woman “soldier”. Rather than rendering the lines, actions and roles meaningless, however, their new order and setting works as a recontextualization; a distinct dynamic is created between them as they are put together in *Disastrous Dialogue*, a novel meaning potential is created.



Figure 1: Stills from *Disastrous Dialogue*, courtesy of Søren Thilo Funder

The total duration of the film is ten minutes, and what happens in this time may be seen as a compilation of tableaux or loosely coupled episodes that can be watched independently.

However, the beginning and end of the film are formally marked out with a title sequence and credit lines, so that it is possible to view it as a whole – as will be done at inaugural viewings and other special screenings. Thus, *Disastrous Dialogue* can either be viewed partially/sequentially or chronologically from beginning to end. In either case, *Disastrous Dialogue* is a distinctly writerly text (Barthes) with so many blank spaces or gaps in the plot (Iser) that one could argue that it has as many potential meanings as there are viewers, that it does not suggest any meaning formation in and of itself. This would not be quite accurate, however, since the film does hold both thematic and formal cues as to what it is ‘about’.

Three substantial themes recur in the various sequences or episodes into which the film is divided: destruction, (emotional) response, and resistance. All three themes are, of course, inherent to the genre of disaster movies on which *Disastrous Dialogue* draws and they are introduced in chronological order, whereby the sequencing can actually – if one watches the film from beginning to end – be seen to follow the typical plot of a disaster movie: a threat is detected, panic breaks out, action is taken. The scenes that contain dialogue support this plot, but the wordless scenes break it up, and the linearity is not strictly maintained. At first, the themes are introduced one by one, but they do not give complete way to each other – rather, they overlap and are unfolded gradually. This underscores how *Disastrous Dialogue* may be viewed as a sequential mash-up despite the implicit narrative development or plot.

The understanding of *Disastrous Dialogue* as one integrated narrative is more directly supported by the non-verbal sequences, which break up the first option of seeing the film as following a narrative arch from problem identification to resolution. The wordless scenes, instead, introduce an alternative dynamic. When focusing on the sequences consisting of tidal waves and other scenes of destruction as well as the actors’ bodily reactions to these, the film appears to be structured as a crescendo – a build-up of feelings moving from concern and anxiety through rising degrees of worry and fear in order to culminate in panic and despair. The final scene cuts from one screaming actor to the other, layering the screams on top of each other and ending in a moment of silence before the screen turns black – and the aforementioned dedication to Sally Zahran followed by the credit lines subsequently appear.

Thus, the verbal and non-verbal scenes contain two different narratives: one narrative is loosely structured around the three themes of ‘destruction’, ‘distress’, and ‘resistance’; this narrative does not progress linearly, but could, instead, be seen as ‘hyperlinked’ sequences that create a networked story in a fashion resembling that of feature films such as *Magnolia*, *Crash*, and *Happy Endings* (Quart). The other narrative is structured as an emotional crescendo moving from relatively calm responses to the imminent disaster towards complete abandon and despair in the face of realized destruction. The two possible narratives do not exclude each other, but are instead supplementary and suggestive of an interpretation of *Disastrous Dialogue* as having an overriding ‘message’, or performing a certain speech act. This interpretation is supported by, or anchored in, the subtitle of the film work: *The Roland Emmerich Speech Act. Disastrous Dialogue*, then, is explicitly marked as a speech act, as a meaningful encounter with and intervention in a social context, but what is the meaning of the film, what is it that it does? This is, perhaps, the most blatantly blank space of the artwork, left completely open to the viewer’s interpretation as he or she struggles to make sense of the relations between the various lines, the lines and the actors, the lines and the settings in which the actors cite them, the verbal and the nonverbal sequences of the film and so on. Rather than offer our personal interpretation of the film as meaningful discourse here we will now turn to the moments of its reception. That is, we will present the intertextually available decodings of the film before returning to the issue of how we see – and have come to see – it.

### *Decoding – Prophesizing (after) the revolution*

As mentioned, our understanding of how the work has been decoded relies on publically available information about and commentary upon *Disastrous Dialogue* rather than on observations of or interviews concerning specific receptions.<sup>6</sup> We chose this material because it

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<sup>6</sup> However, here is a brief description of our observation of the usual viewing practice. In exhibition settings the film is shown in a loop, and visitors will rarely watch it from begin to end, but begin watching from where the film happens to be when they encounter it (that is, walk up to it in the gallery/museum) and stop watching at another (more or less random) moment, e.g. when they lose interest, get distracted by another work, when the film reaches its formal end or when they have seen the entire film (when the film reaches the moment at which watching began). This means that individual viewing experiences will rarely resemble the close reading of the film as a coherent text, which we provided above, but a viewing from beginning to end does seem to underlie much of the public

seems to offer a form of generalized reception that might anchor individual interpretations, but would not bind them completely. We suppose that the work is still open enough for specific individuals' participation in the meaning formation to vary greatly, but have decided not to test the degree of this variance; instead, we will provide a brief reflection upon our own reception and interpretation of the film at the end of this section.

While *Disastrous Dialogue* has only been shown once in Egypt (a showing Søren Thilo Funder described as 'difficult' when we interviewed him), it has made numerous appearances at galleries and museums in Europe. Notably, it has been shown at several art festivals and special exhibitions with a more or less explicit focus on the Arab Spring; for instance, it was part of the "After the Future" 2012-version of the EVA International Biennial of Visual Art in Limerick and it was featured in the "Real Fictions" program of the Oslo Screen Festival of 2012. The screening of *Disastrous Dialogue* is usually accompanied with an account of its making, whereby the story of the changed context of production also becomes part of the context of reception. Thus, the interaction between 'fiction' and 'reality' becomes a central theme of the reception – at least as this is contextualized in and through the various catalogues and websites on which the artwork is presented and in the media coverage of it. Some writers highlight how "reality overtook the artwork" (Redder), others focus on how 'Funder has extended reality' (Jeppesen). The former interpretation resembles the artist's own account of how the 'empty container' he wanted to offer to the audience became filled with more specific meaning, whereas the latter both sees *Disastrous Dialogue* as a prophecy of sorts and seeks to move beyond the pre- and post-revolutionary contexts to ask what will happen to the work post-post-revolution. What meaning potential does *Disastrous Dialogue* have as a work of art once the political meaning to which it has become tied loses its immediacy?

This is, in a sense, also the question that has gradually coalesced from our own process of engaging with the film. As we sought to trace the meanings of *Disastrous Dialogue* in a linear movement from its production through the film 'as such' to its reception, the artwork became more and more 'meaningful' to us. Or rather, its meaning became more and more fixed and the performed speech act more and more distinct. At the pinnacle of this process, we came to see

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commentary upon, not least the reviews of, the artwork. Thus, our reading practice does not, upon reflection, seem to be entirely different from that employed by (other) commentators.

*Disastrous Dialogue* as a critical comment on both the past and future of Egypt – as a statement of hope for the Arab Spring, but also of concern regarding what it will entail. But in looking back upon this process we began to question our interpretation; in particular, we noted that our close reading of *Disastrous Dialogue* contained very few direct hints that this should be the text's only, let alone 'true' meaning, and we began to question the process of inscribing meaning retrospectively.

Rather than progressing from past to future the 'story' of the meaning of *Disastrous Dialogue* is that of re-interpreting a past utterance to fit with present events. Strictly speaking, *Disastrous Dialogue* has 'done' nothing except become adapted to the context into which it has been inscribed. At the very least, then, the causality of the chronology has to be reversed. However, this raises the question of what the currently (at least in our account) dominant inscription of meaning might come to mean prospectively and whether or how such potential new meanings would follow from the established linearity. Might the 'fiction' of the artwork as a political commentary provide it with 'real' political impact? Or could it, sometime in the future, become detached from its meaning as this is currently configured and form part new meaningful configurations?

Maybe it would be more correct to say that the work of art is somehow a-temporal or at least not restricted to a chronological process of meaning formation, that it is possible to de- and recontextualize the work in such ways as to mean and do other things in as yet unforeseen and different situations. And if this were so, if there actually is no necessary link between *Disastrous Dialogue* and the Egyptian Revolution, then why and how did the process of meaning formation as described above come to be so fixed as to render such a connection seemingly necessary to or inherent in the meaning formation of the film? What relationships of potential and enacted meanings underlie this process? In short, the linear account of the process of meaning formation ends up raising more questions than it answers, and it is to the consideration of how one might address these questions conceptually that we now turn.

## The plasticity of meaning-agency relationships

What came out of the linear account is an understanding of *Disastrous Dialogue* as decisively shaped by its context; the artwork has come to take on a quite specific meaning because of its relationship with the Arab Spring. However, even within this narrow interpretation the film continues to hold an undetermined formative potential – as a critical, yet hopeful commentary on Egyptian events it may be put to different uses, just as its presently latent potential as a critique of the West's relation with 'the other' could become actualized in future settings. Finally, there is a sense that *Disastrous Dialogue* has the potential to mean and do completely different and unforeseen things – that a new context could blow up established meanings, just as the film could itself become explosive. These three interpretations of the agency-meaning relationship are all inherent to the notion of plasticity as it is conceptualized in the work of Catherine Malabou. In turning to a conceptually guided criticism (Jasinski 261) of *Disastrous Dialogue* we, therefore, explore how plasticity may explain the interdependence of agency and meaning in a general theoretical sense and for our artifact in particular.

Malabou, a former student and collaborator of Jacques Derrida, recovers and reconceptualizes the Hegelian notion of plasticity in order to offer it as the 'hermeneutic motor scheme' of the current epoch, replacing Derridean 'writing' as the underlying driver of, or condition of possibility for, our interpretative efforts (Malabou *Plasticity* 13; see also Malabou "The End"). As such, the notion of plasticity denotes the human subject's most basic ability to give form to its encounters with the world, but also the ways in which these encounters are formative of the human subject and, finally, how the encounters may become explosive, destructive of both the subject and the world. "Thus," Malabou writes, "plasticity is clearly placed between two polar extremes, with the sensible figure that is the taking shape in form (sculpture or plastic object) on the one side and the destruction of all form (explosion) on the other" (*Plasticity* 87). In philosophical terms, then, what Malabou offers is a reworking of relations of sameness and difference, stability and change, which places these relations squarely within the realm of form and does not rely on any external power for an explanation of their dynamics. Rather, "form is not just a raw material substance that must be worked, reworked, and if necessary destroyed by something else, a transcendent force; form itself gives itself the ability to shape, receive, and blow up forms" (Crockett xiii). Here, we will be concerned with the rhetorical implications of

this “*essentially material* plasticity” (*Plasticity* 45, emphasis in original); more specifically, we will explore the ways in which conceptualizing and studying rhetorical processes as and with plasticity may enhance our understanding of meaning formation as a spatio-temporal event, agency as thoroughly relational, and agency-meaning relationships as creatively destructive.

*Formed by context – Meaning formation as spatio-temporal event*

The concept of plasticity troubles the account of rhetorical processes as unfolding linearly through space and time in two important regards. First, plasticity, in accordance with Derridean deconstruction, deals with “the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time” (Derrida 68), with the fragmentation of the spatio-temporal into non-immediate, non-coincidental events rather than with the chronological ordering of sequential moments (*Plasticity* 6-7). The insight that persuasive attempts – that is, attempts at shaping an audience’s meaning formation about and actions in relation to a given cause or topic – are context-specific is as ancient as rhetoric itself (O’Keefe 583). However, adding the notion of plasticity to the ongoing discussion of how to perceive the ‘rhetorical situation’ allows us to push this discussion beyond both the determined-constructed and the singular-multiple dichotomies (Biesecker; Bitzer; Edbauer; Vatz). “Plasticity refers to the *spontaneous organization of fragments*” (*Plasticity* 7) and, hence, allows us to understand meaning as both formed by the context in which it emerges and able to free itself from this context in order to re-emerge in new spatio-temporal configurations. Meaning formation, as viewed through the lens of plasticity, is both in and out of sync; it is “always before, always after” (*Plasticity* 6) and, significantly, it is always in circulation, never established anywhere outside of “change, exchange, and substitution” (*Plasticity* 44; see also Chaput).

Returning to *Disastrous Dialogue* we can now reflect further on the way in which the meaning of the film has been shaped by the spatio-temporal configuration of which it has become a fragment. Søren Thilo Funder himself provides the following reflection on the shaping of the film’s meaning: “this work will now be associated with the Egyptian revolution. And it is a work about the Egyptian revolution. Even if it isn’t so content-wise. [...] This is the first time that I

have experienced that the container has been taken over by something I couldn't control or foresee" (Redder; our translation). In his interview with us, the artist talked about how the work now looks like a prophecy, but that this is what it has become, not what it was. Also, he expressed concerns about taking on the prophetic role; he had neither foreseen the revolution, nor did he particularly want to comment upon it. Yet he recognized how the insertion of the film into this context provides a platform for its exhibition. A platform he is not altogether comfortably with as it, ironically, means representing Egyptian issues rather than commenting critically on the issue of representation, but a platform he must engage with it if he wants to show the work at all. Being a commentary on current Egyptian affairs has become the basic condition of possibility for the film in its current context and configuration.

Thus, the reading of *Disastrous Dialogue* as a fragment within the agency-meaning complex that has come to be organized as 'the Arab Spring' provides the film-as-form with a meaning it would not have had were it not for the shaping powers of this configuration. The forming of the film, however, did not only endow it with a certain meaning that it would not otherwise have had, but also provided it with a context into which it could speak this meaning. And this raises the question as to whether the formation also endowed *Disastrous Dialogue* with (trans)formative powers, whether the film became able to exert a (different) agency in and through its (new) form.

#### *Formative powers – The relationality of agency*

While not neglecting the duality of rhetorical agency as both potential for and realization of action, we will focus on the aspect of realization in order to ask who or what does the realizing. Is rhetor, text, audience, context or, perhaps, effect the locus of agency? Much of the scholarly debate on the concept has been concerned with wrenching rhetorical agency from the hands of the rhetor whilst maintaining some notion of a rhetorical ability to act (Geisler). The individual speaker, it is argued, is not a freely acting, rational subject, and agency, therefore, is not an expression of the rhetor's intentions (Just & Christiansen). Or put differently, rhetorical utterances very rarely mean what and do as their speakers intended (to the extent that one can consciously articulate 'intentions'), but they almost inevitably mean and do something.



The widespread agreement that agency does not lie with the rhetor, but that rhetoric nevertheless holds agential potential has not led to similar unanimity as to where rhetorical agency should be (re-)located. Some argue that the rhetor ought still to be included in the considerations, ranging from the assertion that he or she can choose from "...various options for the enactment of agency" (Foss, Waters & Armada 2006) to more nuanced understandings of the ways in which agency arises from the intersubjective relationship between rhetor and audience (Leff "Tradition"; Leff & Utley) or out of the interrelations/dialectics between the rhetor and the context in which he or she speaks (Miller; Gunn & Cloud). Others take the more radical stance of placing agency solely at the level of the text, as that which acts on speaker as well as audience (Lundberg & Gunn), or squarely in the context where agency may be identified as the actual effects of the rhetorical artifact, the (various) uses to which it has been put (Rand). Whichever way the question of the locus of agency is answered, it is telling that it *is* answered. While placing 'the blame' does arguably make the interpretative or explanatory task easier, it also, we believe, provides partial or simplified readings of how agency unfolds. Rather than highlighting one factor or another, we propose a notion of agency that is radically relational – in which the involved elements, as Ernesto Laclau says in his definition of discourse, "...do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it" (Laclau 68). In our view, then, agency is best defined as an ongoing process of realizing meaning potential that is informed by the past, grounded in the present, and oriented towards the future (Emirbayer & Mische). Agency, in sum, is plastic; it is the dynamic of meaning that is always different from, yet constantly returned to itself – a form with no other content than the one which it itself embodies and continually creates (*Plasticity* 9).

The aesthetic form of *Disastrous Dialogue* is, as already indicated, a particularly open one that plays with genre expectations (this is decidedly not a disaster movie, so what is it?), narrative norms (where is the plot? What is going on?), cultural biases and stereotypes (can Arabs be the protagonists of disaster movies? Does (movie) disaster even strike outside of the US?), interpretations of the Egyptian Revolution (is social change necessarily predicated upon the destruction of existing order? Is the revolution itself a disaster?). More specifically, each element of the film seems to offer both an anchor for meaning formation and open up the possibility of various interpretations. The very title of *Disastrous Dialogue* is a polysemic framing that both

points to the possibility of having a dialogue about disaster and the risk that dialogue turns into disaster. Which interpretation is one to choose, is it possible to maintain both at the same time, and does the title contain further possible meanings? For instance, is it a specific (kind of) dialogue that is disastrous? As already indicated, the subtitle continues this train of thought: *The Roland Emmerich Speech Act* both anchors *Disastrous Dialogue* in the context of disaster movies and raises the questions of what this specific speech act might be and whether or not it is performed in and through *Disastrous Dialogue*. This polysemy is the main formative character of the film; its insistence on being various, and variously relate many different, perhaps even mutually exclusive, things at once provides it with a potential to form new and indeterminate meanings.

The view of relational agency as formative plasticity, however, implies that each realization of the meaning potential of a form also involves a reconfiguration of the relationship between rhetor, audience, text and context. Although we here argue that the agency of *Disastrous Dialogue* is indeterminate, we saw in the preceding section that its relational configuration presently stabilizes meaning in a certain way that actually is not the most obvious one, judging by the film's own form. *Disastrous Dialogue* presently enacts a commentary upon the fears and hopes of Egyptian society as expressed in and revolving around the Arab Spring, but what would it take for the film to come to mean and do different things? That is, how do spatio-temporal reconfigurations reflect back upon prior meanings of the involved fragments and shape possible future meanings? How do stabilized meanings explode?

### *Creative destruction – Plastic agency-meaning relationships*

Malabou highlights the third sense of plasticity, the ability to explode, to destroy self and others, as the most important of the three interpretations of the concept; plasticity, she says, is "...a *structure of transformation and destruction of presence and the present*" (*Plasticity* 9, emphasis in original). The explosive force of plasticity, then, demolishes the present (meaning), but in so doing it enables change, provides the basis for creating something anew. Explosive plasticity is creative destruction in the Schumpeterean sense (Schumpeter); it is the explosive character of

plasticity that enables it to not only give and take form, but to be transformative in and of itself. More specifically, we perceive this third meaning of plasticity as that which connects the ways in which the meaning of an artifact may be shaped by external forces with the artifact's agential powers to form its own meaning – and to influence the meaningful configuration of which it forms part. Surely, agency-meaning relationships may become stabilized in and through certain configurations, but these configurations are always contingent and contentious, always latently explosive. Moreover, if and when they do blow up, this does not only mean the fragmentation of existing meaning formation, but also the possibility of re-organizing the fragments in new and as of yet unforeseen ways. This is the power of the event as a non-linear, non-causal form of change.

The agency-meaning relationships of *Disastrous Dialogue* have been exploded and are explosive. Initially, the explosive environment of Egypt shaped the shooting of the film, and when Egyptian society actually exploded this significantly changed the conditions of possibility of the productions as well as the reception of the artwork. In the new configuration that emerged from the splintering of the established social order of Egypt the film came to be about the Arab Spring – even if it wasn't. The meaning of the artwork was shaped by the explosive events so as to also come to hold a potential for shaping future events; the film's sequences of disaster and destruction now both point backwards and forwards, but, significantly, they have become more tied to the (real) Egyptian context to which they are relocated than to the (fictional) American context from which they were drawn.

*Disastrous Dialogue*, then, was transformed by its association with the Arab Spring, the explosive force of which had impact upon the artwork and re-arranged its fragments to mean new things. Moreover, *Disastrous Dialogue* is itself explosive in the dual sense that it thematizes destruction and that its form is itself volatile – the various scenes and sequences are constantly pressuring each other, threatening to break down what just seemed like a plausible interpretation, offering up new options as to what the artifact might mean. By fragmenting established forms, *Disastrous Dialogue* offers its audience the possibility of putting the pieces together in new ways, of forming new meanings. Viewers are invited to engage with the artwork in ways that suggest possible directions for the interpretative process while remaining open for alternative interpretations and even negating – blowing up – provisional interpretations. The film points to

possible encounters between itself and its audience(s), but also remains elusive, suggesting the impossibility of common or stable meaning formation.

Even if one anchors the meaning of *Disastrous Dialogue* firmly in the revolutionary context of Egypt, the issue of what sort of a commentary on this context the film might be remains highly precarious. Does the piece speak in favor of revolution or against it? Does it offer hope or despair? Each option constantly challenges the other, threatening to explode – as happens in the final scene – into an unintelligible scream. And then, as the voices of the eight actors are joined, a new question appears: is there order in chaos? And further, is there order after chaos? Will a new reality emerge? Incidentally, one of the media commentaries on *Disastrous Dialogue* contends that “the world will never explode” (Jeppesen), thus providing a direct (if unwitting) reference to the plastic character of the film, but also claiming its limited effect: “It does not bring the Egyptian reality into the presence of our feelings” (our translation). *Disastrous Dialogue*, in this interpretation, may be seen to open up new possibilities, but it does not in itself have an effect so explosive as to alter existing agential relations and presently dominant meaningful configurations decisively. In this reading, the meaning of the film was shaped by the context of the Arab Spring, but this did not alter its agency to such a degree that it was able to explode the Danish (and, more broadly, Western) perceptions of Egyptian events. The film was exploded, but it did not explode. This, however, does not mean that it has exhausted its explosive potential and a final set of questions arise: What may *Disastrous Dialogue* come to mean and do after – and without – the Egyptian revolution? May it, for instance, be used to reflect further upon the Western view of and encounter with the Arab Spring? Could the broader issues of intercultural encounter be brought to the fore? Or will new and hitherto unseen potentials appear in and through eventual encounters with its form? In and as what future relations may the work be reconfigured?

### **Encountering plasticity – From *Disastrous Dialogue* to disastrous dialogues**

Whereas it is common for rhetorical artifacts to be read and used in a multitude of ways that diverge from the usage to which they invite – that is, for relationally enacted agencies to be broader than (or at least different from) textually invited agential potentials (Rand 2008), the

production and reception of *Disastrous Dialogue* provides us with an example of an artifact that has been interpreted and used in a way that is more specific or closed than its open invitation to pluralistic and ambiguous meaning formation would suggest. In this instance, the social act came before the event of the text, so to speak; because the Egyptian revolution *has* happened *Disastrous Dialogue* is endowed with the potential to be read as a commentary upon it. The reconfiguration of the relationship between rhetor, audience, text and context, which in this case was formed by external factors and corroborated at both the moments of production and reception, enabled the collective enactment of a meaning which only exists as a faint and ambiguous hint in the artwork's own form. A hint that, as it turned out, was not in and of itself powerful enough to alter Western audiences' relations with the Arab Spring. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the critical potential of the film is exhausted. Rather, the artwork maintains (perhaps, in altered form) its explosiveness even in the face of the apparent failure of a revolution – in Egypt and in the Western eye.

*Disastrous Dialogue* is, we believe, a particularly clear case of a general phenomenon: meaning formation is a plastic process of relational agency. That is, the internal potential for meaning and agency of a symbolic artifact is realized externally in and through (re-)configurations of author, text, audience, context and effect. Whereas we may cherish the wide array of potential meanings and agencies offered by open works, these will inevitably be closed down or narrowed in the process of their enactment – either at the level of individual receptions or, as in the case of *Disastrous Dialogue*, through their engagement with broader social processes. Open invitations to meaning formation may offer a greater potential for varying and various actions, but the enactment of this potential entails a choice between the offered meanings. While this may be lamented as a loss of potentiality, we suggest that it should not be seen as a fixed or finished state of affairs, but rather as the temporary outcome of the relational exercise of agency.

As Malabou asserts, “there is no outside, nor is there any immobility” (*Plasticity* 43). The process of meaning formation of which any artifact forms part is always moving elsewhere; there is no way of stepping out of, nor stopping the process, and in the process the potential for meaning of the utterance is continuously (re-)formed, opening up for new enactments of meaning. Although a certain configuration may privilege one interpretation, the broader potentiality of any artifact remains available and could be realized in new relationships. This, we

believe, is the key contribution of introducing the notion of plasticity – in our reading of the agency-meaning relationship of *Disastrous Dialogue*, specifically, and in the scholarly conversation on rhetorical agency, generally: meaning is thoroughly formed, the result of variously relating text to context, and agency is thoroughly formative, arising from the (re-) configuration of its constituent fragments. Finally, agency-meaning relationships are, we believe, *dialogical*, in constant, open-ended exchange among themselves, and *disastrous*, susceptible to breakdowns, blow-ups, and new beginnings. This, at least, is the shape in which *Disastrous Dialogue* leaves us.

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