

# Plastic Humanities: Revaluing Humanistic Inquiry in the Plastic Age

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## Abstract

In the early 21st century, humanity finds itself deeply enmeshed in what many call the “Plastic Age”: a historical epoch defined by the widespread production, consumption, and disposal of synthetic polymer materials known as plastics. Plastics permeate nearly every aspect of daily life — from packaging and consumer goods to architecture, medicine, and art. Simultaneously, the global scale of plastic waste and pollution has become a central environmental, social, and cultural concern. Against this backdrop, there is a growing realization that addressing the challenges of plastics is not only a matter for science, engineering, and policy, but also for the humanities. This article investigates the contours of Plastic Humanities: its conceptual foundations, methodological challenges, domains of inquiry, and potential contributions. Drawing on recent scholarship from cultural theory, archaeology, art, environmental humanities, and social science, the essay makes a case for why the humanities must adapt — and what such adaptation could look like.

**Keywords:** Plastic Age, “Plastic Humanities”, plasticity, materiality

The term “plastic” (from Greek *plastikós*, meaning “to mould” or “to shape”) has a long intellectual history — originally referring to the capacity to shape or form, central to sculpture and the fine arts. “Plastic Humanities” refers to an emergent reorientation within humanistic inquiry — one that acknowledges plastics not merely as inert materials, or as technical problems to be engineered away — but as cultural, ecological, aesthetic, and existential agents.

It suggests that humanities disciplines — literature, philosophy, art history, archaeology, cultural studies — must extend their analytical frameworks to engage with the materiality, temporality, and sociopolitical implications of plastic. As argued by scholars like Ranjan Ghosh, the humanities themselves must become “plastic,” flexible, interdisciplinary, and capable of responding to the “noise” generated by material-cultural transformations.

In recent decades, philosophers and critical theorists have re-invoked “plasticity” as a metaphor for intellectual and disciplinary flexibility. For example, according to French philosopher Catherine Malabou, the future of the humanities depends on their ability to be “plastic”: to receive new forms from external disciplines and to bestow new forms in return. Malabou argues that disciplines must remain open, malleable, and capable of transformation — only then can the humanities survive in an increasingly complex, interconnected world.

The notion of “plasticity” thus becomes more than a metaphor: it is a call for epistemic and institutional flexibility. Plastic Humanities builds on that idea: rather than viewing plastic as a problem external to the humanities, it treats plastic as part of the epistemic fabric of modernity — a material-symbolic condition that reshapes how we think, perceive, produce, and consume.

Another foundational thread comes from the humanities' renewed attention to materiality — the idea that materials and things matter: they mediate human relationships, carry memory, shape practices, and influence meaning. The field of “materiality” (in social sciences and humanities) emphasizes that cultural artifacts are not merely symbolic but materially consequential: their physical properties shape how they are used and experienced.

In the context of plastic, this focus on materiality becomes urgent. Plastics are not inert background artifacts. They age, degrade, accumulate in landfills and oceans, fragment into microplastics, travel across borders, and embed themselves in ecosystems and human bodies. Their material life stages — from production to disposal and deterioration — are deeply formative of contemporary culture, environment, health, and memory. Plastic Humanities proposes that these lifecycle processes demand humanities-style attention.

Plastic, as a global phenomenon, refuses disciplinary boundaries. Its challenges traverse environmental science, public health, urban planning, economics, culture, art, policy, and ethics. Attempting to address plastic solely through technical or policy solutions risks ignoring cultural, aesthetic, and existential dimensions. As articulated in the introduction to the special collection *Worldwide Waste*, plastic places new demands on social science and humanities disciplines: “interdisciplinary research that impacts policy and practice.”

Plastic Humanities thus emerges as a necessary bridge — offering modes of critical reflection, narrative framing, cultural memory, value analysis, and ethical imagination — that complement scientific and technical knowledge. Plastic Humanities is not a single method or discipline, but a constellation of approaches — a new epistemic orientation.

One of the striking developments in contemporary scholarship is the adaptation of archaeological methods to the present — a “contemporary archaeology” of waste. In a recent article, Estelle Praet, John Schofield, and Raveena M. Tamoria argue that our planet's plastics are not just waste: they are artifacts of the present — “techno fossils” that will endure into the deep future. By studying plastic debris, landfills, microplastic deposits, and the material legacies we leave behind, archaeologists can produce a material history of the Plastic Age — one that helps us understand human impact on planetary geological and ecological systems. Such archaeological perspectives do more than document degradation: they problematize the notion of “future heritage.” Plastics, as persistent waste, may outlast current human civilizations. Plastic Humanities asks: what does it mean to produce such a legacy? How will future societies — or other species — interpret our discarded polymer artifacts?

Plastic Humanities also finds expression in art and cultural practice — where plastics become materials, mediums, and subjects. The book *Plastic Matter* by Heather Davis, for example, traces plastics' entanglement with geology, media, biology, and race, illustrating how matter itself becomes emblematic of 20th and 21st century modes of production and consumption.

More concretely, interdisciplinary groups such as “The Synthetic Collective” — a collaboration of scientists, artists, and humanities scholars — use exhibitions to render plastic pollution visible in cultural, aesthetic, and affective registers. Their 2021 exhibition *Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through* integrated scientific research on plastic pollution (e.g., microplastic pellet pollution in the Great Lakes) with artwork and curatorial practice, also experimenting with low-carbon, low-waste exhibition methods. Thus, plastic becomes not only a material to discard but a medium for reflection, critique, and imagination — a cultural raw material for the humanities.

Plastic Humanities contributes to policy and social change by situating plastic within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. The special collection in *Worldwide Waste* aims to reorient plastic research away from narrow technical or economic frames (e.g., plastic bag bans), advancing instead a “deeper engagement with socio-material processes.”

Researchers study the social life of plastic: consumer habits, waste practices, extended producer responsibility (EPR) regimes, community waste management, informal recycling sectors, and socio-cultural understandings of plastic pollution. For instance, in a case study of post-consumption plastic waste management in the region around DKI Jakarta, Indonesia, researchers found that community attitudes and informal-sector recycling played crucial roles — highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics underlying plastic waste. Plastic Humanities offers ethical and political frameworks for thinking about responsibility, justice, and equity — not only between humans and nature, but among different communities and generations, including future inhabitants of the planet.

While the sciences investigate the chemical, toxicological, and ecological effects of plastics, Plastic Humanities can provide the broader context: narrative, memory, representation, meaning. For example, scholars draw attention to how plastics embody a culture of disposability — a culture that normalizes waste, alienation from nature, and the externalization of harm to marginalized populations. In this respect, the humanities critique the systemic structures that drive plastic production, overconsumption, and neglect of waste. Moreover, Plastic Humanities can contribute to public understanding and ethics around plastic pollution and human health. By interpreting plastics’ pervasive presence in everyday life — in food packaging, water bottles, medical devices — humanities scholars highlight how deeply enmeshed plastics are with contemporary embodiments of risk, identity, and everyday living.

To date, much of the public discourse around plastics focuses on recycling, waste management, bans on certain plastic products, and engineering better materials. These technical and policy interventions are necessary — but insufficient. They often treat plastic as a problem to be solved, rather than a symptom of broader cultural, economic, and existential crises. Without addressing the cultural logic that normalizes disposability, convenience, and unbridled consumption, solutions risk being superficial or temporary. Plastic Humanities intervenes precisely at this gap — offering critical perspectives on value, meaning, memory, and responsibility. It invites us to ask: why did we create a world so dependent on plastics? What does it say about our relationship to nature, time, and each other? What legacies do we want to leave behind?

The challenges posed by plastics cut across disciplines. Plastic Humanities fosters interdisciplinary collaboration — among philosophers, literary scholars, archaeologists, artists, environmental scientists, policymakers — thereby enabling more holistic and reflexive forms of knowledge. This interdisciplinarity is not a temporary fusion but an epistemic reconfiguration: a plasticization of the humanities themselves. Plastics pose ethical dilemmas spanning species, generations, and geographies. They raise questions about responsibility to non-human life, ecological justice, environmental memory, and the rights of future generations. By giving shape to these questions in narratives, metaphors, artworks, cultural histories, and public discourse, Plastic Humanities helps cultivate an ethical imagination — a necessary component for meaningful change. In a sense, Plastic Humanities asks us to confront what it means to be human in the Plastic Age — a human deeply entangled with synthetic matter, environmental degradation, and global interdependence.

While the case for Plastic Humanities is compelling, there are also challenges and potential criticisms. Because Plastic Humanities is emergent and interdisciplinary, its boundaries remain fuzzy. What counts

as “plastic humanities”? Which disciplines, methods, or research questions belong? This vagueness can impede institutional recognition, funding, curricular adoption, or academic legitimacy.

Furthermore, traditional academic structures — departments, tenure, discipline-based journals — may resist such cross-cutting work. Humanities scholars attempting to engage with plastics may find themselves lacking training in material science, environmental science, or policy studies. Conversely, scientists or environmental engineers may not appreciate the interpretive methods of humanities.

There is a risk that Plastic Humanities could devolve into symbolic critique — art installations, cultural critique, or narrative framing — without engaging structural issues of production, waste infrastructure, consumer capitalism, or global inequalities. Without concrete linkages to material change, policy interventions, or community action, such efforts might remain within academic or cultural bubbles.

Addressing plastic through humanities raises difficult questions: responsibility, guilt, complicity, and agency. How do we ethically navigate our roles as consumers, citizens, global citizens? Should we feel guilt? But guilt without agency can be paralyzing. Plastic Humanities must carefully balance critique with constructive possibility, avoiding despair or moralizing.

Given the stakes and challenges, I propose a few directions for a research agenda in Plastic Humanities:

- **Mapping Material Geographies of Plastic:** Archaeological, anthropological, and geographical studies documenting the flow and accumulation of plastic in different regions — urban, rural, marine — and linking these to histories of consumption, colonial trade, and globalization.
- **Plastic and Memory Studies:** Investigating how societies remember (or forget) plastic — through art, archives, photographs, literature — and how plastic debris becomes part of cultural heritage or toxic legacy.
- **Narratives of the Plastic Body:** Interdisciplinary analysis of how plastic pervades human bodies (microplastics, chemical exposure), and how this shapes identity, vulnerability, inequality, and embodiment.
- **Plastic Aesthetics and Art Practice:** Encouraging collaborations between artists, environmental scientists, and communities to develop aesthetic practices that reveal hidden materialities, provoke reflection, and foster empathy with nonhuman life.
- **Pedagogy and Public Humanities:** Integrating Plastic Humanities into higher-education curricula, museum practices, community activism, and public discourse — fostering a plastic-literacy that combines material understanding with ethical awareness.

Thus, the Plastic Age challenges humanity in unprecedented ways. Plastics are not just materials: they are symbols, artifacts, legacies, agents of change — carrying within them contradictions of convenience and harm, progress and destruction, creation and waste. Plastic Humanities is not an optional add-on — but an essential reconfiguration of humanistic inquiry. By plasticizing the humanities themselves — making them more flexible, interdisciplinary, material-sensitive, ethically engaged — we open new pathways to understanding and responding to the profound transformations that plastics have wrought. In doing so, we not only address the material world, but also our relationships — to each other, to nonhuman life, to future generations, and to the planet. Only through such holistic, reflexive, imaginative scholarship can we begin to face the ethical, cultural, and existential dimensions of living in the Plastic Age.

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