

DESCARTES AND THE POST-TRAUMATIC SUBJECT

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK*

If the radical moment of the inauguration of modern philosophy is the rise of the Cartesian *cogito*, where are we today with regard to *cogito*? Are we really entering a post-Cartesian era, or is it that only now our unique historical constellation enables us to discern all the consequences of the *cogito*? Walter Benjamin claimed that works of art often function like shots taken on a film for which the developer has not yet been discovered, so that one has to wait for a future to understand them properly. Is not something similar happening with *cogito*: today, we have at our disposal the developer to understand it properly.

In what, then, does this developer consist? What makes our historical moment unique? Let us begin with an unexpected case: George Soros is an undoubtedly honest humanitarian whose Open Society foundation, among other things, more or less single-handedly saved critical social thinking in post-Communist countries. Yet a decade or so ago, the same Soros engaged in speculations with the different rates between currencies and earned hundreds of millions, thereby causing the untold suffering, especially in the South-East Asia: hundreds of thousands losing jobs, with all the consequences. This is today's "abstract" violence at its purest: on the one extreme, the financial speculation going on in its own sphere, with no transparent links to the reality of human lives; on the other extreme, a pseudo-natural catastrophe (suddenly and unexpectedly losing jobs) which hits thousands like a tsunami, with no apparent reason at all. Today's violence is like a Hegelian speculative "infinite judgment" which posits the identity of these two extremes.

The philosophical background for this gap is provided by Malebranche

* Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani, Aškerčeva 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija.

who radicalized Descartes' dualism: if our soul and our body belong to two totally different substances with no direct contact, how are we to explain their coordination? The only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously coordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity. When I think about raising my hand and my hand effectively raises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only "occasionally" – upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain which leads to my hand effectively being raised. One can see, again, how the prospect of radical virtualization bestows on the computer the position which is strictly homologous to that of God in the Malebrancheian occasionalism: since the computer coordinates the relationship between my mind and (what I experience as) the movement of my limbs (in the virtual reality), one can easily imagine a computer which runs amok and starts to act like Descartes' *malin génie*, disturbing the coordination between my mind and my bodily self-experience – when the signal of my mind to raise my hand is suspended or even counteracted in (the virtual) reality, the most fundamental experience of the body as "mine" is undermined... And is it not similar with Soros sitting in his New York office, pressing the buttons on his computer and unaware of the social consequences of his speculations? – The psychological consequences of this rise of the new forms of "abstract" violence are the topic of Catherine Malabou's *Les nouveaux blessés (The New Wounded)*.¹

If the Freudian name for the "unknown knowns" is the Unconscious², the Freudian name for the "unknown unknowns" is *trauma*, the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way. Malabou proposed a critical reformulation of psychoanalysis along these lines; her starting point is the delicate echoing between internal and external Real in psychoanalysis: for Freud and Lacan, external shocks, brutal unexpected encounters or intrusions, due their properly traumatic impact to the way they touch a pre-existing traumatic "psychic reality". Malabou rereads along these lines Lacan's reading of the Freudian dream of "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" The contingent external encounter of the real (the candle collapses and inflames the cloth covering the dead child, and the smell of the smoke disturbs the father on a night-watch) triggers the true Real, the un-

¹ Catherine Malabou, *Les nouveaux blessés*, Paris: Bayard 2007. Numbers in brackets refer to pages of this book.

² "Analysis came to announce to us that there is knowledge that is not known, knowledge that is based on the signifier as such". (Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, New York: Norton 1998, p. 96)

bearable fantasy-apparition of the dead child reproaching his father. In this way, for Freud (and Lacan), every external trauma is “sublated,” internalized, owing its impact to the way a pre-existing Real of the “psychic reality” is aroused through it. Even the most violent intrusions of the external real – say, the shocking effect on the victims of bomb-explosions in war – owe their traumatic effect to the resonance they find in perverse masochism, in death-drive, in unconscious guilt-feeling, etc. Today, however, our socio-political reality itself imposes multiple versions of external intrusions, traumas, which are just that, meaningless brutal interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of subject’s identity. First, there is the brutal external physical violence: terror attacks like 9/11, the US “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq, street violence, rapes, etc., but also natural catastrophies, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc.; then, there is the “irrational” (meaningless) destruction of the material base of our inner reality (brain-tumors, Alzheimer’s disease, organic cerebral lesions, etc., which can utterly change, destroy even, the victim’s personality; finally, there are the destructive effects of socio-symbolic violence (social exclusion, etc.). (Note how this triad echoes the triad of commons: the commons of external nature, of inner nature, of symbolic substance.) Most of these forms of violence are, of course, known for centuries, some even from the very prehistory of humanity. What is new today is that, since we live in a “disenchanted” post-religious era, they are much more directly experienced as meaningless intrusions of the real, and, for this very reason, although utterly different in nature, they appear as belonging to the same series and produce the same effect. (Recall the historical fact that rape was categorized as trauma only in XXth century...)

There is yet another distinction one should bear in mind here. While for us, in the developed West, trauma is as a rule experienced as a momentary intrusion which violently disturbs our normal daily life (a terrorist attack, being mugged or raped, suffering an earthquake or tornado...), what about those for whom trauma is a permanent state of things, a way of life, say, those in a war torn country like Sudan or Kongo? Those who have nowhere to retreat from their traumatic experience, so that they cannot even claim that, long after the trauma hit, they were haunted by its specter: what remains is not the trauma’s specter, but the trauma itself?

Malabou’s basic reproach to Freud is that, when confronted with such cases, he succumbs to the temptation of meaning: he is not ready to accept the direct destructive efficiency of external shocks – they destroy the psyche of the victim (or, at least, wound it in an unredeemable way) without resonating in any inner traumatic truth. It would be obviously obscene to link, say, the psychic devastation of a “Muslim” in a Nazi camp to his maso-

chism, death-drive, or guilt feeling: a Muslim (or a victim of multiple rape, of brutal torture...) is not devastated by unconscious anxieties, but directly by a “meaningless” external shock which can in no way be hermeneutically appropriated/integrated: for the wounded brain,

there is no possibility to be present at its own fragmentation or at its own wound. In contrast to castration, there is no representation, no phenomenon, no example of separation, which would allow the subject to anticipate, to wait for, to fantasize what can be a break in cerebral connections. One cannot even dream about it. There is no scene for this Thing which is not one. The brain in no way anticipates the possibility of its own damages. When these damages occur, it is another self which is affected, a “new” self founded in misrecognition. (235)

For Freud, if external violence gets too strong, we simply exit the psychic domain proper: the choice is “either the shock is re-integrated into a pre-existing libidinal frame, or it destroys psyche and nothing is left”. What he cannot envisage is that the victim as if were survives its own death: all different forms of traumatic encounters, independently of their specific nature (social, natural, biological, symbolic...), lead to the same result – a new subject emerges which survives its own death, the death (erasure) of its symbolic identity. There is no continuity between this new “post-traumatic” subject (the victim of Alzheimer’s or other cerebral lesions, etc.) and its old identity: after the shock, literally a new subject emerges. Its features are well-known from numerous descriptions: lack of emotional engagement, profound indifference and detachment – it is a subject who is no longer “in-the-world” in the Heideggerian sense of engaged embodied existence. This subject lives death as a form of life – his life is death-drive embodied, a life deprived of erotic engagement; and this holds for henchmen no less than for his victims. If the XXth century was the Freudian century, the century of libido, so that even the worst nightmares were read as (sado-masochist) vicissitudes of the libido, will the XXIst century be the century of such post-traumatic disengaged subjects whose first emblematic figure, that of the Muslim in concentration camps, is not multiplying in the guise of refugees, terror victims, survivors of natural catastrophies, of family violence ...? The feature that runs through all these figures is that the cause of the catastrophe remains libidinally meaningless, resisting any interpretation:

The victims of socio-political traumas present today the same profile as the victims of natural catastrophies (tsunamis, earthquakes, floods)

or grave accidents (serious domestic accidents, explosions, fires). We entered a new era of political violence where politics draws its resources from the renunciation to the political sense of violence. [...] All traumatising events tend to neutralize their intention and to assume the lack of motivation proper to chance incidents, the feature of that which cannot be interpreted. Today, the enemy is hermeneutics. [...] This erasure of sense is not only discernible in countries at war, it is present everywhere, as the new face of the social which bears witness to an unheard-of psychic pathology, identical in all cases and in all contexts, globalized. (258-9)

Insofar as the violence of the traumatising events consists in the way they cut the subject from its reserves of memory, “the speech of these patients does not have any revelatory meaning, their illness does not constitute a kind of truth with regard to the subject’s ancient history”. (345) In this lack of sense, social conflicts are deprived of the dialectics of political struggle proper and become as anonymous as natural catastrophies”(267). We are thus dealing with a heterogeneous mixture of nature and politics, in which “politics cancels itself as such and takes the appearance of nature, and nature disappears in order to assume the mask of politics. This *global heterogeneous mixture of nature and politics is characterized by the global uniformization of neuropsychological reactions*”. (260) Global capitalism thus generates a new form of illness which is itself global, indifferent to the most elementary distinctions like the one between nature and culture.

In the case of such an intrusion of the raw real, “*all hermeneutics is impossible*”(29): the trauma remains external to the field of sense, it cannot be integrated into it as a mere deterrent which triggers the resuscitation of a latent psychic trauma. This is what Freud cannot (or, rather, refuses to) think: for him, external traumas like brain lesions are “psychically mute”(33), they can only have a psychic impact when a sexual trauma resonates in them. In other words, the enemy that psyche is fighting in encountering a trauma is ultimately always an “internal enemy”: Freud refuses to think the psychic impact of a violent intrusion which remains external to sense, which precludes “the possibility to be fantasized”(35), i.e., he refuses to envisage the psychic consequences of traumatic intrusions which cannot be integrated into a psychic staging – indifference, loss of affects. It is crucial that, in such cases, the limits that separate history from nature, “sociopathy” from “neurobiology,” are blurred: the concentration camp terror and an organic brain lesion can produce the same form of autism.

Such detached psyches are “beyond love and hate: one shall call them

neither sadist nor masochist". (323) However, against Malabou, the difference between pleasure and *jouissance* should be fully asserted here: while it is clear that the dialectical reversals of pleasure fail to capture the traumatic cases evoked by Malabou, the intrusion of a numbing *jouissance* is definitely relevant here. In many of the cases reported by Oliver Sacks in his *Musicophilia*, the patient haunted by compulsive music feels a great release when he learns that his hallucinations are caused by an organic brain lesion or other malfunctioning, not by psychological madness – in this way, the patient no longer has to feel subjectively responsible for hallucinations, they are just a meaningless objective fact. Is there, however, not also a possible escape from some traumatic truth at work in this release? Sacks reports on the case of David Mamlok, an old Jewish immigrant from Germany who was haunted by musical hallucinations:

When I asked Mr. Mamlok what his internal music was like, he exclaimed, angrily, that it was "tonal" and "corny." I found this choice of adjectives intriguing and asked him why he used them. His wife, he explained, was a composer of atonal music, and his own tastes were for Schoenberg and other atonal masters, though he was fond of classical and, especially, chamber music, too. But the music he hallucinated was nothing like this. It started, he said, with a German Christmas song (he immediately hummed this) and then other Christmas songs and lullabies; these were followed by marches, especially the Nazi marching songs he had heard growing up in Hamburg in the 1930s. These songs were particularly distressing to him, for he was Jewish and had lived in terror of the Hitlerjugend, the belligerent gangs who had roamed the streets looking for Jews.³

Did the organic stimulus here not re-awaken old traumas of obscene religious-political *kitsch*? Although Sacks is aware of how organically-caused disturbances like musical hallucinations get invested with meaning (why *these* songs and not others?), it is nonetheless all too often that the direct reference to organic causes tends to obliterate the repressed traumatic dimension.

Furthermore, even with actual terrorist attacks, one should not too quickly discount their fantasmatic reverberations as the cause of their traumatic impact. When we hear how the 9/11 bombings were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable Impossible happened, one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the XXth century,

³ Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2007, p. 56-57.

that of Titanic: it was also a shock, but the space for it was already prepared in ideological fantasizing, since Titanic was the symbol of the might of the XIXth century industrial civilization. Does the same not hold also for these bombings? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just recall the series of movies from *Escape From New York* to *Independence Day*. Therein resides the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with the Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise.

One should therefore turn around the standard reading according to which, the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite on the contrary, it is prior to the WTC collapse than we lived in our reality, perceiving the Third World horrors as something which is not effectively part of our social reality, as something which exists (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 is that this screen fantasmatic apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e., the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality).

This fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they effectively took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans – so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their welfare, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives – why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of welfare, we are haunted by the nightmarish visions of catastrophies.

In the new form of subjectivity (autistic, indifferent, without affective engagement), the old personality is not “sublated” or replaced by a compensatory formation, but thoroughly destroyed – destruction itself acquires a form, becomes a (relatively stable) “form of life” – what we get is not simply the absence of form, but the form of (the) absence (of the erasure of the previous personality, which is not replaced by a new one). More precisely, the new form is not a form of life, but, rather, a form of death – not an expression of the Freudian death drive, but, more directly, the *death of drive*.

As Deleuze pointed out in his *Difference and Repetition*, death is always double: the Freudian death drive means that the subject wants to die, but to die in its own way, according to its own inner path, not as the result of an external accident. There is always a gap between the two, between death

drive as “transcendental” tendency and the contingent accident which mills me. Suicide is a desperate (and ultimately failed) attempt to bring the two dimensions together. There is a nice scene in a Hollywood horror movie of a desperate young woman who, alone in her bedroom, tries to kill herself; at that very point, the horrible creature attacking the city breaks into the room and attacks her – and the woman starts to protect herself desperately, since although she wanted her death, this was not the death she wanted ...

Insofar as the “newly wounded” are radically cut from their past, i.e., insofar as their wound suspends all hermeneutics, insofar as there is ultimately nothing to interpret here, such a “deserted, emotionally disaffected, indifferent psyche also is not (any longer) able to transfer. We live in the epoch of the end of transference. The love for the psychoanalyst or the therapist means nothing to a psyche which can neither love nor hate”. (346) In other words, these patients seek neither to know nor not to know – when in treatment, they do not establish their psychiatrist into the role of the subject supposed to know. What, then, should the therapist do in such conditions? Malabou endorses Daniel Wildloecher’s position s/he should “become the subject of the other’s suffering and of its expression, especially when this other is unable to feel nothing whatsoever” – or, as Malabou herself puts it, the therapist should “assemble [*recueillir*] for the other his/her pain”. (346) These formulas are full of ambiguities: if there is no transference whatsoever, the question is then not only how does this collecting/assembling affect the patient him/herself (does it do any good whatsoever to him?), but, even more radically, how can we be sure at all that is really the patient’s suffering we are assembling? What if it is the therapist who imagines how the patient must suffer, because he as it were automatically has to imagine how the patient’s deprivations must affect someone who still has, say, full memory and thus imagines what it would be to be deprived of it? What if the therapist thus misreads blessed ignorance as unbearable suffering?

One can add another gruesome traumatic experience to the series enumerated by Malabou. In “Le prix du progrès”, one of the fragments that conclude *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer quote the argumentation of the 19th century French physiologist Pierre Flourens against medical anaesthesia with chloroform: Flourens claims that it can be proven that the anaesthetic works only on our memory’s neuronal network. In short, while we are butchered alive on the operating table, we fully feel the terrible pain, but later, after awakening, we do not remember it. Is it not possible to read this scene as the perfect staging of the inaccessible Other Site of the fundamental fantasy that can never be fully subjectivized, assumed by the subject? These premonitions are now confirmed: “anesthesia aware-

ness” – patients being mentally alert (and terrified) while supposedly under full general anesthesia – continues to be reported between 100–200 times daily in the United States alone. The patient is paralyzed, unable to speak, and totally helpless to communicate his/her awareness; actual cutting pain may or may not be present, but the patient is fully aware of what is going on, hearing, feeling as if he cannot breathe – and unable to communicate any distress because he has been given a paralytic/muscle relaxant. The most traumatic case occurs when patients who experienced full awareness explicitly recall it afterwards: the result is an enormous trauma generating posttraumatic stress disorder, leading to long-lasting after-effects such as nightmares, night terrors, flashbacks, insomnia, and in some cases even suicide.

Is the trauma of which Malabou is talking not a trauma which is experienced as such because and insofar as it is so unsettling from within the horizon of meaning – the absence of a meaningful Self is traumatic from the horizon of its presence. In other words, what if we surmise that the cold indifferent disengaged subjects are NOT suffering at all, that, once their old persona is erased, they enter a blessed state of indifference, that they only appear to us caught in unbearable suffering? What if *les nouveaux bénés* are literally the new blessed ones? What if the logic of the already-quoted medical joke about Alzheimer’s (“The bad news is that we’ve discovered you have severe Alzheimer’s disease. The good news is the same one: you have Alzheimer’s, so you will already forget the bad news when you will be back home”) applies here, so that, when the patient’s old personality is destroyed, the very measure of suffering also disappears? Is then Malabou not guilty of the same mistake she reproaches psychoanalysis with: the mistake of not being able to think the straight absence of meaningful engagement, of reading disengaged indifference from within the horizon of meaningful engagement? Or, to put it in another way, does she not forget to include herself, her own desire, into the observed phenomenon (of autistic subjects)? In an ironic reversal of her claim that the autistic subject is unable to enact transference, it is her own transference she does not take into account when she portrays the autistic subject’s immense suffering. This subject is primordially an enigmatic impenetrable Thing, totally ambiguous, where one cannot but oscillate between attributing to it immense suffering and blessed ignorance. What characterizes it is the lack of recognition in the double sense of the term: we do not recognize ourselves in it, there is no empathy possible, AND the autistic subject, on account of its withdrawal, does not enact recognition (it doesn’t recognize US, its partner in communication).

Malabou rejects the very autonomy of psychic life, in the Freudian sense of an autonomous “psychic reality,” of libido as psychic energy different from

neuronal (brain) energy: for her, the Freudian libido is based on the suspension (exclusion) of neuronal energy, more precisely, on Freud's refusal to admit the brain's ability to enact self-affection, to engage in self-regulatory self-modelling. "The psychic energy is in a way a rhetorical detour of the neuronal energy"(73): when the endogenous brain excitation cannot be released within the nerve system itself, it changes into psychic energy which can find release in rhetorical displacements – in short, "rhetorics supplants the silence of the neuronal system": "The unconscious is structured like a language only insofar as brain doesn't talk". (74) Today's brain sciences invalidated this Freudian hypothesis with their demonstration of the "emotional brain," a brain which can generate self-representations and regulate its life through affects: "Emotion is a reflexive structure by means of which the vital regulation affects itself".

One should thus oppose to the Freudian sexual unconscious the "cerebral unconscious," the self-representative activity of the brain which incessantly construct the cartography of its own states and thereby affects itself. Malabou strictly opposes this cerebral self-affection to the self-affection which is the self-awareness of the (conscious) subject, and which was "deconstructed" by Derrida in his detailed analysis of the paradoxes and deadlocks of "hearing-oneself-talking". Nobody can be aware of or talk about the working of his/her own brain, there is no subjectivization possible of the neuronal process of self-affection: "The cerebral self-affection is the unconscious of subjectivity". (85) there is only one way in which the subjective experience of the auto-affection of one's own brain can occur: in the guise of the suffering caused by the damage of the brain.

When the libidinal unconscious undergoes a traumatic encounter, it reacts by "regression," withdrawing from the higher-level engagement and interaction to a more primitive mode of functioning. When the cerebral process of self-affection is disturbed, there is no space or more fundamental level the subject can return to: its substance is erased, the Self which survives this destruction is literally a new Self, its identity is an "identity by default," a disengaged impassive subject deprived even of the capacity to dream.

Malabou's thesis is here very precise and radical: her point is not only to add to the Freudian libidinal unconscious another, cerebral, unconscious. The problem is that the Freudian unconscious only makes sense when (if) we refuse to admit – we erase the possibility of – the cerebral unconscious. What this means is that the "cerebral unconscious" is not just the mechanism which explains the processes which cannot be accounted for in the terms of the libidinal unconscious: once we admit the cerebral unconscious, the libidinal unconscious loses its ground. It is only this cerebral unconscious, ir-

reducible to the Lacanian triad of the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real, which is the truly *material* unconscious (235): the cerebral unconscious is not imaginary, its self-modelling is not the narcissistic self-mirroring; it is not symbolic, its traces do not re-present subject within a structure of meaning; and it is not real in the Lacanian sense of the Thing as the ultimate-incestuous libidinal object of the “psychic reality,” since it is radically external to libido, to sexuality.

Nothing distinguishes the Freudian unconscious and the cerebral unconscious more clearly than the way they relate to death: as Freud emphasized repeatedly, the libidinal unconscious is “undead,” it doesn’t know (cannot represent) its own death, it acts as if it is immortal, indestructible, our brain never acts as if it is immortal: the cerebral unconscious is destructible and “knows” itself (models itself) as such.

The second distinction concerns sexuality, Eros as the counter-pole to Thanatos. If the cerebral unconscious is mortal, the Freudian unconscious is sexual, where, as Malabou put it in very precise terms, the Freudian “sexuality” does not designate merely a constrained content (sexual practices), but this very formal structure of the relationship between Outside and Inside, between the external incident/accident and its *Aufhebung*/integration into an internal libidinal process it triggers – “sexuality” is the name for this passage from contingency to necessity, from *Ereignis* to *Erlebnis*: it is through the integration into a pre-existing frame of “psychic reality” that the external accident is “sexualized”. The mediator between the two is *fantasy*: in order to “arouse” me, the external accident, the pure shock, has to touch my fantasy, my pre-existing fantasmatic frame had to resonate in it. Fantasy enacts the “stitch (*soudure/Verloetung*)” between the outside and the inside. The activity of unconscious fantasizing is “primordially repressed,” the radical (non-subjectivizable) unconscious, yet as such strictly psychic, irreducible and autonomous with regard to the brain activity: it is the outside of the psychic inside itself, its level of ex-timacy.

Malabou formulates the problem in the terms of the difficulty to truly reach beyond the pleasure principle: what Freud calls “beyond the pleasure principle,” the death drive, is really a round-about assertion of the pleasure principle, not its true beyond. What it, however, we turn the problem around: the difficulty lies not in the beyond, but in the (pleasure) principle itself. In human subjectivity, there is no “pure” pleasure principle, its functioning is knotted, self-sabotaged. A recent cognitivist textbook tells us: “If someone were to claim that, *on behalf of his desire* for an object, he moved away from this object, then we would surmise that he is either a madman or he does not

know the meaning of the term ‘desire’”.⁴ Is, however, such an avoiding of the object on behalf of our very desire for it not the very paradox of courtly love? Is it not a feature of desire as such, at its most fundamental? So, perhaps, we, psychoanalysts, are a species of madmen. That is to say, is such an avoiding of the object on behalf of our very desire for it – such a persisting FORT in the very heart of DA – not the very paradox of desire as such, at its most fundamental? Recall the eternal deferral of finally meeting “the distant beloved [*die ferne Geliebte*]”? In the same cognitivist vein, Douglas Lenat tries to construct a computer which would possess the human common sense, filling its memory with millions of “obvious” rules like: *Nothing can be in two places at the same time. When humans die, they are not born again. Dying is undesirable. Animals do not like pain. Time advances at the same rate for everyone. When it rains, people get wet. Sweet things taste good.*⁵ Are, however, these rules really so obvious? What about the same thought shared by two people? What about people who believe in reincarnation? What about desperate people who long to die? What about masochists who like pain? What about our thrilling experiences when time seems to ran faster than usual? What about people with umbrellas who do not get wet? What about those among us who prefer dark “bitter” to sweet chocolates.

Einstein’s theory of relativity offers here unexpected parallels with the Lacanian theory. The starting point of the theory of relativity is the strange fact that, for every observer, no matter in what direction and how fast he moves, light moves at the same speed; in an analogous way, for Lacan, no matter if the desiring subject approaches or runs from his object of desire, this object seems to remain at the same distance from him. Who doesn’t remember the nightmarish situation from dreams: the more I run away, the more I remain at the same place? This paradox can be neatly solved by the difference between the object and the cause of desire: no matter how close I get to the object of desire, its cause remains at a distance, elusive. Furthermore, the general theory of relativity solves the antinomy between the relativity of every movement with regard to observer and the absolute velocity of light, which moves at a constant speed independently of the point of observation, with the notion of curved space. In a homologous way, the Freudian solution to the antinomy between the subject’s approaching or running away from his objects of desire and the “constant speed” (and distance from him) of the object-cause of desire resides in the *curved space of desire*:

⁴Michael Pauen, *Grundprobleme der Philosophie des Geistes*, Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag 2001, p. 203.

⁵Quoted from Michio Kaku, *Visions*, New York: Anchor Books 1997, p. 64.

sometimes the shortest way to realize a desire is to by-pass its object-goal, to circulate around it, to postpone its encounter. What Lacan calls *objet petit a* is the agent of this curving: the unfathomable X on account of which, when we confront the object of our desire, more satisfaction is provided by dancing around it than by directly going at it.

And is what happens in the case of a post-traumatic subject not the *destruction* of the *objet a*? This is why such a subject is deprived of engaged existence and reduced to indifferent vegetating. What we should nonetheless bear in mind is that this destruction of *objet a* results also in the loss of reality itself which is sustained by *objet a* – when the subject is deprived of the excess, it loses in the same move that with regard to which the excess is an excess. This is why the Muslims, the “living dead” of the concentration camps, were simultaneously reduced to “bare life” AND stood for the pure excess (empty form) which remains when all the content of human life is taken away from the subject.

No wonder, then, that, in her confrontation with Lacan – when she argues that, contrary to all appearances, both Freud and Lacan cannot really think the dimension “beyond the pleasure principle,” since every destructive trauma is re-erotized –, Malabou totally ignores Lacan’s key distinction between pleasure (*Lust, plaisir*) and enjoyment (*Geniessen, jouissance*): what is “beyond the pleasure principle” is enjoyment itself, it is drive as such. The basic paradox of *jouissance* is that it is both impossible AND unavoidable: it is never fully achieved, always missed, but, simultaneously, we never can get rid of it – every renunciation of enjoyment generates an enjoyment in renunciation, every obstacle to desire generates a desire for obstacle, etc. This reversal provides the minimal definition of the surplus-enjoyment: it involves the paradoxical “pleasure in pain”. That is to say, when Lacan uses the term *plus-de-jouir*, one has to ask a naive, but crucial question: in what does this surplus consist? Is it merely a qualitative increase of ordinary pleasure? The ambiguity of the French expression is decisive here: it can mean “surplus of enjoyment” as well as “no enjoyment” – the surplus of enjoyment over mere pleasure is generated by the presence of the very opposite of pleasure, i.e. pain. Surplus-enjoyment is thus precisely that part of *jouissance* which resists being contained by the homeostasis, by the pleasure principle. (And since Malabou refers – among others – to “Muslims” from the Nazi camps as a pure figure of death drive beyond the pleasure principle, one is almost tempted to claim that it is precisely “Muslims” who, due to their libidinal disengagement, effectively act upon the pleasure principle: their minimal gestures are fully instrumentalized, they strive to eat when hungry, etc.)

Here Malabou seems to pay the price for here all too naïve reading of

Freud, taking Freud too (not literally, but) “hermeneutically,” not distinguishing between the true core of Freud’s discovery and the different ways he himself misunderstood the scope of his own discovery. Malabou accepts his dualism of drives as it is formulated, ignoring those precise readings (from Lacan to Laplanche) which convincingly demonstrated that this dualism a false way out, a theoretical regression. So, ironically, when Malabou opposes Freud and Jung, emphasizing Freud’s dualism of drives against Jung’s monism of (desexualized) libido, she missed the crucial paradox: it is at this very point, when he resorts to the dualism of drives, that Freud is *at his most Jungian*, regressing to a pre-modern mythic agonism of opposite primordial cosmic forces. How, then, are we to grasp properly what eluded Freud and pushed him to take recourse in this dualism? When Malabou varies the motif that, for Freud, Eros always relates to and encompasses its opposite Other, the destructive death drive, she – following Freud’s misleading formulations – conceives this opposition as the conflict of two opposed forces, not, in a more proper sense, as the inherent self-blockade of the drive: “death drive” is not an opposite force with regard to libido, but a constitutive gap which makes drive distinct from instinct (significantly, Malabou prefers translating *Trieb* as “instinct”), always derailed, caught in a loop of repetition, marked by an impossible excess. Deleuze, on whom Malabou otherwise constantly relies, made this point clear in his *Difference and repetition*: Eros and Thanatos are not two opposite drives that compete and combine their forces (as in eroticized masochism); there is only one drive, libido, striving for enjoyment, and “death drive” is the curved space of its formal structure – it

plays the role of a transcendental principle, while the pleasure principle is only psychological. This is why it is above all silent (not given in experience), while the pleasure principle is flourishing. The first question is thus: how can the motif of death which appears to assemble the most negative aspects of the psychic life be in itself what is most positive, transcendently positive, to the point to affirm repetition? [...] Eros and Thanatos differ in that Eros has to be repeated, can be experienced only in repetition, while Thanatos (as the transcendental principle) is that what gives repetition to Eros, what submits Eros to repetition.

How, then, do we pass from animal sexuality (instinctual coupling) to properly human sexuality? By submitting animal sexuality (its “life instinct”) to death drive. Death drive is the transcendental form which makes sexuality proper out of animal instincts. In this sense, the disengaged indif-

ferent de-libidinalized subject effectively is the pure subject of death drive: in it, only the empty frame of death drive as the formal-transcendental condition of libidinal investments survives, deprived of all its content. It is weird that Malabou, who otherwise quotes Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* in her book, ignores these passages which directly bear on her topic, providing an elegant solution to her question of why Freud was unable to find positive representations of death drive.

Overdoing it a bit, perhaps, one is tempted to say that this subject deprived of its libidinal substance is the "libidinal proletariat". When Malabou develops her key notion of "destructive plasticity," of the subject who continues to live after its psychic death (the erasure of the narrative texture of its symbolic identity that sustain its libidinal investments and engagements), she touches the key point: the reflexive reversal of the destruction of form into the form acquired by destruction itself. In other words, when we are dealing with a victim of Alzheimer's, it is not merely that his awareness is severely constrained, that the scope of his Self is diminished – we are literally no longer dealing with the same Self. After the trauma, ANOTHER subject emerges, we are talking to a stranger.

This may appear to be the very opposite of what goes on in a Hegelian dialectical process, in which we are dealing with a continuous metamorphosis of the *same* substance-subject which develops in complexity, mediates and "sublates" its content into a higher level: is the whole point of the dialectical process not that, precisely, we never go through a zero-point, that the past content is never radically erased, that there is no radically new beginning? However, in a properly Hegelian-Freudian-Lacanian way, one should draw a radical conclusion: *subject is AS SUCH the survivor of its own death*, a shell which remains after it is deprived of its substance – this is why Lacan's mathem for subject is \$ – the barred subject. It is not that Lacan CAN think the rise of a new subject surviving its death/disintegration – for Lacan, subject as such is a "second subject," formal survivor (the surviving form) of the loss of its substance, of the noumenal X called by Kant the "I or he or it (the thing) that thinks".

When Malabou insists that the subject who emerges after a traumatic wound is not a transformation of the old one, but literally a new one, she is well aware that the identity of this new subject does not arise out of a *tabula rasa*: many traces of the old subject's life-narrative survive, but they are totally restructured, torn out of their previous horizon of meaning and inscribed into a new context. The new subject "profoundly modifies the vision and the content of the past itself. On account of its pathological force of deformation and of its destructive plasticity, such a [traumatic] event effectively

introduces into psychic life *inauthenticity, facticity*. It creates *another history, a past which doesn't exist*". (252) But does this not hold already for radical historical breaks? Are we not dealing all the time with what Eric Hobsbawn called "invented traditions"? Does not every truly new epoch rewrite its past, rearticulating it into a new context?

Malabou is at her theoretical best when she formulates a fine critical point about those brain scientists, from Luria to Sacks, who insist on the necessity to supplement the naturalist description of the brain lesions, etc., with the subjective description of how this biological wound not only affects the subject's particular features (loss of memory, the inability to recognize faces...), but changes their entire psychic structure, the very fundamental way they perceive themselves and their world. (The first great classic is here Alexander Luria's unsurpassable *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, the description of the inner universe of a man who was condemned to absolute memory, unable to forget things.) These authors remain all too "humanist": they focus on the victim's attempts to cope with his/her wound, to build a supplementary life-form that somehow enables him to reintegrate himself/herself into social interaction (in Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, the cure is the man's undisturbed musical sense: although he cannot recognize the face of his wife or his other companions and friends, he can identify them through their sounds.) Luria, Sacks, etc., thereby avoid fully confronting the true traumatic heart of the matter: not the subject's desperate effort to recompense his loss, but the subject of this loss itself, the subject which is the positive FORM this loss assumes (the disengaged impassive subject). They directly make their job easy by directly passing from the brain devastation to the subject's efforts to cope with this loss, by-passing the truly uneasy point: the subjective form of this devastation itself.

For Malabou, even Lacan succumbs to this temptation of "stitching" in his notion of the Thing (*das Ding*) as the ultimate libidinal object, the all-erasing abyss of incestuous *jouissance* which equals death. At this ultimate, asymptotic, point of the coincidence of opposites, *Ereignis* and *Erlebnis*, the Outside and the Inside, fully overlap. As Malabou puts it in very precise terms, the Thing is Lacan's name for the horizon of ultimate destruction which is impossible-real, an always deferred anticipation, a threat of an unimaginable X always to-come and never here. The destruction of every horizon remains a horizon of this destruction, the lack of encounter remains the encounter of lack. The Thing is real, but real transposed into "psychic reality," it is the way the subject experiences/represents the very impossibility to experience/represent.

Lacan's name for the transcendental Inside which finds resonance in

external traumatic intrusion is “separation”: prior to any empirical traumatic loss is the “transcendental” separation constitutive of the very dimension of subjectivity, in its multiple guises, from birth-trauma to symbolic castration. Its general form is that of the separation from the partial object which survives as the spectre of the undead *lamella*.

Here, perhaps, Lacan introduces a logic which is not taken into account by Malabou: castration is not only a threat-horizon, a not-yet/always-to-come, but, simultaneously, something which always-already happens: the subject is not only under a threat of separation, it IS the effect of separation (from substance). Furthermore, insofar as a traumatic encounter generates anxiety, we should bear in mind that, for Lacan, in anxiety, what the subject is exposed to is precisely the loss of the loss itself – Lacan here turns around Freud: anxiety is not the anxiety of separation from the object, but the anxiety of the objet(-cause of desire) getting too close to the subject. This is why trauma belongs to the domain of the uncanny in the fundamental ambiguity of this term: what makes uncanny uncanny is its homeliness itself, that fact that it is the rise-into-visibility of something too close to us.

So when Malabou – with a critical edge towards Lacan – defines the intrusion of the traumatic real as separation from separation itself, does she not thereby repeat Lacan’s notion of psychotic breakdown as the loss of the loss itself: what is lacking in psychosis is ultimately lack itself, the gap of “symbolic castration” that separates me from my symbolic identity, from the virtual dimension of the big Other. Consequently, when Malabou insists that, in the true trauma of the real, it is not just that the subject lacks its objective supplement, but it is the subject itself which lacks (is missing, disintegrates), does she not echo Lacan’s notion of the subject’s disintegration caused by the psychotic over-proximity of the object?

What Freud cannot think is the “destructive plasticity,” i.e., the subjective form assumed by the very destruction of the self, the direct form of death drive: “It is as if there is no intermediary between the plasticity of the good form and elasticity as the mortifying erasure of all form. *In Freud, there is no form of the negation of form*”. (273) In other words, Freud fails to consider

the existence of a specific form of psyche produced by the presence of death, of pain, of the repetition of a painful experience. He should have rendered justice to existential power of improvisation proper to an accident, to the psyches deserted by pleasure, in which indifference and detachment win over links, and which nonetheless remain psyches. What Freud is looking for when he talks about the death drive is precisely the form of this drive, the form he doesn’t find insofar as he denies to

destruction its own specific plasticity. [...] The beyond of the pleasure principle is thus the work of the death drive as the giving-form to death in life, as the production of those individual figures which exist only in the detachment of existence. These forms of death in life, fixations of the image of drive, would be the “satisfying” representatives of the death drive Freud was for such a long time looking for far way from neurology. (322, 324)

These figures are “not so much figures of those who want to die as figures of those who *are already dead*, or, rather, to put it in a strange and terrible grammatical twist, who *have already been dead*, who ‘experienced’ death”. (326) – The strange fact is that, although it is impossible to miss the Hegelian resonances of this notion of “negative plasticity,” of the form in which destructivity/negativity itself acquires positive existence, Malabou – the author of a path-breaking book on Hegel – not only totally ignores Hegel in *Les nouveaux blessés*, but even gives here and there hints that this negative plasticity is “non-dialectizable” and as such beyond the scope of the Hegelian dialectics. Malabou sees here not only a task for psychoanalysis, but also a properly *philosophical* task to reconceptualize the notion of subject so that it will include this zero-level of the subject of death drive:

the only philosophical issue is today the elaboration of a new materialism which precisely refuses to envisage any, even the smallest, separation not only between brain and thought, but also between brain and the unconscious. (342)

Malabou is right to emphasize the philosophical dimension of the new autistic subject: in it, we are dealing with the zero-level of subjectivity, with the formal conversion of the pure externality of meaningless real (its brutal destructive intrusion) into the pure internality of the “autistic” subject detached from external reality, disengaged, reduced to the persisting core deprived of its substance. The logic is here again that of the Hegelian infinite judgment: the speculative identity of meaningless external intrusion and of the pure detached internality – it is as if only a brutal external shock can give rise to pure interiority of subject, of the void that cannot be identified with any determinate positive content.

The properly philosophical dimension of the study of post-traumatic subject resides in this recognition that what appears as the brutal destruction of the subject’s very (narrative) substantial identity is the moment of its birth. The post-traumatic autistic subject is the “living proof” that subject cannot

be identified (does not fully overlap) with “stories it is telling itself about itself,” with the narrative symbolic texture of its life: when we take all this away, something (or, rather, NOTHING, but a FORM of nothing) remains, and this something is the pure subject of death drive. If one wants to get an idea of the elementary, zero-level, form of subjectivity, one has to take a look at autistic monsters. The Lacanian subject as \$ is thus a response TO/OFF the real: a response *to* the real of the brutal meaningless intrusion – a response *of* the real, i.e., a response which emerges when the symbolic integration of the traumatic intrusion fails, reaches its point of impossibility. As such, the subject at its most elementary effectively is “beyond unconscious”: the empty form deprived even of unconscious formations encapsulating a variety of libidinal investments.

We should thus nonetheless apply even to the post-traumatic subject the Freudian notion that a violent intrusion of the real counts as trauma only insofar as a previous trauma resonates in it – in this case, the previous trauma is that of the birth of subjectivity itself: a subject is “barred,” as Lacan put it, it emerges when a living individual is deprived of its substantial content, and this constitutive trauma is repeated in the present traumatic experience. This is what Lacan aims at with his claim that the Freudian subject is none other than the Cartesian *cogito*: the *cogito* is not an “abstraction” from the reality of living actual individuals with the wealth of their properties, emotions, abilities, relations; it is, on the contrary, this “wealth of personality” which functions as the imaginary “stuff of the I,” as Lacan put it.

So when Malabou claims that the post-traumatic subject cannot be accounted for in the Freudian terms of the repetition of a past trauma (since the traumatic shock erases all the traces of the past), she remains all too fixed on the traumatic content and forgets to include into the series of past traumatic memories the very erasure of the substantial content, the very subtraction of the empty form from its content. In other words, precisely insofar as it erases the entire substantial content, the traumatic shock REPEATS the past, i.e., the past traumatic loss of substance which is constitutive of the very dimension of subjectivity. What is repeated here is not some ancient content, but the very gesture of erasing all substantial content. This is why, when one submits a human subject to a traumatic intrusion, the outcome is the empty form of the “living-dead” subject, but when one does the same to an animal, the result is simply total devastation: what remains after the violent traumatic intrusion onto a human subject which erases all its substantial content is the pure form of subjectivity, the form which already must have been there.

To put it in yet another way, the subject is the ultimate case of what Freud described as the experience of “feminine castration” which grounds

fetishism: the experience of encountering nothing where we expected to see something (penis). If the fundamental philosophical question is “why is there something rather than nothing?”, the question raised by the subject is “why is there nothing where there should be something?”. The latest form of this surprise occurs in brain sciences: when one looks for the “material substance” of consciousness, one finds that “there is nobody home” there – just the inert presence of a piece of meat called “brain”... So where is the subject here? Nowhere: it is neither the self-acquaintance of awareness, nor, of course, the raw presence of brain matter. When one looks an autistic subject (or a “Muslim”) into the eye, one also has the feeling that “there is nobody home” – but, in contrast to the raw presence of a dead object like brain, one expects someone/something there because the open space for this someone is there. This is subject at its zero-level: like an empty house where “nobody is home”:

to kill in cold blood, to ‘explode oneself,’ as one is used to say, to organize terror, to give to terror the face of a chance event emptied of sense: is it really still possible to explain these phenomena by way of evoking the couple of sadism and masochism? Do we not see that their source is elsewhere, not in the transformations of love in hate, or of hate into indifference to hate, namely in a beyond of the pleasure principle endowed with its own plasticity which it is time to conceptualize?(315)

How does the rise of such a detached subject, a survivor of its own death, relate to the only *true* socio-political alternative today: do we endorse the ongoing naturalization of capitalism, or does today’s global capitalism contain strong enough antagonisms which prevent its indefinite reproduction? There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of *ecological* catastrophe, the inappropriateness of *private property* for the so-called “intellectual property,” the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in bio-genetics, and, last but not least, *new forms of apartheid*, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between the last feature, the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included, and the other three, which designate the domains of what Hardt and Negri call “commons,” the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should also be resisted with violent means, if necessary: *the commons of culture*, the immediately socialized forms of “cognitive” capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc. (if Bill Gates were to be allowed monopoly, we would have reached the absurd situation in which

a private individual would have literally owned the software texture of our basic network of communication); *the commons of external nature* threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to forests and natural habitat itself); *the commons of internal nature* (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity). What all these struggles share is the awareness of the destructive potentials, up to the self-annihilation of humanity itself, if the capitalist logic of enclosing these commons is allowed a free run.

It is this reference to “commons” which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of Communism: it enables us to see the progressing “enclosure” of the commons as a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance, a proletarianization also points towards exploitation. The task today is to renew the political economy of exploitation – say, of the anonymous “cognitive workers” by their companies. And do these three versions of proletarianization not fit perfectly the three contemporary figures of the Cartesian subject? The first figure, which fits the enclosure of external nature, is, unexpectedly perhaps, Marx’s notion of the *proletarian*, the exploited worker whose product is taken away from him, so that he is reduced to subjectivity without substance, to the void of pure subjective potentiality whose actualization in work process equals its de-realization.

The second figure, which fits the enclosure of the symbolic “second nature,” is that of a *totally “mediatized” subject*, fully immersed into virtual reality: while he “spontaneously” thinks that he is in direct contact with reality, his relation to reality is sustained by a complex digital machinery. Recall Neo, the hero of *The Matrix*, who all of a sudden discovers that what he perceives as everyday reality is constructed and manipulated by a mega-computer – is his position not precisely that of the victim of the Cartesian *malin génie*? No wonder that the philosophy which uncannily announced the nightmare of Virtual Reality is Malebranche’s occasionalism.

The third figure, which fits the enclosure of our “inner” nature, is the post-traumatic subject – a “living proof” that subject cannot be identified (does not fully overlap) with “stories it is telling itself about itself,” with the narrative symbolic texture of its life: when we take all this away, something (or, rather, NOTHING, but a FORM of nothing) remains, and this something is the pure subject of death drive.

If one wants to get an idea of *cogito* at its purest, its “degree zero,” one has to take a look at autistic monsters – a regard which is very painful and disturbing. This is why we resist so adamantly to the spectre of *cogito*.