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# Post-Trauma: Towards a New Definition?

Catherine Malabou

**According to Žižek, contemporary approaches to trauma disregard Lacan's most fundamental statement: trauma has always already occurred. To state that trauma has already occurred means that it cannot occur by chance, that every empirical accident or shock impairs an already or a previously wounded subject. In this text, I want to chance a thought that would definitely escape the always already's authority, which would give chance a chance. The chapter goes on to compare the Freudian/Lacanian view of brain trauma versus psychic trauma with contemporary neurobiological and socio-political views on trauma.**

In his article “Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject,” Slavoj Žižek (2009) develops a very insightful critique of the current neurobiological and neuro-psychoanalytic approach of trauma.<sup>1</sup> He challenges the way in which these approaches tend to substitute for the Freudian and Lacanian definitions of psychic wounds. Žižek’s critique may be summarized in the following terms: While developing its own critique of psychoanalysis, namely of Freud and Lacan, neurobiology would not have been aware of the fact that Lacan, precisely, has already said what they thought he has not said. They would thus be ventriloquized by Lacan at the very moment they thought they were speaking from another point of view, one other than Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Why is that? How is it possible to cite Lacan without knowing about it? According to Žižek, contemporary approaches to trauma would remain unaware—out of disavowal or of desire—of Lacan’s most fundamental statement: trauma has always already occurred. A specific trauma, this or that empirical shock, may happen only because a more profound and originary trauma, understood as the real or as the “transcendental” trauma, has always already occurred. Trauma had always already happened. Always always already. Lacan had already said always already. The new approach to trauma would only be a confirmation, and not a destitution, of the always-already. It would be a mere repetition of what has already occurred and been said.

To state that trauma has already occurred means that it cannot occur by chance, that every empirical accident or shock impairs an already or a previously wounded subject. There is an obvious rejection of chance in Freud and Lacan. Beyond the always-already principle. Something that Lacan had never said, to the extent that I want to chance a thought that would definitely escape the always already’s authority, which would give chance a chance.

Before I focus on the notion of chance, I want to state that the possibility of such a beyond is opened by current neurobiology and its redefinition of both the unconscious (named neural unconscious or neural psyche) and the trauma, and consequently the post-traumatic subjectivity (this is the central thesis of Malabou 2007). Neurobiology and neuropsychology challenge the Freudian conception of the psychic accident understood as a meeting point between two meanings of the event: the event conceived as an internal immanent determination (*Erlebnis*) and an encounter that occurs from outside (*Ereignis*). In order for an accident to become a proper psychic event, it has to trigger the subject’s psychic history and determinism. The *Ereignis* has to unite with the *Erlebnis*. The most obvious example of such a definition of the psychic event is the example, often proposed by Freud, of the war wound. When a soldier on the front is traumatized by being wounded, or merely the fear of being wounded, it appears that the current real conflict he is involved

1 Žižek’s article is a review of Malabou 2007.

in is a repetition of an internal conflict. Shock is always a reminder of a previous shock. Freud would then have considered PTSD as the expression of the always-already character of the conflict or trauma.

Neurobiologists hold, on the contrary, that severe trauma is, first, fundamentally an *Ereignis* and as such something that happens by mere chance from the outside. Second, they thus maintain this dismantles the *Ereignis/Erlebnis* distinction to the extent that it disconnects the subject from her reserves of memory and from the presence of the past. After severe brain damage, which always produces a series of severed connections and gaps within the neural network, a new subject emerges with no reference to the past or to her previous identity. A neural disconnection does not trigger any previous conflict. Instead, the post-traumatized subject disconnects the structure of the always-already. The post-traumatized subject is the *nevermore* of the always-already.

We can then state that a neural disconnection cannot belong to either of the three terms that form the Lacanian triad of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, to the extent that this triad is rooted in the transcendental principle of the always-already. We propose to entertain a fourth dimension, a dimension that might be called the material. From a neurobiological point of view, the trauma would be taken to be a material, empirical, biological, and meaningless interruption of the transcendental itself. This is why post-traumatic subjects are *living examples of the death drive* and of the dimension *beyond the pleasure principle* that Freud and Lacan both fail to locate or to expose. Beyond the always-already principle is the true beyond-the-pleasure principle.

Žižek (2009) affords a certain credulity to these ideas but rejects them out of hand for three main reasons:

1. These statements are seemingly ignorant of the Lacanian distinction between pleasure (*plaisir*) and enjoyment (*jouissance*). Enjoyment in itself is precisely beyond pleasure. It is this painful surplus of pleasure that resists being contained within the framework of the pleasure principle. Enjoyment is the always-already confronting us with death, and without which we would be trapped in pleasure only. In other words, neurological trauma cannot be but a form of enjoyment. Lacan has always already said that disconnection, separation from the past, loss of memory, and indifference are modalities or occurrences of enjoyment. The unconscious is always already ready for its own destruction: "What is beyond the pleasure principle is enjoyment itself, it is drive as such" (Žižek 2009, 136).
2. The second objection concerns destruction itself understood as the presence of what Lacan calls "the Thing" (*la Chose*). The Thing is the threat of death. Without this threat, which mainly appears to the subject as the threat of castration, any empirical objective danger or hazard would remain meaningless to the psyche. Here comes the always-already again: "Castration is not only a threat-horizon, a not yet/always to come, but,

simultaneously, something that always already happens: the subject is not only under a threat of separation, it is the effect of separation (from substance)" (Žižek 2009, 141).

3. This last sentence expresses the main objection: according to Žižek, the subject is, since Descartes, a post-traumatic subject, a subject structured in such a way that it has to constantly erase the traces of its past in order to be a subject. Thus, and once again, the experience of being cut off from oneself is a very old one. Neurobiology does not teach us anything new on that point, according to Žižek it rather confirms the very essence of the subject: "The empty frame of death drive is the formal-transcendental condition" (2009, 27) of subjectivity: "What remains after the violent traumatic intrusion onto a human subject that erases all his substantial content is the pure form of subjectivity, the form that already must have been there" (2009, 144). Further: "If one wants to get an idea of cogito at its purest, its 'degree zero,' one has to take a look at autistic monsters (the new wounded), a gaze that is very painful and disturbing" (2009, 146).

From Descartes to Damasio via Lacan, there would be, once again, one and only one principle: *trauma has always already happened*.

To answer these objections one may insist that the motif of chance and thought, elaborated in a certain way, deconstructs the always-already, which appears to be a barrier to what it is supposed to be—that is, a barrier to destruction. If destruction has always already happened, if there is anything such as a transcendental destruction, then destruction is indestructible. This is what, in Freud and in Lacan, remains extremely problematic: Destruction remains for them a structure, the repetition of the originary trauma. What if the always-already might explode? What if the always-already were self-destructive and able to disappear as the so-called fundamental law of the psyche?

In order to address these issues more specifically, let us concentrate on the status of chance in a dream that Freud analyzes in chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and that Lacan comments in turn with his seminar XI *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* in chapters 5 "Tuché and Automaton" and 6 "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze." Freud writes:

A father had been watching beside his child's sick bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so he could see from his bedroom into the room in which the child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man has been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?' He

woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped out to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of the beloved child's dead body had been burned by a candle that had fallen on them. (1964, 5: 547-48)

The issue immediately addressed by Freud is to know whether we can consider such a dream as a wish fulfillment. On the contrary, is it not an objection, a counter example to the theory of dreams as wish fulfillment?

Let us consider Lacan's answer to this issue. First of all, after having reminded us of this dream, Lacan posits that psychoanalysis is "an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us" (1978, 53). This essential missed encounter, or *misencounter*, with the real is the encounter with the trauma. According to Lacan, this dream stages such an encounter. The Freudian question comes back at that point: If this dream stages the encounter with the trauma, how can we consider it as wish fulfillment, as fulfillment of a desire?

We need to understand more precisely what the very notion of "encounter with the real" means. The analysis of this formula—"encounter with the real"—forms the content of Freud's chapters 5 and 6. This formula is contradictory to the extent that "encounter" for Freud refers to something contingent, accidental, to something that may or may not happen. For Lacan "real," on the other hand, designates the necessary and determined mechanism of repetition, the always-already of the trauma. How then can we encounter—contingently—the necessity of trauma? Here, the notion of chance is emerging. How can we encounter—by chance—the necessity of the trauma, which has been always already here?

It is on this point that Lacan refers to Aristotle, who in his *Physics* distinguishes two regimes of events or of causality. First to the mode of "*tuché*": which means fortune, contingency; then to the mode of "*automaton*," the blind necessity of the repetition mechanism, the compulsion to repeat as such. With those to modes, we have chance on the one hand, determinism on the other. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, everything that comes to pass is due to one of these two modes of temporality: *Tuché* will decide if you will meet by chance a friend on the agora today; *automaton* governs the cycle of sunset and sunrise, or the seasons cycle, etc. Lacan comments on these two modes: "*Tuché*, he says, is good or bad fortune" (1978, 69). "*Automaton* is the Greek version of the compulsion to repeat" (67). Even if this encounter between two regimes of events and two modes of causality is said to be a missed encounter, it is nonetheless an encounter. Again, how is this possible?

Here is where the analysis of the dream of the father and his dead child can begin. But what belongs to *automaton* and what to *tuché* in this dream? Or as

Lacan puts it: "Where is the reality in this accident?" (1978, 58) and where is the accident in this reality?

Obviously, what belongs to *tuché* is the falling of the candle and the burning of the child's arm. This is the reality, Lacan says, but not the real. The real is the unreal "resurrection" of the child and the words: "Father, can't you see I am burning?" Here, Lacan starts to analyze *tuché* as a secondary kind of causality or reality. The child's burned arm is not the real accident in this dream, it is not the real. The real comes with the speech, the son's address to his father. *Tuché* has no autonomy; it is in fact only a means for the real or the *automaton* to emerge. Accordingly, there would only be one mode of happening, that of *automaton*, with a disguised version of it, a mask, *tuché*.

Chance, or fortune, is only an appearance, an "as if." What happens as if by chance is in fact always the automatism of repetition, the primary trauma: "What is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs *as if by chance*," states Lacan (1978, 54). Moreover, Lacan asks what is genuinely burning in the dream. Is it the child's arm, or the sentence uttered by the child: "Father, can't you see that I'm burning?" Lacan explicates:

Does not this sentence, said in relation to fever suggest to you what, in one of my recent lectures, I called the cause of fever? . . . What encounter can there be with that forever inert being—even now being devoured by the flames—if not the encounter that occurs precisely at the moment when, by accident, as if by chance, the flames come to meet him? Where is the reality in this accident, if not that it repeats something more fatal *by means* of reality, a reality in which the person who was supposed to be watching over the body still remains asleep, even when the father reemerges after having woken up? (1978, 58)

It is clear that if contingent reality is always a means for the real to come to light, it is then always secondary. When Lacan asks what is the reality in this accident, he means that there is something other, in the accident, than the accident: "Is there no more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door?" (1978, 58).

The contingent external encounter of reality (the candle collapses and ignites the cloth covering the dead child, the smell of the smoke disturbs the father) triggers the true real, the unbearable fantasy-apparition of the child reproaching his father. Again, what burns are the words, not the arm. "Father, can't you see I'm burning? This sentence is itself a fire-brand—or itself it brings fire where it falls," writes Lacan (1978, 69) Further: the veiled meaning is the true reality, that of the "primal scene." In other words, there is a split between reality and the real.

Now is the moment for approaching the problem of wish fulfillment. Lacan writes: "It is not that, in the dream, the father persuades himself that the son is still alive. But the terrible version of the dead son taking the father by the arm designates a beyond that makes itself heard in the dream. Desire manifests itself in the dream by the loss expressed in an image at the cruel point of the object. It is only in the dream that this truly unique encounter can occur. Only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this . . . encounter" (1978, 59).

This dream would then be a kind of fulfillment to the extent that it would render the encounter with *jouissance*, enjoyment, possible. The fulfillment is not always linked with pleasure, says Lacan, but it can be linked with *jouissance*. We remember that *jouissance* as defined by Žižek is the beyond of the pleasure principle, the excess or surplus of pleasure. It transforms itself in a kind of suffering which is the very expression of the death drive. Read in this way, the dream is, a wish fulfillment, because we can only encounter *jouissance* in dreams.

Is it not properly inadmissible, the way in which Lacan distinguishes two kinds of realities in this dream, a true one and a secondary one? Can we not think that the accident of the candle falling on the child's arm is traumatizing per se, and as such does not necessarily trigger the repetition mechanism of a more ancient trauma? Then, this accident would be as real as the words it provokes.

If there is a beyond the pleasure principle, can we still understand it as a beyond chance, beyond the accident or beyond contingency? This is precisely what is no longer possible. When the victims of traumas are "burning," we certainly do not have a right to ask: Where is the reality in these accidents? We certainly do not have a right to suspect contingency for hiding a more profound kind of event, for being the veiled face of the compulsion to repeat. We do not have a right to split reality from the real, contingency from necessity, the transcendental from the empirical, good or bad fortune (*tuché*) from necessity (*automaton*). Reading this Lacanian interpretation, we cannot help but visualize the psychoanalyst as a fireman looking at the catastrophe and saying: "There must be something more urgent, I must take care of a more originary emergency."

The accident never hides anything, never reveals anything but itself. We need to think of a destructive plasticity, which is a capacity to explode, and cannot, by any means, be assimilated by the psyche, even in dreams. The answer we can give to the second objection, concerning castration as something which has always already occurred, is that the threat of castration is what helps Lacan to always see, even if he says the contrary, the symbolic at work within the real.



While for Freud castration is the phenomenal form of the threat of death, because it means separation, it gives death a figurative content, Lacan declares about separation: “We must recognize in this sentence [‘Father can’t you see I’m burning?’] what perpetuates for the father those words forever separated from the dead child that are said to him” (1978, 58). Here, we find the motive of separation: the child’s death, the separation from the child is the trauma, the *automaton*. But since this separation can be expressed by another separation, that of words—words separating from the body—then the trauma encounters the symbolic and never escapes it. The real is separated from itself thanks to words, thanks to the symbolic.

What challenges the idea that castration or separation has always already happened is precisely the fact that this always already is the presence of the symbolic in the real, consequently also a kind of erasure of the trauma. There is no “pure” real.

What brain damage allows us to see is that the violence of the traumatizing lesions is consistent with the way they cut the subject from his or her reserves of memory, as we have already seen. The traumatized victim’s speech does not have any revelatory meaning. His or her illness does not constitute a kind of truth with regard to their ancient history. There is no possibility for the subject to be present to their own fragmentation or to their 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. There are no words.

We do not believe in the possibility of responding to the absence of meaning by reintroducing some kind of hidden repetition of the real. On the contrary, we have to admit that something like a total absence of meaning is the meaning of our time. There is a global uniformity of neuropsychological reactions to traumas, be it political, natural, or pathological traumas. Žižek, among others, considers this new uniformed face of violence:

First, there is the brutal external physical violence: terror attacks like 9/11, street violence, rapes, etc., second, natural catastrophes, 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, PTSD, etc.), which can utterly change, destroy even, the victim’s personality. We would not be able to distinguish between natural, political and socio-symbolic violence. We are dealing today 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. (2009, 125)

What Žižek does not seem to admit is that with this a new form of violence is emerging today, which is implying a new articulation of the concept of the real—we might also say the concept of what is burning, a concept that would give chance its chance, a chance that would never be an “as if,” an “as if by chance.”

Let us turn to the third and last objection. We remember that for Žižek, post-traumatic subjectivity is nothing other than the classical Cartesian form of subjectivity. The subject is an instance capable of erasing all substantial content in order always to be new and present to itself and to the world. This is as true as the whole history of metaphysics.

But while this might be true, it is difficult to believe that traumatic erasure can occur without forming each time a new subject, unaware of the previous one. Repetition is plastic, it gives form to what it destroys. We have to think of a form created by destruction, the form of a new person, which is not the transcendental subject, but what undermines it, as the threat of its explosion. The plasticity of contingency has the power to bestow its own form on the subjects that it shocks. A subject that burns, and which urges us to see, at long last, that it is *really* burning.

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What is a shock? A trauma? Are they the result of a blow, of something that cannot, by any means, be anticipated, something sudden that comes from outside and knocks us down, whoever we are? Or are they, on the contrary, always predestined encounters? Are they something which would force us to erase the “whoever you are” from the previous sentence, to the extent that an encounter presupposes a destination, a predestination, something which happens to you, to you proper, and to nobody else? According to this second approach, a shock or a trauma would always result, as Freud states, from a meeting between the blow itself and a preexisting psychic destiny.

Is this Freudian conception still accurate to characterize current global psychic violence? Do we not have to admit that blows, or shocks strike any of us without making any difference, erasing our personal histories, destroying the very notion of psychic destiny, of childhood, of the past, even of the unconscious itself? For Freud and for Lacan, it seems clear that every external trauma is “sublated,” internalized. Even the most violent intrusions of the external real owe their traumatic effect to the resonance they find in primary psychic conflicts.

When it comes to war neuroses, Freud declares in his introduction to *Psycho-analysis and the War Neuroses* that the external accident, which causes the trauma, is not the genuine cause of it. It acts as a shock, or a blow, which

awakens an old "conflict in the ego." The genuine enemy is always an "internal enemy" (Freud 1964, 17:210).

According to Freud, there is only one possible kind of "neurosis aetiology": the sexual one. Some passages from "Sexuality" and from "My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality" in *The Aetiology Of The Neuroses* are clear in this respect. In the first, Freud states: "The true aetiology of the psychoneuroses does not lie in precipitating causes" (1964, 7:250). In the second text, Freud sums up his whole theory of infantile trauma and recapitulates all the changes he has brought to it. He says that he was forced to give up the importance of the part played by the "accidental influences" in the causation of trauma (1964, 7:275). Traumas are not caused by effective events or accidents, but by phantasms:

Accidental influences derived from experience having receded into the background, the factors of constitution and heredity necessarily gained the upper hand once more. (Freud 1964, 3:250)

For Freud, brain injuries and brain lesions cannot have a real causal power since they are regarded as merely external. In the course of our psychic life and in the constitution of our subjectivity the brain has no responsibility. It is not responsible, which also means that in general it cannot bring a proper response to the questions of danger, fragility, and exposure. It is exposed to accidents but not to the symbolic and/or psychic meaning of accidents. For Freud, sexuality appears to be, first of all, not only the "sexual life," but also a new specific kind of cause, which alone is able to explain the constitution of our personal identity, our history, and our destiny. There is a wide gap between external and internal traumatic events, even if the frontier between inside and outside is being constantly redrawn by Freud. Nevertheless, it is clear that none of the determinant events of our psychic life has an organic or physiological cause. In a certain sense, such events never come from the outside. Properly speaking, there are no sexual accidents.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud goes so far as to state that the emergence of a neurosis and the occurrence of a physical lesion are antithetic and incompatible:

In the case of the ordinary traumatic neuroses two characteristics emerge prominently: first, that the chief weight in their causation seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright; and secondly, that a wound or injury inflicted simultaneously works as a rule *against* the development of a neurosis. (1964, 18:12)

Here, Freud recognizes the importance of surprise and terror, and he seems to admit the power of chance and the absence of anticipation. However, this power either causes a physical wound or a psychic wound. In the first case, there is a narcissistic bodily investment that takes care of the wound, as if

organic injuries were able to cure themselves without any help from psychic therapy. It is as if physical and psychic wounds have nothing in common, unless the first can be translated into the language of the second to be considered as “symptoms.” This means that for Freud people suffering from brain diseases do not belong within psychoanalytic jurisdiction. And that is why, perhaps, we do not encounter any kind of despondency in Freud’s clinical studies. But we then emerge with the idea that the psychic life is indestructible:

The primitive mind is, in the fullest meaning of the word, imperishable. What are called mental diseases inevitably produce an impression in the layman that intellectual and mental life have been destroyed. In reality, the destruction only applies to later acquisitions and developments. The essence of mental disease lies in a return to earlier states of affective life and functioning. An excellent example of the plasticity of mental life is afforded by the state of sleep, which is our goal every night. Since we have learnt to interpret even absurd and confused dreams, we know that whenever we go to sleep we throw out our hard-won morality like a garment, and put it on again the next morning. (Freud 1964, 24:285–6)

Even if Lacan displaces many Freudian statements, he also shares many on the indestructibility of psychic life, which is another name for the always-already. Neurobiology puts the so-called psychic immortality into question. Our socio-political reality imposes multiple versions of external intrusions, traumas, which are just meaningless brutal interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of the subject’s identity and render all kinds of internalization/interiorization impossible, as well as the accident’s re-appropriation or resubjectivation, because some regions of the brain have been destroyed. Nothing, in psychic life, is indestructible.

At some point in his review, Žižek evokes the possibility that neurobiologists would only project their own desire, in their account of neurobiological victims and meaningless trauma, without mentioning it: do they “not forget to include [themselves], [their] own desire, in the observed phenomenon (of autistic subjects)?” (2009, 137).

Here comes desire again! But of course, we might reverse the objection: Does not Žižek omit to include his own desire for the always-already? Even if he is one of the most accurate and generous readers of current neurobiology, as becomes manifest in his great text, we might interpret the meaning of such a desire as a fear of the trauma of being definitely separated from Lacan.

*Acknowledgments: This text is a response to Slavoj Žižek’s review (2009) of Catherine Malabou’s book Les Nouveaux Blessés (2007). It has been previously published in the Open Access anthology: Tom Cohen (ed.) Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012.*

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