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Trauma without a Subject: On Malabou, Psychoanalysis and *Amour*

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The cinema of Michael Haneke is one that consistently interrogates the limits of representation. This can be discerned in the relationship between the seen and the obscene that Lisa Coulthard (2011) recognises in her investigation of violence and the depiction of sexual abuse in, for example, *The White Ribbon* (2009). It can also be found in the presence of death, as Serge Goriely identifies (2010), such as the lingering familial suicide in *The Seventh Continent* (1989). There is a recurrent concern here with what cinema can (*or should*) achieve and what I will argue in the first instance is that this tendency already seems to suggest an encounter with the Lacanian Real and (or as) the unrepresentable.

In fact, Haneke's *Amour* (2012) is almost wholly determined by mortality, presenting its aged characters at the end of life and pursuing them into death. However, my focus in this chapter will be on *a different kind of death* the film suggests: a kind Catherine Malabou identifies as being precipitated by the radical supervention of *trauma*, a kind *where death takes a form of life*. For those subjects whom she christens the "new wounded", this is the life of a psyche that *survives its own destruction*. My aim is to investigate Malabou's theory of trauma, with *Amour*, to ask what questions they pose to each other, and – importantly – *to psychoanalysis*, as well as what perspectives psychoanalysis can offer on this dialogue. *Amour* thus takes a place in this discussion, not as "proof" of any of the realities of neuropathology – it is, as I will discuss, fiction rather than a documentary – nor simply as an *illustration* of theoretical ideas, but as a *participant* in this debate over making a specific contribution *as a film* (i.e. in terms of the way in which the *formal* qualities of Haneke's work make a case for approaching neuropathology in a unique way).

Specifically, this chapter will explore the relationship between the unthinkable and the unrepresentable in *Amour* through an engagement with Malabou's dialogue with psychoanalysis in *The New Wounded* (*TNW*). There, Malabou identifies new forms of post-traumatic subjectivity that necessitate "the complete theoretical reinvention of psychopathology" (2012a: xv). I will approach this from a Lacanian orientation and consider what sort of questions Malabou's concept of "destructive plasticity" poses for psychoanalysis, and wonder whether – for example – Žižek's riposte to Malabou might be sufficient to meet her challenge. My approach is equally that of a film theorist, and I will consider both the ways in which cinema can engage in this dialogue on "plasticity", and – equally – how this dialogue might help us to approach the depiction of trauma in Haneke's film. Malabou asserts an important connection between narrative and a clinic of trauma, and so this chapter will explore the possibility – through *Amour* – that the cinema could stage for the psyche a representation of the unrepresentable neurological injury. By focusing on Anne, I will attempt to explore the subjectivity of the new wounded and approach, from a Lacanian perspective, the post-traumatic subjective experience.

New Wounded, New Subject

I can't hope fully to convey the breadth and complexity of Malabou's analysis, particularly her close reading of Freud. Here, I will therefore constrain myself to some brief notes on several key features of her thesis. Malabou's project revolves around her conceptualisation of "plasticity", through the variant meanings of giving, receiving and – crucially – *destroying or erasing form*. She had begun to explore the neuroscientific dimensions of "plasticity" *before* coming to *TNW* – in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008) – but it was, in particular, Malabou's personal experience of her grandmother's Alzheimer's disease that, she professes, compelled a more complete orientation of her philosophy towards both neuroscience and

psychoanalysis. In her dissatisfaction with the ability of either discourse (or her philosophical training) to account sufficiently for what I could refer to as *the subject of dementia*, she came to propose what she considers to be a radically new theory of psychopathology (see 2012a: xi-xiv).

Psychoanalysis, I'd argue, deals with the unsayable and the unsaid, the unrepresentable, indeed, the *un*conscious: the presence of things made visible by their very invisibility. To this, Malabou seeks to bring something – in her estimation – previously unrepresented and unthought by psychoanalysis: indeed, a new mode of the unthinkable itself in the realm of *cerebral trauma* and what she calls "destructive plasticity", the "dark double" of the constructive plasticity that moulds connections, which then makes form through the *annihilation* of form (ibid.: xix). It is a type of trauma, Malabou contends, heretofore countenanced by neither psychoanalysis nor neuroscience, but closely related to the principles of the former and fundamentally informed by the insights of the latter.

As a paradigmatic example, she refers to the famous case of Phineas Gage, a railway engineer who suffered a massive head trauma in 1848 when an explosion drove a metal rod into his brain. He survived the accident but was affected profoundly by its impact: he became utterly indifferent to those around him and his personality altered to such an extent that, as Antonio Damsio relates, "Gage was no longer Gage" (cited in Malabou 2012a: 16). In effect, Malabou argues, this brain injury had created a "new person", a new identity unrecognisable from the old: indeed, predicated on the *destruction* of the previous one. Trauma thus supervenes as a sudden disruption of the subject, which Francois Lebigot describes as a "catastrophe" that introduces "a very radical rupture between [a] before and [an] after", and between which there can be no mediation (cited in Malabou 2012a: 15). Malabou extends the domain of this "after" to incorporate other – if not all – forms of post-traumatic subjectivity, from her grandmother's deterioration through Alzheimer's to victim's of social exclusion and

violence: all of whom, she suggests, present this same detachment or "coolness", this same radical alteration in the subject, severing them from their former selves and creating an "identity without precedent" (2012a: 49, 57).[1]

While Malabou claims that destructive plasticity is something that analysis simply cannot approach (see ibid.: xiii-xiv), Adrian Johnston insists that certain conditions – such as Alzheimer's – may not be *treatable* in a conventional psychoanalytic clinic but this does not mean they cannot be *theorised* in psychoanalysis (2013: xii-xiii). Moreover, as my analysis of *Amour* will demonstrate, I suggest that this distinction can be compared to differing understandings of the *Lacanian Real*. Malabou seems to posit destructive plasticity as a Real conceptualised as preceding the Symbolic and thus forever excluded from it as a mystified, obscure and external realm; conversely, recognising the possibility of theorising destructive plasticity within a Lacanian framework – rendering the "unknowability" of the unknown in some way *knowable* (which isn't the same as turning the unknown itself *into* the known) – is analogous to recognising the Real-within-the-Symbolic: a gap, a lacuna which can be circumscribed, but only made "present" in or by its absence. It is such circumscription that allows us to continue to the question of *form*.

The Form of Form

Malabou's project allows us to begin thinking about representations of that unrepresentable and unthinkable dimension which her work evokes: she insists "One does not fantasize a brain injury; one cannot even represent it" (2012a: 9). The question of *form* is, then, central to her project: plasticity is, above all, "an elaboration of form" (2012a: 20), and discovering a "form" appropriate to the new wounded is vital for her description of post-traumatic subjectivity. While cerebral trauma is for Malabou an accident that resists all hermeneutics, she notes, nonetheless, that "cases of brain damage can be written and narrated" (2012a: 53).

Such case studies she refers to as "literary forms of neuropathology", which give the new wounded "their own form of narrativity" (2012a: 53). Here she refers not only to clinicians such as Alexander Luria and Oliver Sacks, whose very literary forms of case study are indebted to Freud, but also to theatre of Samuel Beckett as a rhetorical expression proper to the "brain ache" of the new wounded (cf. 2012a: 55-6).

In this respect, it is important to note that Freud himself expressed the mechanism of psychic trauma in terms that suggest a sort of formal process:

> There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of (1955b: 34.

The influx of disturbing energy constituting trauma must be *contained* in order for mental functioning (i.e. the pleasure principle) to reestablish itself: it must be bound and rendered quiescent. Moreover, as Adam Phillips suggests, the fundamental problem posed by trauma is *how to find a form for it*, to tell a story about it; our experience is in large part a product of our annexing (or cathecting) traumas internal and external (2013). Malabou brings the very idea of *Bindung* into question (see 2012a: 194-198) – and we could perhaps consider destructive plasticity as *the trauma which finally refuses any psychic binding* – however, I would contend that the "case studies" she references could be considered a form of *conceptual binding*: giving shape to the trauma of the new wounded, finding a way to tell a story about it through theory.

Such cases then, in their literary elaboration, attempt to find a form specific to the traumas which they relate. And, I suggest, Haneke's *Amour* fulfils a similar function given that it follows one of the "new wounded", as Anne suffers a series of increasingly debilitating strokes that ultimately leave her incapacitated and dependent on the care of her husband,

Georges. My focus therefore will be on the way in which *Amour* presents *but doesn't represent* the unexpected, unpredictable, unthinkable moment in which the radical supervention of trauma creates *another form of form* that is elaborated as a living death. *Amour* can thus serve to establish Anne – as Malabou advocates – as a "case" in the strong sense, a paradigm, a mirror in which we learn to look at ourselves (cf. 2012a: 54). All such case studies involve, as Malabou notes, an element of *fictionality*. Sacks, for instance, compares his patients with characters in epic narratives; they are "heroes, victims, martyrs, warriors (…) travellers to unimaginable lands" (quoted in 2012a: 55). These "fictionalised" aspects allow the writer to find the form specific to the case and thus to narrate the new wounded, which, I suggest, is equally true for *Amour*.

Most importantly, what this fiction presents is what I will call "the moment of the accident". By its very nature, the unexpected, unpredictable intervention of such brain trauma would be next to impossible to record as documentary footage, except perhaps as an *accident itself* while attempting to film something else. The fictional frame of Haneke's cinematic case study therefore allows for a staging of the Malabouan trauma while retaining a fundamental unrepresentability.

The Moment of the Accident

The presentation of the moment of the accident in *Amour* – specifically, the first stroke that precipitates the destruction of Anne's psychic life (but also the second stroke that completes it) – is therefore particularly significant. The "moment of death" here becomes the *moment destructive plasticity*: the point at which, Malabou might insist, Anne's psyche is "shredded" by her cerebral trauma. And, I suggest, in order to appreciate the full import of these scenes, it is worth comparing them with "death" scenes in some of Haneke's other films.

Perhaps most striking is *Benny's Video* (1992), which begins with home-movie footage of the slaughter of a pig. The textural video image shows, in a continuous take, two men trap the animal and then, in close up, apply a stunbolt gun to its head; the pig's squeals are cut short as it keels over and its body spasms. The image is then rewound and we watch again, this time in slow motion, the moment of the pig's death. The filmic image thus presents this passage to us directly and in the most explicit way possible. Similarly, in *Caché* (2005), Majid stages his suicide both for George and the camera in an immediate and shockingly violent way. By contrast, much of the violence of *Funny Games* (1997) occurs off-screen. First, through extra-diegetic sound, is the dog's demise evoked as barking and howling turn to silence; then, we realise that – in a narrative ellipsis – the son has been killed as his body is shown in the corner of the room; finally, the father lies just out of shot as Paul shoots him. Again, this technique of *suggesting* rather than directly *presenting* the moment of death occurs in *Benny's Video*: in contradistinction to the pig's slaughter, when Benny uses his purloined stunbolt gun to kill a young girl, her death is again obscured by framing and evoked through sound as her shouts are silenced by the stunbolt's report.

Amour thus combines both representational strategies: in one sense, we see Anne fall victim to the stroke just as clearly as Benny's pig falls victim to its own head injury – both are framed by the camera, we see their eyes, their faces, as destructive plasticity strikes – however, this irreparable damage is no more graphic (in fact, much less) than the suggestions of Paul's or Benny's murderous violence. Indeed, Anne's psychic "death" lacks even the aural dimension of the earlier films; it is marked by her profound silence alone. And like Majid, Anne sits before the camera in a precisely arranged domestic space (see Figure 1), but whereas he slashes at his throat with a knife, she succumbs to a blockage in that same carotid artery: blood sprays up the wall in the first instance, its circulation stalled in the second. One explicit, one obscure: both moments are, in the end, equally decisive. *Amour*, in a sense,

shows us "everything" while at the same time telling us *nothing* about the violence that occurs.

The catastrophe in *Amour* – this event that forever changes (and ultimately *ends*) the lives of Georges and Anne – is thus presented as almost *nothing at all*. Preceded by a slight movement of Anne's leg and a tilt of her head, the accident goes entirely unnoticed by Georges – and the spectator – as it *strikes dead* his wife's present self. It is effectively imperceptible, unseen, barely "represented" at all and, in a version of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, can only be discerned or constituted *qua* trauma *after the fact*, once it has been diagnosed as what neurologists advocate calling a "brain attack".

Although Haneke thanks doctors from the *Salpêtrière* hospital in the credits, I'd argue that the *complete medical accuracy* of the film, and these scenes in particular, isn't necessarily what is here at stake. More important – following both Malabou *and* Freud – is the question of finding the form for this trauma, and a purely "scientific" representational strategy here would add very little. If we recall Malabou's insistence that a brain injury can't be represented, here one could well imagine, by contrast, a *CSI*-style computer animated rendering of Anne's internal organs depicting every detail of her heart and blood vessels, and the flow of blood to the brain being restricted thus precipitating a stroke, but this would tell us nothing of the radical alterations Anne will undergo as a *subject*.

Haneke's cinematic case study of destructive plasticity therefore allows for a staging of the crucial, Malabouan unthinkable event, while – I suggest – retaining an element of its unrepresentability, its ephemerality, as well as its devastation. The moment of the accident is figured as a blank, an absence, an aporia of the subject itself; the film *presents* the unrepresentable – allows us, in a sense, to know its unknowability – without rendering it known. Indeed, the second – *truly decisive* – stroke that renders Anne profoundly debilitated presents itself only as a complete absence. We might infer from the morning scene in which

Georges finds that she has lost control of her bladder that this stroke took place during the night, but it is again only reported after the fact in a conversation between Georges and Eva, and without making clear when or why it occurred.

Goriely suggests that death in Haneke's films is "like Medusa's head; [it] cannot be looked at directly" (2010: 121), and this is most obviously true in the cases of *Benny's Video* or *Funny Games* where we get only an indirect representation of the fatal moment. However, I'd argue – and Goriely doesn't seem to address this even though he discusses Majid's suicide – that this is no less true of those instances where we *do* seem to witness the death "itself" on screen (such as Anne's smothering). The cinema might be able to record the duration in which this instant occurs (even – or especially – in documentary), but this doesn't give us knowledge of death, of what dying means to *us*. It remains – in a Malabouan way – unthinkable, unknowable even then, and this is what *Amour* demonstrates effectively: we both see and don't see – for example – Anne's psychic death, her cerebral destruction, at the breakfast table. The moment is given to us in its fullness but it remains *absent*.

On the other hand, Anne's breakfast time fugue in particular *does* accord strikingly with the descriptions that Malabou relates as her "Psychopathological Cases": from the "absence seizures" endured by patients with epilepsy to the "akinetic muteness" (loss of speech and motion) demonstrated specifically by those suffering a stroke. In each instance is the subject's disposition characterised by a "veritable absence", a "suspension of selfhood", of being "there but not there" (2012a: 50-51). And it is precisely this utter lack of self-presence that the stasis of Emmanuelle Riva's performance evokes as she sits blankly at the table. As Georges grasps Anne's face, dabs her with cool water, she remains impassive, unmoved, *absent*. And I am tempted therefore to ask here whether we could we say in fact that, "*Anne is no longer Anne?*"

This lack of self, Malabou suggests, extends to the very destruction *of* the self: a radical rupturing of identity. She insists, "A person with Alzheimer's disease, for example, is not—or not only—someone who has "changed" or been "modified," but rather *a subject who has become someone else*" (2012a: 15). Over the course of *Amour*, we bear witness to profound changes in Anne's character that would certainly serve to corroborate a Malabouan psychopathology (indeed, it is after the second stroke that we truly find Anne among *the new wounded*). However, I'd argue that it isn't enough simply for the film – any film – to illustrate the particular questions at hand (even if *Amour can* illustrate a certain impossibility when it comes to representing the traumatic event). In a film-philosophy of destructive plasticity, we must also ask in what ways does the film *contribute* to an on-going discourse here: what problems might it pose to Malabou?

Trauma – Break-in

Amour begins with a break-in, as the fire-service force open the front door of Anne and Georges' apartment. Bright light and loud noise explode the darkened image- and silenced soundtracks of the film. This already suggests the classic definition of trauma as *wound*: a rupture or invasion of the body. And, moreover, it evokes Freud's memorable declaration in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

> We describe as "traumatic" any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism. (1955b: 33)

However, as Malabou would no doubt be quick to point out, in the context of *Amour*, the injury we are faced with should, in the first instance, be considered *cerebral* rather than

psychic (or "sexual) in its eventality (see 2012a: 39-44). Nonetheless, Freud's image remains useful: the threatening possibility of a break-in looms over the first part of *Amour*. After Anne and Georges return home from the concert, Georges inspects the front door and sees that someone has tried to force the lock with a screwdriver. He then notes that several neighbours have already been burgled, and Anne relates a story about a robbery in another building where the burglars entered the top floor through the attic, knocking a hole in the wall – that otherwise efficacious barrier – and removing valuable paintings (provoking large scale disturbance).

The domestic space of the apartment is under the threat of intrusion from the very beginning and in a Malabouan context it therefore starts to evoke a dimension of destructive plasticity where a break-in through the attic points to the "break-in" of brain trauma occasioned by Anne's stroke. Anne suggests that she would be scared to death if someone should break in during the night, while she was in her bed. And if we recall, this is precisely how the second trauma – the decisive stroke – hits her: one night in bed. The brain injury is thus an intruder in the dark that comes to take something from them (dignity, mobility, control, life).

Such an intervention, I argue, further insists upon the psychoanalytic context: it calls forth Lacan's depiction of the "irruption" of the Real, the break-in of *tuché*, that derails the smooth functioning of the Symbolic. This is how Lacan takes up Freud's theorisation of trauma and assigns it a function within his own metapsychology. For Lacan:

> The function of tuché, of the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of trauma. (1977: 55)

I will return to the question of *tuché* in a moment, but what we can say first of all here is that at the origin of analytic experience, Lacan notes, the Real presents itself "in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it—in the form of trauma" (ibid.). Trauma-*qua*-Real is the intrusion of an impossible event, an unthinkable wound that resists symbolisation, a shock (or fright, Freud's *Schreck*) in the face of which the signifier stutters and fails. It is only this very *failure* that the Symbolic can circumscribe, without ever signifying its traumatic core. It could then provide fertile ground for a theorisation of the new wounded: as I have noted, the way in which *Amour* depicts Anne's injuries through absence and blankness does suggest the impossible presence of the Real of her trauma. However, Malabou is more sceptical, even closed to this possibility of thinking together *tuché* and destructive plasticity.

Traum/a – Dream

Amour addresses such trauma – its absent presence – in various ways at the formal and diegetic levels, and in this context, a particularly significant form here is in *dreams*. In a striking sequence, we bear witness to one of Georges' dreams – his nightmare – which returns us, first of all, to the traumatic break-in/intruder motif: the sound of a doorbell draws him into the hallway and he stumbles into ankle-deep water. The film cuts to a close-up of his face: *suddenly* a hand reaches impossibly from behind his head and clasps his mouth before an equally sudden cut to black (see Figure 2). Georges' waking screams form a sound bridge over these images, which then reveal him nightmare-stricken in bed next to Anne. This dream, then, suggests a terrible, unacknowledgeable truth for Georges: something impossible or unthinkable directly, a trauma which finds only indirect expression through the dreamwork. The horror of Anne's illness, her degeneration; the promise he made never to take her back to hospital; the proximity of his own mortality: all this is condensed into the dream-image of unbearable intensity.

Similarly, this is how to interpret the famous dream of the burning child, which Freud related in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: a trauma given shape only indirectly through the reverie. A father sleeps, while in the next room an overturned candle sets alight the body of his dead son; in his dream, the father is confronted by the son, who reproaches him, "*Father, don't you see I'm burning*?" (1958: 509). Here we can detect the Real, as Lacan puts it, only "in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack or representation of which there can be only one representative" (1977: 60). The terrible image is not, therefore, a direct encounter with or access to the Real but a representation of its traumatic impact, which, as Bruce Fink explains, is at the level of the "unthinkable, unnameable, unspeakable" (1995: 227).

Again, I'd contend that, in the context of the new wounded and a destructive plasticity that resists all hermeneutics, this could put us on the track of a psychoanalytic theorisation, following Malabou's insistence that we can, nonetheless, find a form for this trauma with our case studies, and even *narrate*, to some extent, this post-traumatic subjectivity. For example, Georges' nightmare seems to narrate (or prefigure) aspects of the central trauma of *Amour*: the suffocating hand over his mouth perhaps suggesting his unconscious knowledge of, even his plan for, what is to come and his sheer terror in the face of both this realisation and Anne's decline.

Malabou, however, rejects any psychoanalytic rapport. She addresses Lacan's theory of "*tuché* and *automaton*" in chapter seven of *TNW* but instead of finding scope for productive dialogue, Malabou deems the theory to be as inadequate as the rest of psychoanalysis. First, she performs a predictable – but nonetheless interesting – deconstructionist gesture by returning the Greek terms to their origin in order to demonstrate how *tuché* and *automaton* can be shown to mean their opposites: contingency becoming necessity, and vice versa (2012a: 136). It's a nice move, and for Malabou enough to suggest

that psychoanalysis once again must fall silent when faced with unthinkable trauma. Nonetheless, it doesn't change the fact that this is precisely what Lacan *is* attempting to conceptualise.

Lacan is clear from the outset that he is taking Aristotle's terms and translating (even redefining) them into his metapsychology.[2] Thus an appeal to etymology will only get us so far: for Malabou, *tuché* and *automaton* might signify differently for the language of Aristotle but Lacan is forging here his own language in attempting to think the unthinkable, represent the unrepresentable, through psychoanalysis. Moreover, Malabou's transposition of these two terms in her approach to Lacan seems to result in a curious reading of the burning child dream, where – again – I suggest that Lacan can be understood as being much closer to Malabou. In German, of course, a dream is "*ein Traum*" and, as I have shown, both *Amour* and Freud understand well the intimate relation between *der Traum* and *das Trauma* – one effectively contained within the other – and by going into the dream again here I will attempt to circumscribe the locus of Malabou's *missed encounter* with Lacan.

Malabou returns to the question of *tuché* and *automaton* in an essay titled, "Post-Trauma", where she offers a sustained reading of the dream and it is here, I suggest, that her particular (mis)interpretation of Lacan becomes most clear. In her commentary on *Seminar XI*, she states:

> 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?" And here, Lacan starts to analyze tuché as a secondary kind of causality or of reality. The child's burnt 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. There would only be one

> mode of happening, that of automaton, with a disguised version of it, a mask, tuché. (2012c: 231)

And in this passage, I suggest, we can see how Malabou's transposition of Lacan's terms causes a confusion in her reading of the dream and the place of the Real. The *tuché* is not, as Malabou suggests, the falling candle; the latter is certainly an *accident* that is woven into the fabric of the dream but it isn't the traumatic encounter. The Real is indeed in the child's reproach but it isn't literally "in" the words: they only indicate its presence indirectly. Moreover, this doesn't mean that *tuché* has no autonomy, being *only a means for the Real or automaton to emerge*: it *is* that very Real, its traumatic irruption in the father's psyche, the disruption of automaton.

His trauma isn't in the burnt arm (or the letter of the words themselves) but in the devastating guilt over his son's death that resurrects him in the dream and burns in the address, *Father, don't you see I'm burning*; and it is from *this* encounter that he wakes *in order to escape into reality*. That Malabou seems to treat "Real" and "automaton" as somehow equivalent here further suggests the confusion of terms that originated in *TNW* and by the end of the passage quoted above, *tuché* and *automaton* have once again exchanged conceptual places: *tuché* is not, as Malabou asserts, the "mask" of automaton but its *cause*. This doesn't mean that trauma is effective only to the extent that it resonates with some previous experience (as in the classic Freudian version); it is an external shock precisely conceptualised by psychoanalysis. *Tuché* is, like destructive plasticity or Freud's *Schreck*, a violent, unanticipatable catastrophe that *disrupts* the subject; what Malabou theorises (perhaps beyond Lacan) is thus a type of *tuché* that doesn't simply *disturb automaton* but irrevocably damages (or destroys) it.[3]

Georges' dream in *Amour* is thus a disturbance according to a similar principle: it isn't some noise outside the apartment that gives rise to his nightmare. It isn't the quotidian

anxiety about intruders or burglars in the building, but what – as I have already suggested – these interlopers could represent. Here, an arm appears in the dream – impossibly reaching into the image with irruptive force – but it serves the same function as the child's words: indicating the traumatic Real that lies beyond it. His *automaton* thus masks the truth of *tuché* and the impossibility of Anne's destruction.

No Subject

To address this destruction, I will return, for the last time, to the moment of the accident. What I want to suggest is that Haneke's staging of the kitchen scene in particular emphasises something that comes through again and again in Malabou's discussion of the new wounded, which is to say the fundamentally *intersubjective* nature of this trauma. As I described, the scene begins in the recognisably observational, Haneke style: deep focus photography, and slight reframings to follow Anne as she prepares breakfast. It is also at this distance that we see, or rather don't really see, Anne suffer the stroke. However, as Georges begins to realise that something has happened, the film switches to more intimate close-ups and – importantly – a clearer orientation towards not Anne's but *his* experience of the accident. Aside from those striking shots where Anne stares blankly and Georges clasps her face, the camera focuses mainly on Georges and allows Jean-Louis Trintignant's performance to convey the combination of confusion and horror that the subject of the accident presents to the other. The camera follows Georges to the sink and back, and as he wets his wife's forehead: and almost throughout our perspective is simply the back of Anne's head (see Figure 3). Moreover, the camera follows Georges into the bedroom as he dresses himself to leave for help, and so even Anne's return to self-presence – signified obliquely by the extra-diegetic sound of the running tap being turned off in the kitchen – is presented from *his* perspective rather than hers.

This depersonalised image of Anne certainly evokes that loss of self which Malabou identifies, and prepares us for the creation – through her destruction – of a "new" Anne. However, as the concomitant focus on *Georges* in this instance must insist, when – as Malabou suggests – "neurologists speak of a person becoming unrecognizable" (2012a: 19), the question begs itself: "unrecognisable" to whom? In this context, it makes little sense to suggest "to herself" because – if we follow Malabou – that (former) "self" no longer exists. It is only for Georges that "Anne is no longer Anne": the identity "no longer Anne" cannot serve as a point of reference for *her* because of this traumatic supervention.

While, in *The Ontology of the Accident*, Malabou asserts that "All of a sudden these people become strangers to themselves" (2012b: 13), this isn't congruent with her wider conceptualisation of the new wounded. If it is the case that "When damage occurs, it is another self who is affected, a new self, unrecognizable" (2012a: 141), as she states in *TNW*, then there cannot be the requisite distance between two senses of "self" for such dissonance; if Malabou's conjecture is correct – that destructive plasticity brings forth a radically new form of subjectivity – then the "new self" would be unable to "compare itself" with any sense of former identity. They are, then, only strangers to *themselves* in a metaphorical way; the new wounded are more literally strangers to those around them. Indeed, Malabou herself even describes this at certain points in *TNW*: she explains, "What people with brain damage have in common are changes in personality that are serious enough to lead their family and friends to conclude that they have metamorphosed into another person" (ibid.: 48).

It is for family and friends, *for others*, that the transformation occurs. And this is in fact reiterated in *Amour*: when Eva comes to visit her parents after the second stroke, she is disturbed by her mother's decline and exclaims that she is *unrecognisable*, which is to say that the daughter no longer recognises Anne as the mother she knew. I will return to this point below but what I want to emphasise here, in the first instance, is that Malabou's formulation

of destructive plasticity seems to present, then, a *trauma without a subject*: because the subject is simply not present at the site of her own destruction. It is an event that erases its subject, while at the same time preserving its form: *psychic death as a form of life*.

In light of this, Žižek offers an intriguing attempt to rehabilitate the Freudian notion of present trauma's resonance with past experience, arguing that destructive plasticity "repeats" the founding gesture of the subject as such: the traumatic separation from substance that constitutes subjectivity. He asserts that "the subject is the survivor of its own death" and this is why Lacan's matheme for the subject is the barred *$*: the subject as void, divided or alienated from itself (2010: 307). Apropos of Malabou, then, it isn't a question for Žižek of whether Lacanian psychoanalysis is capable of thinking a new subject, a form of subjectivity that survives its own death, because – for Lacan – this is the form of the subject *as such*: the "surviving form of the loss of its substance" (ibid.). What results, Žižek argues, after the violent intrusion of trauma – the destructive plasticity that "erases all substantial content" – is nothing but "the pure *form* of subjectivity, a form which must have already been there" (ibid.: 312, emphasis added). This does not entail, as Malabou suggests apropos of Freud, a return of or to the "child" as the "imperishable" form of the subject (see Malabou 2012a: 58-59), but of the emergence/persistence of form as such, of the subject *qua* form (there is no "permanent" form except the form of form itself, i.e. *plasticity*). It is therefore a bold speculative redemption of psychoanalysis that Žižek proposes, and it is – I contend – by recognising what he describes as this "zero-level" form of the subject without content that we can proceed in an interrogation of both Malabou and *Amour*.

As I have suggested, the film charts Anne's disintegration as a result of her disease but what remains perhaps the most striking and certainly most significant image of Anne *qua* new wounded is her blankness at the breakfast table: her absent, staring face clasped in Georges' hands (see Figure 4). Haneke's screenplay describes her staring into the void (see

2012); however, I'd contend that it isn't only *she* but also *we* who stare into the void in this moment, as we lock eyes with her. This could well invoke that most famous of Žižekian reference points, that "empty nothing" of Hegel's "night of the world". As Georges gazes helplessly at Anne, this much-quoted passage might resonate with our experience: "One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful" (quoted in Žižek 1999: 30). And in keeping with Žižek's thesis that the new wounded constitute a formal exemplar of subjectivity as such, we could similarly consider the "night" in Anne's eyes as that of the "pure self" of every human, reduced *in extremis* to pain and horror.

However, Žižek frames this *night* – via Schelling and Hegel – as a "passage through madness" (1999: 34), while Malabou insists that "The brain injured are not mad; they abandon even madness" (2012b: 24), and "madness" does not seem here the appropriate paradigm. Instead, I'd suggest that Žižek himself offers a more apt image where, in his response to Malabou, he reframes this look in terms of the uncanny experience of "encountering nothing when we expected to see something" (2010: 313). Where we expected to find a subject (Anne), we instead encounter a complete absence: the pure void of subjectivity itself, which Žižek suggests give us the sense of an "empty house where 'no one is home'" (ibid.). And here again we return to the space of the apartment in *Amour*: when the fire brigade break down their door, Georges and Anne are "there" but they are no longer "home".

The New Blessed Ones?

It is, moreover, this uncanny coincidence of presence and absence in *Amour* that is so unsettling: as I suggested, we "recognise" Anne but at the same time, *she is no longer Anne*. As Žižek notes of the new wounded in general, there is in fact a double lack here: there is no

recognition *in* us, no chance of empathy, and at the same time there is no recognition *of* us as a partner in communication (2010: 300). For Lacanian psychoanalysis, *identity as such* depends upon the other, arising initially from the imaginary dyad, and developing into a relation to the trans-individual unconscious, where desire is inscribed in the Other. Here, I'd argue, this dialectic of identity is wholly suspended: as Malabou suggests, the subject becomes "intransitive (he or she is not the other of someone)" (2012b: 24). I'd add, then, that *Amour* can reveal instead only the point at which a *trauma* is inscribed *in* an other: there is no *Nachträlichkeit* for Anne (*qua* subject) so "we" have to do it, to experience it as trauma "ourselves".

Indeed, the genesis of Malabou's project begins with such intersubjective connection: recall that it is *her* experience of her grandmother's Alzheimer's disease and *her* speculation on the states of trauma involved that occasioned *TNW*. When faced with this degeneration, she concluded that "this absence, this disaffection, this strangeness to oneself, were, without any possible doubt, the paradoxical signs of profound pain" and that only further exploration of neuroscience, philosophy and psychoanalysis could help her to comprehend this malady (2012a: xii). Equally, as Haneke explains, was the motivation behind *Amour* the question of dealing with the pain of another, the pain of one that we love. This, he suggests, is more unbearable than suffering the disease oneself – to watch another stricken by illness – and it was this feeling that motivated the writing of the film.[4]

This insight into both projects – and the proximity of intentions – is vital, but it also raises important questions. Žižek captures something of this when he asks, in typically provocative manner, whether "*les nouveaux blessés*" couldn't be understood as "the new blessed ones": their trauma only experienced as such from within the horizon of meaning, while they themselves remain indifferent (2010: 299). Predictably, for him this becomes a version of the tasteless joke, "the bad news is you have Alzheimer's, the good news is you

will forget this by the time you get home". But Žižek's contention – that when we approach such "trauma" we might forget to include ourselves, to take into account our own desire in the observed phenomenon – is a crucial point for understanding destructive plasticity: one that is equally emphasised by *Amour* in what I have identified as the presentation of Anne's trauma from Georges' perspective.

Malabou claims that we live "in the epoch of the end of transference" because a "deserted, emotionally disaffected, indifferent psyche" no longer has this capacity (2012a: 214), and this is borne out in *Amour* by the blockage of intersubjective connection caused by Anne'e blankness. Moreover, Malabou proposes that our task in this light is – following Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière – one of "becoming subject to the other's suffering, especially when this other in unable to feel anything" (quoted in 2012a: 214). And we can equally see both *TNW* and *Amour* as gestures towards this, as the quotations above from Malabou and Haneke attest. Nonetheless, a nagging question persists, and this is where (in their very proximity) the distance between the two projects – as well as the necessity of a Lacanian perspective – becomes apparent.

Malabou further states that, "Between psychoanalysis and neurology, it is precisely the sense of 'the other' that is displaced" because of the need that she sees for welcoming a conceptual alterity (i.e. destructive plasticity) (2012a: 215). To this I'd add that there is also a need for Malabou to recognise the place of the other *for* the new wounded. Her book ends where it began, with "a patient with Alzheimer's", but we should recognise that *TNW* is not so much "about" a grandmother as it is about a granddaughter's *response to* this patient. This response is certainly a reparative gesture, to "gather the other's pain" not to take their place "but to restore it to [her]" (2012a: 215); however, this proposition raises a number of questions.

Like Georges, we can become subject to the other's suffering, but – in the Malabouan paradigm – is there a "subject" there to suffer in the first place? Žižek wonders, again provocatively, how we can be sure of the way in which this affects the patient: "does it do them any good whatsoever?" and, more radically, "how can we be sure that it is really the patient's suffering we are assembling?" (2010: 297). It is at this point, I contend, that Malabou's attempt to think the limit of thought (i.e. destructive plasticity) reaches its own limit. Malabou attempts to conceptualise a trauma beyond the horizon of all meaning, but this conceptualisation itself must remain *en-deçà, on this side* of the horizon. As Žižek observes, the traumatic intervention of which Malabou speaks is only experienced *qua* trauma from *our perspective* because we encounter the absence of a meaningful Self: "when the patient's old personality is destroyed, the very measure of their suffering also disappears" (2010: 300). Whether blessed indifference or unbearable suffering, we are unable to determine and this, for us (the other), is indeed *traumatic*.

The point here, I'd insist, is not that Žižek is right (they really are "blessed") or Malabou is wrong, per se, but that within this framework any answer is *unknowable*. However, where the Žižekian paradigm *does* come forward, I suggest, is in the necessity of understanding this not as an *epistemological* question but an *ontological* one: "the gaps and voids in our knowledge of reality are simultaneously the gaps and voids in the 'real' ontological edifice itself" (1999: 55). And nowhere is this more apparent than when we are dealing with the *Real* – the aporia of the Lacanian Real-within-the-Symbolic – of destructive plasticity. Moreover, it is this unknowability that Haneke's representational strategy in *Amour* preserves: showing everything can tell us only that *we do not know*, even while this unknown is circumscribed and given form.

Representing the Unthinkable, Thinking the Unrepresentable

To conclude, then: where Malabou argues of destructive plasticity – "We know it, but the psyche cannot stage this knowledge for itself" (2012a: 9) – I'd argue, first of all, that a film like *Amour*, *as a film*, can further help us to "know it" through the immediacy of its cinematic depiction. But, importantly, the *cinematic form of neuropathology* that Haneke presents can serve to stage, to evoke, for the psyche this unknowable, unthinkable event while at the same time retaining an element of its fundamentally unrepresentable nature. The film thus demonstrates that – *pace* Malabou – Lacanian psychoanalysis *can* theorise such an aporia, and bringing both together can help us to think this unrepresentable.

Indeed, the question of *representation* comes to the fore as Malabou brings her own project towards its conclusion. In the last section of *TNW*, she turns her attention to the death drive. Freud, she argues, doesn't accord the death drive its own form. He could not find its "representative" in the way that Eros functions for the life drives; it is always given form *by the "life drives"* (e.g. the "example" of sadism/masochism). The question thus becomes, as Malabou summarises, "How does one render the death drive visible?" (2012b: 18). Sadism/masochism can't account for the new wounded *qua* "living figures of death" (2012a: 198), but destructive plasticity *can*: these figures thus become, as Žižek notes, "the pure subjects of the death drive" (2010: 305) and – Malabou contends – destructive plasticity therefore gives the death drive its own particular form.

Her development of psychoanalysis here is compelling; nonetheless, in this context I can't help but detect – in Malabou's phrase *living figures of death* – a summoning of the figure of the *undead*, evoked from Freud to Lacan to Žižek. Freud might not have found a representative of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* but he had already done so in his essay on *The Uncanny* (1955a), where the return of the dead constitutes an avatar of *das Unheimliche* (and thus, retroactively, a rendering visible of the death drive). And in *The Parallax View*, Žižek renders this image even more explicit: anticipating his subsequent

description of the new wounded, he connects this "zero-level" of the subject with the death drive, and the space of the death drive with "the 'living dead' (the monstrous life-substance which persists in the Real outside the Symbolic)" (2006: 210, 121). This is not to say that we should consider Anne and her company as "zombies"; rather, it is to insist that the horrifying persistence of "life after death" in the new wounded has indeed been theorised by psychoanalysis. It is therefore true that, as Malabou proposes, "a new chapter in the history of the death drive (*Todestrieb, pulsion de mort*) writes itself" (2013: 224), but at the same time – I would add – this chapter, Malabou's project, is not *without precedent*.

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Filmography

Amour (2012) Directed by Michael Haneke. France/Germany/Austria: Les Films du Losange.

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Benny's Video (1992) Directed by Michael Haneke. Austria/Switzerland: Bernard Lang.

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The Making of Amour (2012) Directed by Yves Montmayeur. France/Germany/Austria: Les Films du Losange.

The Seventh Continent (1989) Directed by Michael Haneke. Austria: Wega.

The White Ribbon (2009) Directed by Michael Haneke. Germany/Austria/France/Italy: Les Films du Losange.

[1] This is a particular bone of contention between Malabou and not only psychoanalysis but also neuroscience: a point raised by Dr Diana Caine of the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London, in an intervention at the Psychoanalysis and Science conference, University of Tallinn, 15 March 2015. She noted that many neurological disorders do not present such radical disconnection from the patient's past (e.g. Caine 2009).

[2] "First, the *tuché*, which we have borrowed (…) from Aristotle, who uses it in his search for cause. We have translated it as the *encounter with the real*" (1977: 53).

[3] Johnston makes a comparable point when he connects *tuché* and *automaton* to Lacan's coin toss game in the Postface to the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" to suggest that Malabou's model points to an instance where the coin is lost or destroyed, leaving the subject without "enough coin for analysis" but which does not mean the "complete bankruptcy of analysis" (2014: 290).

[4] See *The Making of Amour* (Montmayeur, 2012).