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# On Anxiety and Other Tales of Truth

## Introduction: A Century Ago

In 1926, Sigmund Freud published *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, a text that would summarize his work on anxiety and its relation to the unconscious and sexuality. Like many works published by the late Freud – especially *après* the 1920 theoretical shift – it may seem that he had come up with a conclusive explanation of anxiety and other discomforts of the mind. It so happens that this shift not only reinterpreted many of the earlier Freudian discoveries – such as drive theory, the unconscious, sexuality, and anxiety – but it also created a sort of schism between psychoanalytic theories and practices, pushing things up to an irreconcilable limit where many psychoanalytical schools alleged that whatever Freud wrote before this period was neither effective nor relevant for the challenges set forth by contemporary sociocultural demands. In doing so, it seems as if everything that Freud had constructed in his earlier years of psychoanalytic work were only taken as freshman efforts at understanding different clinical ailments and their relation to anxiety. Although this is a slippery turn that many psychoanalysts did eventually perform, it goes without saying that it is Freud's own *faux pas* that needs to be taken into consideration here.

According to James Strachey, in his introduction to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, this book stands out as a rather curious piece of work, being a somewhat Frankenstein's-Monster-esque text. While the chapters are not necessarily delineated in a straightforward matter, unlike other works written by Freud, they resemble a rambling conjunction of various ideas put together in an attempt to make a statement on anxiety and other themes. But, indeed, its delivery is not quite clear. Is Freud trying to recompose his earlier theory on anxiety into a new *tableau* of ideas or is he doing quite the opposite? Does anxiety have any other meaning apart from his earlier take as a "toxic" sexual excitation, or should there be more ground given to what exactly is at stake when we think about anxiety? Should anxiety be reduced to castration? Freud didn't make things any clearer, so rather than focusing on later developments, it is best to understand, first and foremost, what was Freud's theory of anxiety about precisely. In addition, throughout the construction of psychoanalysis, Freud's theory of anxiety held a faithful companion in the form of repression, which eventually experienced these imposing shifts along the road.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is three-fold: a) what is the outcome of Freud's thesis (or theses) on anxiety and its development in psychoanalytical theory afterwards; b) how can anxiety be related to topography; and c) what exactly can we understand as anxiety from a cultural perspective nowadays?

## Freud's Theory of Anxiety: A Tale of Two Topographies

If we look a bit closer into Jean Laplanche's and J.-B. Pontalis' *Vocabulaire de la psychoanalyse*, there is no solid place for the concept of *Angst*, other than three entries Freud introduced in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*: automatic anxiety (*automatische Angst*), realistic anxiety (*Realangst*), and signal anxiety (*Angstsignal*).<sup>1</sup> However, when turning our attention

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, 28–9, 274–75. Although there is also the entry for "anxiety neurosis" (*Angstneurose*), it is only taken in contrast to other clinical formations such as hysteria or neurasthenia.

towards the German lexicon for Freudian concepts established by Luiz Alberto Hanns, there is more to be considered when speaking about anxiety, not only understood as a sentiment as simple as fear, but most importantly, in contrast to *Furcht* (dread), a term occasionally employed by Freud. The latter is quite effective for Freud especially when explaining children's fears or certain *Angstneurosen*, such as the Wolf Man's paralyzing anxiety. Therefore, according to Hanns, the concept of *Angst* is precisely one of the most controversial within the tradition of translators to Freud's works (in any language).<sup>2</sup>

Where to begin tracing this confusion? By mid-1894, Freud included a manuscript in his early exchange of letters with Wilhelm Fliess in which he poses an explanation to the problem of how anxiety originates. In the commonly known "Draft E" – subtitled "How Anxiety Originates" – Freud explains the following: "It quickly became clear to me that the anxiety of my neurotic patients had a great deal to do with sexuality."<sup>3</sup> After briefly elaborating on various clinical examples dealing with *coitus interruptus*, virginal people or abstinent ones, Freud comes to a preliminary conclusion: anxiety arises from a *transformation* of the accumulated sexual tension. Here the key word is "transformation" (*Verwandlung*) in the form of somatic tension perceived as the accretion of sexual appetite turned into an attempt at an elaborated, psychically bound affect. That which fails to complete the jump from physical tension to psychical representation is precisely what will be defined as anxiety, an excess of energy that is left unbound provoking fissures on a certain bodily threshold. As an embryonic theory of anxiety – as early as 1894 – Freud concludes: "Where there is an abundant development of physical sexual tension but this cannot be turned into affect by psychical working over... the sexual tension is transformed into anxiety."<sup>4</sup> In short, anxiety works accurately as a prelude to affect or a rather unelaborated form of psychical representation.

<sup>2</sup> Luiz Alberto Hanns, *Diccionario de términos alemanes de Freud*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Draft E. —How Anxiety Originates," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, "Draft E. —How Anxiety Originates," 194.

Although Freud developed his initial steps of psychoanalytical theory addressing the problems arising from clinical evidence such as hysterical symptoms or phobias, there is an important linkage one needs to make to arrive at the early developments of his first topography: namely, the topography of dreams as wish fulfilments. This first topography displays not only a channel for dream-formation, but most importantly, it allows Freud to pave the way for a suitable place to allocate anxiety: the “Dream of the Burning Child” is an accurate example. Not only does the dream reveal a certain wish fulfillment (i. e., for the child to resuscitate), but it also exhibits anxiety at the core of the dream (i. e., the burnt candle, the child’s reproach towards the father’s negligence). Although dreams are accepted as a form of figurative representation, the emotional distress certain dreams provoke, such as nightmares, insist on the excess that punctures through the oneiric tarpaulin. But the question remains, is this excess sexual?

By 1920, Freudian repetition takes on the guise of an unresolved affect: an urge that signifies not only the death drive but also serves as a diversionary channel for psychological representation. With the introduction of his second topography (1923’s triadic effort), Freud places more emphasis on the locus of anxiety beyond the previous unconscious sexual push; rather than situating anxiety purely on the nervous extensions of the body, the “actual seat” of anxiety is now to be situated on the Freudian ego (*das Ich die eigentliche Angststätte ist*).<sup>5</sup> This is an important shift due to its move from the body (a physical domain) to the ego (a mental domain).

Yet, Freud is not willing to explain anxiety solely on the basis of a mental representation like the ego. Instead, he develops this idea in relation to his 1926 “new” theory of anxiety: *Hilflosigkeit*. While Freud is working profusely with the concept of castration anxiety – which unfortunately took on a dire pallor with the construction of the theory of the Oedipus complex – he comes to the position that the precise origin of anxiety is “helplessness” or “distress.” By taking the notion of human birth as a prototype of anxiety, diverging from Otto Rank’s unsatisfactory theory on the

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Hemmung, Symptom und Angst,” in: *Studienausgabe*, Vol. 6, 238.

trauma of birth, Freud situates the problem of anxiety prior to any form of Freudian subject:

Anxiety is not newly created in repression; it is reproduced as an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemonic image. . . . Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primaevial traumatic experiences, and when a similar situation occurs, they are revived like mnemonic symbols. . . . In man and the higher animals it would seem that the act of birth, as the individual's first experience of anxiety, has given the affect of anxiety certain characteristic forms of expression.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, there are many adjustments to Freud's initial theory of anxiety. Not only has Freud shifted the place of anxiety from the body to the ego, but most importantly, the theory of repression has also been slightly modified. Rather than repression precipitating anxiety as a by-product of the accumulation of sexual tension (the first theory), the reverse is now the case: repression originates *from* anxiety, becoming itself a by-product of a human being's early immature state (this is the second theory). In addition, though at this point Freud installs the notion of castration anxiety in comparison to the *Hilflosigkeit* at the core of human existence, he later turns to a new figurative shape in the guise of separation anxiety. Such a leap from "castration" to "separation" can best be understood as part of Freud's drift from his first theory of anxiety, where sexuality is at the epicenter, drift into the second theory of anxiety. It is in the drift to the latter that Freud makes a substantial theoretical move from sexuality to love; now, the child's own helplessness is no longer a matter of survival but rather a demand for love.

To move beyond the pale of castration anxiety and its conceptual misusage, I believe it is promising to consider to what extent Freud's drift from sexuality to love explains how anxiety originates. However, the question remains: where has Freud placed (or misplaced) his first theory of anxiety, a theory in which the sexual calls out for corporeal urge?

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<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 93.

## From Psychoanalysis to Philosophy and Back

In further developments of the concept of anxiety, it was probably Melanie Klein who granted it a peculiar quality. In her 1948 paper, “On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt,” while addressing the added feature that guilt plays upon anxiety due to sadistic impulses the child bears towards the (love) object, she quickly steers our attention towards the primary cause of anxiety insofar as it stems from the death drive (or “instinct” as she likes to name it): “The danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety.”<sup>7</sup> Evidently, this is an important component when the fear of death (or fear of castration) exposes the child’s *Hilflosigkeit* to their own frail existence in need of an (auxiliary) other for survival. Thus, the anxiety which Klein likes to underline is more akin to a loss of the object which provokes separation anxiety. If the child is left alone with their interiority, without external help from the adult-other, anxiety is there to aggravate sadistic impulses towards the self (persecutory anxiety) or the object (depressive anxiety). This psychoanalytical development, although greatly influenced by Karl Abraham’s work and disseminated by many post-Kleinian theoretical approaches, creates one subtle problem: What if anxiety does not arise from the absence of the object (separation anxiety) but is instead enabled by its perpetual, captivating presence?

Likewise, the problem of anxiety is not fully a question of negativity (absence). On the contrary, it is a question of an ever-present, positive imputation. Isn’t this our current contemporary inclination to completely alleviate anxious symptomatology in favor of reducing its distress? I’ll come back to this later.

Seen retroactively, Jacques Lacan’s seminar on anxiety stands as his final credo under IPA-affiliation rule. Knowingly or unknowingly, it is this tenth seminar which was his last before being excommunicated from the Société française de psychanalyse (SFP). Effectively dissolved in 1963, the SFP became the IPA-affiliated Association psychanalytique de France (APF) in May 1964; others joined with Lacan in the establishment of the École freudienne

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Klein, “On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt,” in: *Envy and Gratitude & Other Works 1946–1963*, 29.

de Paris (EFP) one month later. Did Lacan suspect anything which could anticipate or prefigure his imminent expulsion in terms of anxiety? The question is left unresolved. But what is pivotal for the sake of our argument is the leitmotif of the seminar: Lacan's objective is not merely to explain anxiety but rather, I believe, to attempt to pose the problem of truth.

According to Lacan, the concept of anxiety entails a certain structure. In short, anxiety is not without an object or conceptualized as some disorganized form of pre-figurative "speech." In contrast to early Kleinian developments, where separation or loss of the object is that which ignites anxiety stemming from the death drive, for Lacan, anxiety is conceived differently: anxiety is a sign of desire. Rather than perceiving it exclusively as an obtrusive force of discomfort, anxiety is an affect which knows not how to deceive (it discloses truth), it is unrepressed or at least it is not mediated initially by repression, and it allows the subject to anchor its existence (originally based on a specular image) to desire. Given the word-play which Lacan employs with the French verb *jeter* (to throw) in relation to the French word for "I" (*je*), it is precisely this Freudian ego that gets "thrown" onto the net of signifiers where repression acts as a formidable mooring for anxiety. Furthermore, Lacan continues his seminar by introducing the figure of "the unary trait [which] precedes the subject."<sup>8</sup> This "proto-signifier" elicits a form of singularity, a pure difference, a necessary condition for the subject's identification process. In short, a Freudian ego is to be constituted.

Here is, then, what concerns us with the structure of anxiety: It brings forth the *Unheimlich* (another chilling form for truth-telling). Anxiety emerges when something appears in the place of – in Lacanian terminology – minus-phi ( $-\phi$ ):

The *Unheimlich* is what appears at the place where the minus-*phi* should be. Indeed, everything starts with imaginary castration, because there is no image of lack, and with good reason. When something does appear there, it is, therefore, if I may put it this way, because *lack happens to be lacking*. . . .

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 21.

But should all the norms, that is, that which makes for anomaly just as much as that which makes for lack, happen all of the sudden not to be lacking, that's when the anxiety starts.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if the Freudian ego reclines on its own image, an enthronement not only situated by narcissism but also in the supposed full knowledge of oneself, then the question of anxiety must be turned towards the grounds of truth. Isn't anxiety that which deceives not? The function of anxiety is to remind the (Freudian) ego of its own truth, its vulnerability, and its fragile existence in the world beyond its imaginary lifeline, its "non-existence." The ego is "thrown" onto the void of existence and only captured by the repressed signifiers. Thus, anything that unmoors the net of signifiers must be a sign of the ego's underlying *Hilflosigkeit*. For example, whenever a disaster strikes in the public sphere – from high-intensity earthquakes to wildfires that run ablaze, from 9/11 to the Covid pandemic, or even from the Holocaust or Hiroshima up to the more recent atrocities in Palestine – both the individual body and social body are jolted back to the reality of their own vulnerability. Anxiety harbors precisely around the edges where desire appears as a bedding for the ego beyond castration. However, the question lingers: How does this psychoanalytical approach differ from pure metaphysics?

To differentiate the philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptions of anxiety, Lacan resorts, specifically, to three philosophers: Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger.

In Kierkegaard's philosophy, especially in *The Concept of Anxiety*, this term is fundamentally related to hereditary sin and freedom as figures of existence.<sup>10</sup> Yes, Kierkegaard cannot shy away from Christianity, but it is only to demand that this sort of anxiety constitutes an original condition for existential spirituality. Not only is salvation from anxiety a path taken through faith, but it is also a condition to be transversed by anxiety itself. Thus, for Kierkegaard, anxiety should best be understood as "the awareness of the freedom to choose," or as he likes to playfully express, "the dizziness

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 42; my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Concept of Anxiety," in: *Kierkegaard's Writings*.

of freedom.”<sup>11</sup> This latter effect is, in fact, related to the boundlessness of one’s own possibilities. Henceforth, anxiety is there to caution against such possibilities. (In today’s free market economy, it is precisely the imposition of choice that enables anxiety to circulate continuously not in terms of offering a solution but rather in complicity to its perpetuation). Later, Lacan turns to Sartre in a rather derisive matter, basically offering a repudiation of the existentialist conception of anxiety. Lastly, Lacan broaches Heideggerian phenomenology. While quoting “being-unto-death,” a being “thrown” onto the world and able to acknowledge its own finitude (death is not just an event but a fundamental part of existence), Lacan is clear to point out that this experience doesn’t really go via anxiety.”<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Kierkegaardian or Sartrean existencialisms as well as Heideggerian phenomenology, psychoanalysis manages to push for a different response when exploring anxiety. Instead of diverting anxiety into a sort of metaphysical sphere or spiritual quarry, Lacan is clear not to “immediately [shut] it away in a cupboard,” but rather to speak as one could only speak of it: through the transmission of analytical experience, that is, through the effects it has on the body. Analytical experience on the couch testifies to this as the kernel of the unconscious through the body in which truth is disclosed. There is fundamentally a body in place – beyond the ego and other mental representations – to push thinking as a result to the structure of anxiety.

Topographically speaking, how is this, then, accomplished?

### **Laplanche’s First *Problématiques*: On Neurosis, Topography, and Morality**

Laplanche’s *Problématique I* – the first of a series of lectures given at the Sorbonne from 1970 to 1990 – a composite seminar attributed to his “debt” to Freud, is posed as a matter to interpret (with) Freud, and it deals,

<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Anxiety,” 61.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 8.

strikingly, with the concept of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> This particular *Problématique* stands out not only as the inaugural cornerstone to his teaching, but it is crucial to remember that Laplanche's analysis with Lacan was hastily interrupted in 1963 (after fifteen years), due to the institutional struggles that led to the dissolution of the SFP.<sup>14</sup> We cannot overlook that his final seminar with Lacan was precisely the one on anxiety. As already mentioned, there is no formal entry for "anxiety" or *Angst* in the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (published in 1967). So, can we speculate that Laplanche's own inaugural seminar on psychoanalytic theory represents an attempt to overcome the fall of the master after seven years? What sort of anxiety does this produce in the analytical experience? Again, however, we will have to leave this question to the side.

In *Problématiques I*, Laplanche conducts, over a three-year period, a committed and profound study of anxiety, advancing from three distinct fronts: neurosis, topography, and morality. It is the second year that demands our fullest attention here. In an attempt at illustrating anxiety from a Freudian perspective, Laplanche walks us through a careful assessment of Freud's first and second topographies. In the course of this walkthrough, he pauses to examine the metaphor of the "undifferentiated vesicle."<sup>15</sup> According to Freud, this vesicle is a living organism in its simplest form and susceptible to both internal and external stimulation. For the sake of surviving amidst the contentious external forces that run adrift, the vesicle is compelled to flee from overt stimuli or raise "efficient" defenses to counteract them, a protective shield against stimuli (*Reizschutz*). However, how does it protect itself from internal demands such as sexual excitation or grief? This vesicle is then driven to cause what Laplanche names as an "inner periphery" – an innermost edge or boundary that allows for certain stimulation to pass – to be canceled or simply

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*.

<sup>14</sup> By 1964, Laplanche would take on a key role in the newly founded Association Psychanalytique de France (APF) and later be instituted as president from 1970–1971.

<sup>15</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18, 26.

diverted. This “inner periphery,” closed to the outer world, remains indistinctly open to the body. Therefore, according to Laplanche, “anxiety represents the last line of defense of the protective shield against stimuli (*Reizschutz*).”<sup>16</sup> Characterized as a metaphor for the ensuing development of the Freudian ego, the “vesicle” is then abandoned in favor of a continuity between body and mind.

What concerns our analysis here is the problem of anxiety and topography. I believe that, for Laplanche, anxiety works rather as a hinge-concept on the margins between the ego and the body. This is exemplified, firstly, by his diagram where that which touches briefly between the interaction of the other (with enigmatic messages) and unconscious sexuality (from a child’s perspective) is precisely the position of the body. By placing anxiety at the periphery between body and ego, Laplanche not only extends the definition of anxiety as a limit but also as a herald of familiar warnings.<sup>17</sup> Anxiety, therefore, replaces the material limit in exchange for a signal of succor. One cannot help but recall the infamous 1893 painting by Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch, *The Scream*. Rather than focusing on the universal angst portrayed by the central figure’s rostrum or the obscure couple standing at the end of the bridge, it is perhaps noticeable to think about the red skies that hover over a placid lake, where nothing seems to happen on an ordinary day other than a contentious scream. The real angst is not the pictorial outcry but that quotidian life goes on in spite of it. Apparently, an overflow experienced by the ego as anxiety is, after all, a sign of life.

Lastly, there is an additional development to which Laplanche arrives concerning Freud’s first theory of anxiety. If we look back to “Draft E,” there the source of anxiety is not to be located within the psychological sphere

<sup>16</sup> Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*, 199.

<sup>17</sup> “Anxiety is this cut—this clean cut without which the presence of the signifier, its functioning, its furrow in the real, is unthinkable—it’s the cut that opens up, affording a view of what now you can hear better, the unexpected, the visit, the piece of news, that which is so well expressed in the term *presentiment*, which isn’t simply to be heard as the premonition of something, but also as the pre-feeling, the *présentiment*, that which stand prior to the first appearance of a feeling.” Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 76.

but is rather triggered by a physical factor (usually something in sexual life): “the physical tension, not being psychically bound, is transformed into—anxiety.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, according to Laplanche, anxiety remains fundamentally a psychically unbound affect without any mental representation or elaboration, unsymbolized, but solely occurring within the boundaries of the somatic. Isn’t this – in metapsychological terminology – a variation of what Lacan declared in saying that “truth can only be half-told” (*la vérité ne peut que se mi-dire*)? However, this instinctive (sexual) pressure is not precisely what is traumatic; it depends on an additional factor: “It is not the mechanical shock itself that is traumatic: it needs a trigger, which is sexual excitement, and it is this *influx* of sexual excitement that is traumatizing for the psychic apparatus.”<sup>19</sup> What Laplanche implies by the “influx” of sexual excitement is that sexuality (the physical factor that produces anxiety) is only to be considered traumatic because it is strictly harnessed to fantasy (unconscious sexuality) and not because it is linked to an accretion, to an object, or to the loss of an object. In other words, anxiety – in its abbreviated form – is just a translation in search of an interpreter.

If the ego’s tendency for self-preservation is to limit anxiety generated by sexual tension to a bare minimum, even to a point-zero, thereby threatening to cancel any attempt of psychic energy or pressure imposed by the sexed body, it is the place of sexuality, in its infantile form, that is simultaneously exciting and threatening, reshaping the boundaries of the child’s *Hilflosigkeit*. If these Freudian theories of anxiety share any feature, it is precisely the linking of sexuality to unconscious truth.

### **Anxiety and Sex: A Match Made in the Unconscious**

Why is sexuality continuously a headache for society, let alone culture, agitating all sorts of responses, especially in the form of anxiety?

<sup>18</sup> Freud, “Draft E.—How Anxiety Originates,” 193.

<sup>19</sup> Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*, 213; my emphasis.

In his seminar given at the Collège international de philosophie on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May of 1999, Alain Badiou examines the problem of “sex in crisis.” As Badiou analyzes – in line with Freud – sexuality became inserted into society by a sort of cultural sublimation enacted from within mythology or religion, a sexuality constricted to sense (the “hermeneutic ploy”).<sup>20</sup> However, immediately he denounces such an appropriation as a form of resistance to the proper Freudian discovery. Precisely, it is Freud’s own *Unbehagen* with *Kultur* that boosts him back to the real of sex and the lack of meaning in his breakthrough. In a clear swing at religious institutions and their supposed “knowledge” of sex, it isn’t that the perversity of sex alarmed the Fathers of the Church, but, Badiou insists, “what frightened them is the fact that sex can command a conception of truth separate from meaning. The terrifying thing is that sex may repel any donation of meaning, whereas the very existence of religion depends on its capacity to spiritualize the sexual relation, thereby forcing it to signify.”<sup>21</sup> In short, the power of the Freudian discovery of infantile sexuality lies in the fact that it is not linked to any signification or *telos*. Basically, it is there for itself and does not originate with or serve a reproductive purpose whatsoever.

Let us briefly think about why, after many decades of feminist struggles, sexual liberation, and transformative years of courageous combats in favor of transgender rights, does sexuality incite anxious responses (sometimes as plain violence) from the public? Regardless of how ineluctably anxiety is tied to subjectivity – and thus forms a constitutive part of the subject – the more pressing question concerns the kinds of advertisements being endorsed today, as more objects of desire tend to fade and disappear, making way for broader and newer objects of anxiety.

In her book *On Anxiety*, Renata Salecl gives us a contemporary panorama of anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Rather than delving into each example, it is remarkable how anxiety, as a social construct, has changed throughout the years. Firstly, during the Cold War era, the dangers that provoked anxiety were usually projected onto a foreign figure: a Martian, a communist, or a spy

<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety*.

that usually came from abroad. Afterwards, this “foreign” enemy turned into its opposite and the source of danger was now considered to be internal, domestic. Therefore, after 9/11, a new figure of anxiety appeared in the form of the terrorist – be it alien or – the threat took on an amorphous shape: Who could be a terrorist? Basically, anyone. Consequently, Salecl’s thesis focuses on how such threats or anxiety-producing events don’t generate as much stress in comparison to the high levels of anxiety individuals feel nowadays concerning their own self. That is, fear of rejection, impostor syndrome, social media, living a meaningful life or building a career at a socially responsible job, or balancing between finding “true” love and living an autonomous and independent life, take on the shape of anxiety, becoming new forms of the phenomenon. In each of these cases, while what is at issue might be viewed as objects of desire, the contemporary demands of neoliberal plights and post-capitalist imperatives have rendered them objects of anxiety. Sex, evidently, is no stranger to this predicament.

If we turn towards contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytical theses on Freudian theory, the seemingly simple question of sex – understood as the “stumbling block of sense,” an “empty entity,”<sup>23</sup> or that which binds/unbinds ontology (being) and epistemology (knowledge)<sup>24</sup> – implies a fortunate deadlock.<sup>25</sup> According to Laplanche, (unconscious) sexuality is always already there in the form of a generalized seduction, that is, the primary parental caregiving which works as an intruder or foreign body through enigmatic messages that find a way to the child’s unfiltered mind. This would be the beginning stages of infantile sexuality (breastfeeding was Freud’s prototypical example), a complex assemblage of multiple sources of satisfaction to keep the drive(s) circulating. As infantile sexuality evolves, it becomes traumatic not because it is linked to a specific object or experience but instead because it is associated with fantasy. The drift from biological aims of human sexuality to the realm of fantasy is precisely that which remains as irreducible to a definite meaning, in which the

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<sup>23</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 201–36.

<sup>24</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 141.

<sup>25</sup> See Jamieson Webster, *Disorganisation & Sex*, and Darian Leader, *Is It Ever Just Sex?*

drive “perverts” the instinct from its function. However, there is still the subject’s *Hilflosigkeit* to keep in mind while examining the problem of anxiety and the sexual. In short, sex and anxiety are linked to the unconscious not because of the “dirty” nature of the former and its obligation to repress it, but precisely because of sexuality’s polymorphous qualities and its constant deviations towards any given pleasure. Sex itself may be something of an anti-philosophy.

A brief clinical anecdote: I recall an analysand’s initial demand and what he expected from his psychoanalytic treatment. When asked about what brought him here, sufficiently enough, it was his anxiety and the overpowering dominance it had over him. But when asked what he expected from his treatment, he clearly exclaimed: “To get rid of anxiety!” The source of anxiety? A recent amorous breakup, and constant self-referential guilt where the individual protested: “Why me? How could she do this to me?” The simple answer: Why not? What qualities or elements of anybody’s lives exempt us from experiencing such pain, especially when it comes to love? Michel Gondry’s 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is quite illustrative of this point: Joel Barish (played by Jim Carrey) is demanding to erase the memories he still has of his former lover Clementine Kruczynski (played by Kate Winslet) due to a sour breakup and an unforgiveable grief. Joel seems so desperate to eradicate the pain that he ends up canceling out various parts of his own life. It is only once he tries to “hide” within his earliest memories of his mother and other first-loves that he becomes unwilling to undergo the “effacing surgery” any further. What do we find in these primal series of events? In short: infantile sexuality as the anchor of subjectivity.

Lastly, in a post-truth era arranged by social media algorithms where it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between truth and falsehood, perhaps the concept of anxiety still has more to offer other than simple discomfort. If, according to Lacan, the reality of the unconscious is sexual, and if, in order to arrive at the so-called “genital stage,” one must transverse anxiety, perhaps it would be entertaining to think of anxiety as another form of thinking, but moreover, as a possible fifth vicissitude of the drive: a destiny that oscillates between *turning round upon the subject’s*

own self and repression. Anxiety is not only an aperture to thinking; it is also a tool to carve out that which lies at the heart of sexuality: unconscious truth.

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