

Anxiety Now

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We are all used to hearing about anxiety all the time: in the media, in scholarly articles, when talking with friends. Anxiety is considered the most common mental disorder in America, affecting between fifteen and thirty percent of the population.¹ My own personal way of appreciating the cultural impact of anxiety is by noting the literally hundreds of *Amazon* pages devoted to books about anxiety and how to treat it. One of the nice things about anxiety—for a graduate student, and for academics in general—is that it is a term that circulates as freely in everyday discourse as in scholarly articles, unlike, say, ‘subjectivity,’ or even ‘homosocial,’ which still often requires a quick gloss when dropped at the hairdresser’s. With anxiety, no translation is required. Everyone understands it more or less: a chronic state of tension, nervousness, or apprehension. One of the less nice things about anxiety—for a graduate student—is that he or she probably feels it every day as part of the normal graduate school experience, worrying about grades, qualifying exams, the job market, the future of funding for humanities research, and so on.

When I think back on my graduate school days at UC Irvine in the early 1990s, I am struck by how well theorized some emotions were—anger, pathos, horror, desire, the abject, disgust, etc.—but no major theory or theorist was associated with anxiety, unless you reached back to Kierkegaard, and few ever did. Even now, twenty years later, well into the affective turn, with books on ideas of ‘cruel optimism’ (Lauren Berlant) and ‘ugly feelings’ (Sianne Ngai) and a range of other emotional conditions



Poe or Romero?

Soltysik Monnet: BOTH.

Batman or Superman?

Soltysik Monnet: I’m fascinated by Batman’s camp/gothic ambivalence and moved by Superman’s cosmic loneliness.

Lecture or seminar?

Soltysik Monnet: Seminar.

Fiction or nonfiction?

Soltysik Monnet: Both.

Late work or early rise?

Soltysik Monnet: Early rise.

¹ According to the National Institute of Mental Health, eighteen percent of Americans in a given year suffer from anxiety. Other sources group a variety of anxiety-linked disorders together and come up with thirty percent (Kessler et al.).

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and affects, there is still no solid or definitive theoretical account of anxiety. Yet we use this term constantly, finding anxiety in characters, stories, discourses, institutions, and entire cultures or epochs. Anxiety is basically a psychological notion, but we don't need to cite Freud or Lacan or even Žižek to use it with authority. Anxiety has no particular critical underpinning but no one ever challenges its use or its validity. In fact, claims of anxiety are essentially unfalsifiable. We can look at what we believe are symptoms—repetitive patterns, eloquent omissions, paranoid scenarios—but we cannot really know if the creators were feeling anxious or wishing to induce anxiety, or whether an audience finds the narratives compelling because they speak to their fears or for some entirely different reason.

And yet the concept of anxiety is a valuable heuristic: It functions as an invisible cause of cultural and textual phenomena, and it allows us to make claims about broad cultural trends that would be difficult to quantitatively measure in any case. It also serves as a universally accepted code for something that is precious to us academics—especially in the humanities—and that is the notion that things are more meaningful than they seem on the surface, that there is a deeper logic or cultural current at work. It allows us to say that things are more complicated, darker, more troubled than they seem. Anxiety is an inherently politicized affect: It emerges from a concern about the future, an unease about the past, and a desire to critique the present state of affairs. Anxiety requires the higher cognitive qualities of self-consciousness and recognition. It is not a weaker version of fear. It is a state of apprehension that can be less focused and less ephemeral than fear but it is just as intense and just as important in reacting intelligently to the world. It can also be paralyzing, of course. Anxiety comes from the Greek root *angh*, which means a tightening or a constriction. Excessive anxiety can block a person or a group from thinking clearly or taking effective action.

Yet anxiety is not necessarily a pathological response in all cases, as we tend to think it is in this age of pharmaceuticals and Zen-chasing self-help manuals (such as most of the *Amazon* books on anxiety mentioned earlier). Anxiety can be a valuable response to growing dangers and subtler forms of trouble than those arousing immediate fear. One of the fascinating things about anxiety—as understood by contemporary cognitive science—is that it does not have to be conscious. A person or a group can be anxious without being fully aware of their anxiety or its causes. This makes anxiety the perfect mental disorder for a culture predicated on denial and self-distraction. Anxiety would thus be the natural condition for a society devoted to strategic amnesia, rushing toward an ecological point of no return and engaged in costly pseudo-imperialist wars and targeted assassinations with no clear or defensible objectives. Even closer to home for most people, anxiety is a healthy response to a

national economy that just experienced a major financial meltdown and then went back to business as usual.

Although I find anxiety to be a wholly logical condition for Americans to have at the moment, it must be admitted that we have been anxious (on and off at least) for quite some time. Those of us who work on the nineteenth century are familiar with that great cultural epidemic of the time, nervousness or neurasthenia. It was commonly believed that modernity itself was straining Americans' nerves and making them anxious and depressed. Then again, in 1947, fast on the heels of the end of World War II, W. H. Auden published his age-defining poem, *Age of Anxiety*, and gave a name to the postwar era. Although the book is not about the atom bomb in any way, I think that the prospect of nuclear annihilation was really a main cause of anxiety in the 1950s and '60s. Even in the 1970s and '80s, growing up in California, on the Pacific Rim, I spent my childhood convinced that I would probably be nuked before I reached thirty. Or that I'd end up homeless, washing in mall bathrooms and sleeping in a car. In fact, I didn't stop feeling permanently anxious until I found a teaching assistantship in my mid twenties in Switzerland, a country that hadn't fought a foreign war in five hundred years and has no nuclear arsenal. They had a small civil war in the mid-nineteenth century, very similar to the American Civil War as far as its causes were concerned: Some of the Catholic cantons (states) wanted to secede and make their own country. Sound familiar? Yet the brief war that was fought to solve this conflict cost eighty-six lives instead of 600,000. I found myself living in a peaceful country that planned for a long-term future and took steps to ensure it would have one. A country with a social safety net and an ecological strategy. My chronic personal anxiety slowly subsided as my critical and comparative perspective on American culture grew more complex.

More to the point, however, anxiety has remained on my radar as a professional concern. As my fields of research include cultural studies, the gothic, and specifically the horror film, I often find myself reflecting on the relationship between fear-oriented cultural productions and real fear or dread. It is a commonplace of horror film scholarship, for example, that the creature features of the 1950s reflected American anxieties about invasion, communism, and annihilation. Similarly, the horror film revival of the 1970s is generally understood as reflecting widespread cultural anxieties about crime, the breakdown of authority, feminism, and so on. Using the horror film as a gauge of cultural anxiety suggests that the 1990s, with the horror film at an all-time low, stuck in repetitive loops of self-parody and remakes, was the least anxious decade in recent history. The current surge in creativity and production in the horror film genre is, therefore, generally read as a symptom of an overall rise in cultural anxiety and fearfulness. Notwithstanding my earlier caveats about the

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looseness with which the term ‘anxiety’ is bandied about in general, this correlation makes sense to me as a scholar and cultural observer. The recent wave of horror is traced by some to the success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and by others to 9/11. In any case, both events combined to create a trend of ultrarealist digital horror that reached directly into the texture of our everyday lives. The mockumentary, found footage, and subjective-camera horror film adopted the look and feel of our own amateur home videos and transformed the medium of the recorded birthday party and blooper moment into a world of monsters and inadvertent terror. If *The Blair Witch Project* showed how cheap and easy it could be to make a realistic found-footage horror mockumentary, 9/11 became the paradigm of the home video gone wrong. Since then, digital horror cinema has flourished, as have horror movies in general, generating a number of new subgenres or cycles that have garnered a lot of attention, such as the disturbingly named ‘torture porn’ or the ‘zombocalypse.’

My particular interest has been on the use of digital aesthetics in the horror film, and even more narrowly, the uncanny green appearance of night vision technology, which I see as inextricably associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Night vision has become a visual shorthand for those wars and, as such, a code freighted with unease about the interactions between the US military and civilian populations in the war zones, whether in Baghdad during aggressive searches or from the air as drones or Apaches fire on human targets. It is my impression that the dehumanizing effect created by the shining or opaque eyes in night vision renders it a particularly evocative visual transcoding of anxieties about our military operations abroad. Like all effective aesthetic codes, night vision is powerfully suggestive while remaining semiotically undefined. It alludes to night scopes and military technology but has no specific content or message. It creates an atmosphere that assumes invisible dangers and insecure situations. People look odd and distorted, uncanny and interchangeable. Monsters that lurk in darkness threaten to loom into visual range at unpleasantly close distances. Whatever the exact appeal of night vision, it has been used at key moments or in particularly striking ways in many recent films, including *Exhibit A* (2007), *REC* (2007) and *REC 2* (2009), *The Zombie Diaries* (2006) and *Zombie Diaries 2* (2011), *Trollhunter* (2010), *Atrocious* (2011), *The Tunnel* (2011), *Evil Things* (2011), *The Bay* (2012), the *Paranormal Activity* series (2009-12), and the *Grave Encounters* series (2011-12).

However, the most striking trend within the recent horror film is the proliferation of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic scenarios. The end of the world is so common in cinema that it has become the subject of comic self-parody, as in the recent *The World's End* (2013) and *This Is the End* (2013). Again, it would be hard to deny that this obsessive rehearsal of apocalyptic situations correlates to genuine cultural anxiety about the future of our society and our planet. Certainly Žižek, who recently published

a book titled *Living in the End Times* (2010), would not disagree. And like I said before, this is an anxiety that seems particularly high in the United States and the United Kingdom, though Germany, France, and other countries have also produced interesting examples of apocalyptic cinema (e.g., *Rammbock* [2011]; *The Horde* [2010]).² Many of these films are zombie invasion scenarios and thus explore the tense survivalist dynamics of postapocalyptic coexistence rather than possible causes or destructive trends in current society. Yet, in a sense, these films, like *World War Z* (2013) or the TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-), ask if the entire wasteful late capitalist way of life is not somehow to blame for a zombie outbreak. Knowingly or not, these stories continue the tradition of John Romero's critical and socially conscious zombie films, which take militarism, greed, and patriarchy to task. Many zombie movies propose—directly or indirectly—that we're already a population of walking dead, numbed by routine, consumerism, and a generalized state of tunnel vision and lack of thought. Our endless craving for sneakers, clothes, and electronic equipment leads us to keep buying more stuff, even though we know that most of it is made by underpaid and probably underage workers in dehumanizing labor conditions. The ruined landscapes of the postapocalyptic genre speak eloquently of the wastefulness of the current system. Survivors scramble for food and shake their heads in wonder at the overabundance that characterized society before it all came crashing down. These films and stories are our bad conscience speaking to our well-founded anxieties about the future of America.

In short, anxiety is an issue both timely and ripe for more critical investigation. As a term that is used as often in psychiatry or anthropology as in English studies, it offers an ideal interdisciplinary object. However, the current anxiety epidemic requires more than just scholarly attention: It needs a new generation of academics who combine research with activism in order to help keep apocalypses fictional. I hope *aspeers* readers will be that new generation.

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2 I know American and European cinema best, with only passing acquaintance with Bollywood, Nollywood, and Asian horror, but my impression is that apocalypse remains an Anglo-American obsession.

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