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Anxiety and Ontology: Toward the Lacanian Materialist Metapsychology of the Affect¹

Introduction

In the history of modern philosophy, affects in general, and particularly the affect of anxiety, has experienced a rather peculiar and uneasy fate. In fact, after the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, of reason and senses, gained hegemony, the question of affects as something categorically different than both mind and senses was somehow “repressed” or excluded from serious philosophical engagement. The sole exception to this hegemonic disposition might indeed be Spinozistic monism, which in order to think affects, however, had to “repress” or exclude negativity and, consequently, subjectivity, whereby this exclusion led to the problem, roughly put, of the very indistinguishability of affects and sense, and also of affects and substance. It could be said that the first modern philosophical current that attempted to address the problem of affects broadly speaking is the post-Schellingian existentialist tradition, which, however, thought of affects in a very singular manner, i.e. as affective determinations of decisively *subjective* existence. Accordingly, Kierkegaardian existentialist affects (boredom, anxiety, despair) are popularly seen as inherently bound with the experience of subjective existence, which seemingly opposes itself to the (Hegelian) dialectics of objective spirit conceived as a system.

However, as Michael O’Neill Burns has counter-intuitively yet highly convincingly argued in his recent book *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectics*,¹ this popular picture, according to which Kierkegaardian subjective existence is opposed to the mechanic totality of the dialectical system and to the seemingly irresistible progress of objective spirit, is in many ways misleading, to say the least. Above all, it is misleading by way of presupposing a sharp and neat distinction between the spheres of objectivity and

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² Michael O’Neill Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectics*, Rowman and Littlefield International, London and New York 2015, pp. xi–xxii.

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subjectivity, which can actually never achieve a state of mutual reconciliation. Moreover, the sphere of objectivity, that is, of objective spirit, is conceived as totalised in itself and separated from subjective existence, whereby the latter can emerge only as an external leftover, as something that is left outside of the system and cannot be integrated into it, and not as something that is, perhaps, a result of the inner dialectical process of the system itself. Against this rather naïve picture of “existence vs. system,” O’Neill Burns instead argues that the whole of Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy emerges at the point of what he calls “fractured dialectics,” that is, not as an external critique of German idealism, as is usually assumed, but as an immanent and thus materialist critique addressing malfunctions and fractures within the system, rather than its smooth functioning. Accordingly, the fracture, the break, the crack, is immanent to the system, and subjective existence is related to this point of systemic failure, and is in some sense even produced by it. In short, for Kierkegaard, man is spirit, yet spirit that failed to reconcile or resolve (via synthesis) its inner contradictions. To recall, perhaps, the most famous example, Kierkegaard conceives despair as a “sickness in the spirit,” a crisis of “synthesis,” which refers to the impossibility of death as a synthetic moment of mind and body, of the infinite and the finite, of freedom and necessity, as a threshold or the passage of individual existence into eternal life in the Christian sense.² However, this crisis of synthesis is caused precisely by the very inscription of the infinite into the finite, or of the objective dimension of spirit into the subjective dimension of existence. In other words, for Kierkegaard, despair emerges as a result of the crisis of death as the impossibility of getting rid of the eternal in the existence of man itself, which is a precondition for the passage to eternity: “despair is a qualification of spirit, that it is related to the eternal in man. But the eternal he cannot get rid of, no, not to all eternity; he cannot cast it from him once for all, nothing is more impossible.”³

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This insight immediately sheds new light on the general relation between affects and reason, and ultimately also between affects and ontology. Even if one conceives of affects in a reductive manner by reducing them exclusively

³ See Søren Kierkegaard, “Sickness Unto Death”, in *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*, trans. and with notes by Walter Lawrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013, pp. 235–478.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

to the domain of the subjective and subjectivity, the blurring of the distance between subjective and objective puts a huge question-mark above this conception of the opposition between subjective affects and objective spirit. In fact, this inner intertwining between subjective and objective brings the problem of affects, including the affect of anxiety, which is the primary concern of this text, closer to the questions of ontology than one might assume. Incidentally, already Kierkegaard himself introduced in his *The Concept of Anxiety* a crucial distinction between *subjective anxiety* (of an individual sinner) and *objective anxiety* (which is, as Kierkegaard puts it, “the reflection of sinfulness of the generation in the whole world,” therefore “the effect of sin in nonhuman existence”⁴). Here, objective anxiety immediately relates anxiety to ontological determinations of the world, and specifically, as O’Neill Burns puts it, to its inner “fractured dialectics”⁵ or gap. Not surprisingly, Lacan places his articulation of anxiety – and the whole conceptual framework set up in Seminar X *Anxiety* – precisely on this *locus* of the short circuit within dialectics itself, that is, on the “non-dialectical,” rather than “anti-dialectical,” gap within the system. More specifically, as he points out in the introductory lecture of the next Seminar, *The-Names-of-the-Father*, what happens in Seminar X is a kind of shift from Hegel to Kierkegaard, from the system to its inherent gap, whereby anxiety as the sole affect which “does not deceive” figures as a privileged access to the structure of this very same gap: “It is here that anxiety is for us a sign, as was immediately seen by the contemporary of the development of Hegel’s system, which was at that time quite simply The System, as was seen, sung, and marked by Kierkegaard. Anxiety is for us witness to an essential gap, onto which I bring testimony that Freudian doctrine is that which illuminates.”⁶

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin, Kierkegaard’s Writing*, Vol. VIII, ed. and trans. Riedar Thomte, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, p. 57.

⁶ See, again, O’Neill Bruns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy*, Chapter 2 “Anxiety and Ontology”, pp. 31–70, for an overall systematic discussion of the relation between anxiety and ontology in Kierkegaard, and especially pp. 53 et seq. for an overview of “objective anxiety,” and pp. 61–66 for the relation between anxiety and what he calls “fractured dialectics.”

⁷ Jacques Lacan, “The-Names-of-the-Father”, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *October* 40 (Spring 1987), p. 84; translation modified. The point to be stressed, here, is that the gap at stake should be considered not as an anti-dialectical moment opposed to the dialectical process, but, on the contrary, as a non-dialectical moment within the dialectical process itself.

However, despite Kierkegaard (and, to be sure, before him already Schelling) bringing affects and ontology into close proximity, and although Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis seems to represent a continuity with Kierkegaard, there nevertheless remain some crucial differences between anxiety as existential affect and the way psychoanalysis deals with it. To highlight only a couple of the most crucial short circuits in Kierkegaard's take on anxiety, there is, on the one hand, the short circuit between anxiety as the affect to be felt and anxiety as the object of thought (the concept), whereby the two are in principle mutually exclusive; on the other hand, this leads us to another short circuit which refers to the as yet unclear conceptual distinction – which persists in both the existential and phenomenological traditions – between senses and affects in general, and particularly between the affect of anxiety and the sense of fear – which is one of the crucial discoveries achieved by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, while this is not unrelated to the questions of ontology. In fact, while for both Kierkegaard and even more so for Heidegger anxiety reveals nothingness⁷ as the existential condition surrounding a particular existence – the famous “nothingness” as a determination of *Dasein* – for Freud and Lacan, anxiety, precisely in its “ontological form” invoked by Lacan already in his early essay “Logical Time”,⁸ which implies a sharp distinction between anxiety and fear, is articulated as an immanent moment in the process of the constitution of subjectivity, and not simply as its external condition of possibility. In short, Lacan's infamous reversal of the existentialist and phenomenological conception of anxiety as a lack of object (privation), which he unfolds in Seminar X along with the thesis that “anxiety is not without the object,”⁹ leads not only to a completely new definition of object (as *objet petit a*) with respect to the previous phase of Lacan's teaching, as Jacques Alain Miller characterised the main achievement of Seminar X,¹⁰ but it also has far-reaching consequences

⁸ Literally: “Anxiety reveals the nothing”. (Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?”, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 88).

⁹ To be sure, Lacan's precise expression is “ontological form of anxiety” (Jacques Lacan, “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism”, in: *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Company, London and New York 2006, p. 169.)

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, trans. A. R. Price, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden 2014, p. 100; hereafter cited as *Seminar X*.

¹⁰ See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Introduction to Reading: Jacques Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety”, trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink* 26 (2005); hereafter cited as “Introduction”.

for the articulation of Lacan's own critique of classical ontology, or, better yet, his "critical ontology."¹¹

To summarise what follows, my argument will be that Lacanian anxiety, famously conceived as a "signal of the real," is inextricably connected with the *third dimension of being*, which amounts to what Lacan in Seminar XI labelled as "the unrealized," that is, to the peculiar structure of the unconscious, which distorts the classical ontological opposition between being and non-being. For Lacan, the unconscious, rather than referring simply to the repressed unconscious content, is instead structured around a "pre-ontological" gap or "ontological negativity," to borrow the term advanced by Alenka Zupančič. While, for Lacan, anxiety notoriously "does not deceive," it does not deceive only regarding the subject's encounter with the real, operating as a signal of this encounter, but also – and most importantly – regarding the specific ontological structure of the unconscious, without which there cannot be anything similar to the Lacanian "real," and, consequently, neither something like the affect of anxiety. In other words, the affect of anxiety as different from fear emerges as an affective correlate of the structure of the unconscious, which includes the ontological negativity or real, whereby anxiety, in turn, figures also as the privileged access to this very same structure. In this respect, anxiety might be regarded as an "ontological affect" – indeed not in the posthumanist sense of the affect of being/matter, but rather as the affective correlate or signal of the fracture of being itself. Importantly, without this specific ontological gap/negativity/void, which is materialised by object *a* (as both the object of the drive and the object-cause-of-desire), there would be only fear and frustration, not anxiety. And, last but not least, such an inextricable connection between anxiety and negativity brings anxiety into the domain of metapsychology, to put it in clinical terms, and ontology, to put it in philosophical terms – which is far from self-evident and sufficiently explored thus far.¹² Even more, the potential

¹¹ As I have argued elsewhere (Boštjan Nedoh, *Ontology and Perversion: Deleuze, Agamben, Lacan*, Rowman and Littlefield International, London and New York 2019, pp. 1–5), "critical ontology" precisely because Lacan's critique of classical ontology does not lead to the refusal or abandonment of the notion of ontology as such – as is the case with analytic philosophy – but rather to a renewal of ontology, which would include psychoanalysis in the same way as Lacan argued for modern science.

¹² Although there exist many original readings of Seminar X by clinicians (besides Miller's "Introduction", see also seminal works such as Roberto Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on Anxi-*

meta-psychological status of anxiety seems to be, at least at first glance, a subject of contestation, rather than something one would straightforwardly argue for. It is this contested meta-psychological dimension of anxiety, which at the same time figures as a “crucial term of reference” in Lacan, with which we will proceed in order to then reach first its revolutionary articulation, unfolded especially in Lacan’s Seminar X, and, second, its most immediate consequences for his critical ontology.

Either Anxiety or the Concept

Perhaps one of the main reasons for this missing relationship between anxiety and Lacan’s critique of ontology in the literature thus far¹³ is his own rather ambiguous position regarding the affect(s), and particularly regarding anxiety. This ambiguity, which is ultimately misleading, is perhaps best epitomised in the tenth lesson of Lacan’s controversial Seminar XVII *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, which took place on the “Steps of the Pantheon” on 13 May 1970 in the form of an interview between Lacan and the audience. After being accused of neglecting affects – the accusation being fully in line with the post-May 1968 spirit of student protests – Lacan immediately rejected this accusation by saying he did not at all neglect the question of affects in his theory insofar as he had dedicated the entire Seminar X to the primary affect in psychoanalysis,

ety: An Introduction, trans. Jane C. Lamb-Ruiz, The Other Press, New York 2001; and, more recently, Bogdan Wolf, *Anxiety between Desire and the Body*, Routledge, London 2019), it could be said that these readings are mainly close readings of Seminar X itself, without extending its consequences especially to ontological and philosophical questions that traverse Lacan’s entire work.

¹³ There are only a few bold and systematic attempts to bridge this pretty obvious gap. To list the two, perhaps, most important examples: Ruth Ronen, *Aesthetics of Anxiety*, State University of New York Press, New York 2009; Yves Depelseñaire, *Une analyse avec Dieu: Le rendez-vous de Lacan et de Kierkegaard*, La Lettre volée, Brussels 2004. Although their aim is not to bridge this gap between philosophy and psychoanalysis only in the context of anxiety, but rather consider a broader list of concepts, and expand the problematic of affective life in Lacan also to other related fields, such as neuroscience, literature, and politics, one should add to this series of books, among many others, at least the following contributions: Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013; Sigi Jöttkandt, *First Love: A Phenomenology of the One*, re.press, Melbourne 2010; Ed Pluth and Dominiek Hoens, “What If the Other Is Stupid? Badiou and Lacan on ‘Logical Time’”, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward, Continuum, London 2004, pp. 182–190.

which is indeed anxiety. However, he immediately added something strange to his defence, arguing that the affect as seen by psychoanalysis is not “suppressed, it’s that it is displaced and unrecognizable.”¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Lacan here only corroborates what he already argued six years earlier in Seminar XI. Therein, immediately after mentioning that this topic is unfolded by Freud in his “*metapsychological*” writings, he argues the following: “I insisted on the fact that Freud emphasizes that it is not the affect that is repressed. The affect [...] goes off somewhere else, as best it can.”¹⁵

What makes this argument strange in light of the affect in general and anxiety in particular is the following: if, according to the common understanding, repression equals the unconscious so that the psychoanalytic interpretation would aim at unearthing the unconscious repressed content (repressed signifiers, as Lacan stresses on the same occasion), the fact that the affect is not repressed and is even displaced and in motion would then make of anxiety an element that exceeds the domain of psychoanalysis, as Adrian Johnston nicely noted this apparent paradox.¹⁶ Seemingly, this is confirmed by taking together Lacan’s basic definitions of anxiety and the unconscious: “the unconscious is structured as language” (Seminar XI); “anxiety is a signal of the real” (Seminar X). The first definition implies that the unconscious functions according to the famous logic of the signifier, that is, the symbolic order of language, while the second definition ties anxiety to the concept of the real, which is by definition heterogeneous to the symbolic and indeed marks the limits of the latter. Thus, at first glance, the affect and particularly the affect of anxiety has no immediate relation to the unconscious, which psychoanalysis deals with in the first place.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, W. W. Norton & Co., London and New York 2006, p. 144. For a broader contextualisation and discussion of affects in Lacan’s Seminar XVII, which highlights also the crucial affect of “shame” as a “sister of anxiety”, see Joan Copjec’s brilliant contribution “May ’68, The Emotional Month”, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, Verso, London 2006, pp. 90–114. Copjec’s in-depth analysis of the relation between anxiety and shame would need additional discussion, which goes beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton & Co., London and New York 1998, p. 217; hereafter cited as *Seminar XI*.

¹⁶ Adrian Johnston, “From Signifiers to *Jouis-Sens*: Lacan’s *Senti-Ments* and *Affectuations*”, in Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, p. 119 (pp. 118–149).

The affect is felt, which locates it in the domain of the ego, and not in that of the unconscious. Accordingly, there should not be any kind of metapsychology of the affect, and far less of anxiety, insofar as the affect seems to belong to the psychological or empirical domain of felt experiences that are only of secondary importance in psychoanalysis as metapsychology.

And yet, Lacan insists throughout his Seminars that anxiety has a distinguished status not only among other affects, but – quite surprisingly – among other concepts of psychoanalysis as well. Such a distinguished status of anxiety is perhaps best epitomised in Lacan’s one-liner in Seminar XI in which he categorically argues that “For analysis, anxiety is a crucial term of reference, because in effect anxiety is that which does not deceive.”¹⁷ Counterintuitively, the distinguished status of anxiety is here defined not only by the content of the one-liner itself, namely by Lacan’s observation that anxiety is that which does not deceive, but also by the place of enunciation or context in which this one-liner takes place. This place is nothing other than Seminar XI, entitled *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. The paradox is here brought to the extreme: on the one hand, Lacan dedicated the whole year of Seminar XI to the articulation of four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (the unconscious, repetition, transference, and the death drive), while this, on the other hand, by no means prevented him from assigning the status of “a crucial term of reference” exactly to anxiety, which does not even figure in this series of fundamental concepts and is, moreover, seemingly as distant as possible from one of the “fundamental” concepts, namely the unconscious. As was already well-documented, this non-correspondence between anxiety and the list of fundamental concepts is far from accidental. Anxiety is not listed in the series of fundamental concepts because it cannot be listed, that is, insofar as anxiety as dealt with in psychoanalysis, unlike, for instance, in Kierkegaard or Heidegger, cannot even have the status of a concept, but is indeed considered to be an affect. In psychoanalysis, concept and affect are opposed to each other. So, Lacan’s affect of anxiety differs from Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety precisely to the extent that in Kierkegaard anxiety takes a conceptual form, which suggests that it is something one can think about and that can be approached philosophically, while in Lacan anxiety is considered to be an affect, and as

¹⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 41. To be sure, this is indeed not the first time Lacan uses this one-liner, since it was at length elaborated in the earlier Seminar X.

such as distant as possible from a signifier. As Ruth Ronen puts it, anxiety is “something we sense, yet because of its instinctual source we have no determinate notion of it, it is not an object of knowledge.”¹⁸ In fact, if we assume that the main medium of thought is language itself as a system of linguistic differences or signifiers, then we might conclude that anxiety as an affect, which can be felt yet not thought of, is located as far as possible from the symbolic order of language. Lacan’s name for this position, which is heterogeneous to the symbolic order of language, is the “real,” and it is following this premise that he unfolds his basic definition of anxiety as a “signal of the real.” Or, as Miller puts it, in what Lacan calls anxiety “there is a connotation of the passage from reality to the real, the breaking through reality in the sense of the real, and, in that way, it is correlative to a lapse of a signifier.”¹⁹ However, if anxiety is an affect, it is by definition the affect that affects the subject. Hence, for Lacan, anxiety signals the subjective position of the immediate, direct encounter with the real that goes hand-in-hand with a lack of signifiers, which would enable the subject to symbolise this traumatic experience, this encounter with the real.²⁰ It is anxiety signalling the subject’s position “in-between” signifiers, in the interval between one signifier and another without vanishing into a signifier, that which constrains us to articulate anxiety as a concept in the classical sense. That is why Miller in his introductory reading of Lacan’s Seminar X on *Anxiety* began by reducing the whole relation between anxiety and concept to the most basic either/or choice: “Either anxiety or the concept.”²¹ One cannot have them both.

Following this premise, we could say that Seminar X aims precisely to unfold the structure of anxiety by enacting the passage of anxiety from affect to concept. As we shall see soon, it is anxiety’s position at the limit between symbolic reality and the real of *jouissance* that explains and resolves the apparent short

¹⁸ Ronen, *Aesthetics of Anxiety*, pp. 82–83.

¹⁹ Miller, “Introduction”, p. 23.

²⁰ This indeed refers to Lacan’s so-called “difficulty/movement” matrix that he draws in Seminar X in order to explain variations of affects as corresponding to different subjective positions within the dynamic relation between the movement/pressure of the drive and the difficulty of its symbolisation. Anxiety marks the most extreme position within this matrix since in anxiety the movement of the drive is the most intense, while the subject is the most distant from the signifier, which would enable him or her to articulate/symbolise the former. I am relying here on what I consider to be one of the best readings of the overall implications of this matrix: Jöttkandt, *First Love*, pp. 18 et seq.

²¹ Miller, “Introduction”, p. 22.

circuit between anxiety being “a crucial term of reference” and an affect that is by definition displaced. Furthermore, this very same structure of anxiety also highlights the way anxiety is displaced, which substantially differs from the way other affects, or better yet, emotions, are displaced. What makes the difference between one singular affect (anxiety) and other affects, which therefore deserve to be called “emotions,”²² is the different form of displacement, or, better yet, the difference in place where one and the others are displaced. And, perhaps this different form of displacement is that specific characteristic which enables Lacan to assign the status of “a crucial term of reference” to anxiety, regardless of its non-conceptual status. Moreover, the displacement of the affect, which, as Lacan stresses, is thereby not repressed, is, however, not unrelated to the broader mechanism of repression, which includes the structural point of primal repression. Paradoxically enough, as we shall see now, this peculiar form of displacement, which is directly related to the whole mechanism of repression, establishes anxiety also as a cornerstone of Lacan’s critical ontology, for which I will try to make the case in the concluding section below. In order to properly grasp this form of displacement characteristic of anxiety, it is necessary to look closely at how Freud ultimately distinguishes between anxiety and fear.

Anxiety beyond Fear: The Logic of Anxiety from the Trauma of Birth to the *Niederkommen*

From the vantage point of Freud’s entire work, the essay “Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety”²³ is of the highest importance to the matter of anxiety. In fact, it is in this essay that Freud finally breaks with his previous conception of anxiety conceived in terms of “transformed libido,” which is accumulated during the process of repression.²⁴ This conception presupposed a clear causal sequence

²² As Peter Klepec noted, for Lacan, “emotion refers etymologically to movement” (Lacan, *Seminar X*, p. 12), while affects, and particularly the affect of anxiety, point to the subject’s paralysis or inability to move, that is, to being stuck between signifiers without vanishing into them. This, in turn, implies the most intensive movement of the drive (see Peter Klepec, *Matrice podrejanja: Kapitalizem in perverzija 2*, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, Ljubljana 2019, pp. 61–67).

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Inhibition, Symptom, and Anxiety”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XX*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, Vintage, London 2001, pp. 75–175.

²⁴ Regarding this, see, for example, “Editor’s Introduction”, in “Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety”, pp. 78–80.

where there was repression that triggered anxiety and actually caused its emergence. In “Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety” Freud completely reverses this conception such that anxiety now becomes a crucial agent or cause of symptom-formation in neurosis. Anxiety that is significant for neurosis therefore comes “not from the process of repression, not from the libidinal cathexes of the repressed impulses, but from the repressing agency itself. The anxiety belonging to the animal was an untransformed fear of castration.”²⁵ It is necessary to emphasise that at this point of the essay Freud does not yet sharply differentiate between fear and anxiety; moreover, he even seems to take Oedipal fear of castration and anxiety as one and the same thing. In the case of Little Hans – assuming his libidinal investment in his mother – the anxiety affect appears in the form of fear within Hans’s relation to his father in the first place. It is this fear that generates the repression of his sadistic cathexis towards his father, who, before the repression occurs, represents the imaginary rival of Hans in his relation to his mother. However, this suffices for Freud to note that the phenomenon that appears first is anxiety (although in the form of fear), and not repressed cathexis. This is why he ultimately draws an unambiguous conclusion as to the primacy of anxiety over repression: “It was anxiety which produced repression and not, as I formerly believed, repression which produced anxiety. [...] It is always ego’s attitude of anxiety which is the primary thing and which sets repression going. Anxiety never arises from repressed libido.”²⁶

It is precisely on this basis of reversing the causal relation between anxiety and repression that Freud starts drawing some crucial differences toward the end of his essay, which were completely neglected in his previous works, in the first place the difference between “realistic” and “neurotic anxiety.” At first glance, the difference between the two is determined by the subject’s knowledge of the danger: “Real danger is a danger that is known, and realistic anxiety is anxiety about a known danger of this sort. Neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger.”²⁷ Importantly, along the same lines Freud further distinguishes between fear and anxiety properly speaking. The danger itself implies that the subject somehow expects the danger. Knowing or not knowing the object of danger is thus crucial for distinguishing between fear and anxiety: “Anxiety

²⁵ Freud, “Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety”, p. 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[*Angst*] has an unmistakable relation to *expectation*: it is anxiety *about* something. It has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*. In precise speech we use the word ‘fear’ [*Furcht*] rather than ‘anxiety’ [*Angst*] if it has found an object.”²⁸ Simply put, if the subject finds the object of danger in the external world, than this is realistic anxiety or fear, while if he or she does not find it, then we are dealing with anxiety properly speaking. The question is thus all about this indefiniteness of the object of danger in anxiety. For Freud, there is no doubt that it indicates that the danger comes not from the external object as in the case of fear; instead, it comes from the unconscious, whereby the scope of the analysis is precisely to bring it into consciousness and thus make it the same as realistic anxiety: “Neurotic danger is thus a danger that has still to be discovered. Analysis has shown that it is an instinctual danger. By bringing this danger, which is not known to the ego, into consciousness, the analyst makes neurotic anxiety no different from realistic anxiety, so that it can be dealt with in the same way.”²⁹

The most important point in these observations of Freud is indeed the link he establishes between anxiety and the unconscious without any reference to an external agency. This was the first step toward the articulation of anxiety as irreducible to the so-called fear of castration, which, in this context, refers to the Oedipus complex and the castration agency embodied in the figure of the father. This implies that the external object, which is essential for the distinction between anxiety proper and fear, should be understood precisely as a signifier: fear applies to the danger we know, which means that it is symbolised through signifiers, and as such can be subjected to psychoanalytic interpretation, while anxiety refers to a danger that is not attached to any signifier and thus cannot be interpreted in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. So, precisely to the extent that anxiety might be articulated without reference to the castrating agency or, more generally, external object, Freud then tries to trace the genesis of anxiety back from the idea of the primal anxiety that he locates in the moment of the trauma of birth. As he puts it: “The first experience of anxiety which an individual goes through (in the case of human beings, at all events) is birth, and, objectively speaking, birth is a separation from the mother.”³⁰ Thus, the

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

appearance of anxiety later on in the course of life is, for Freud, a repetition of this originary experience of anxiety in the birth in the first place. As he later continues, “we are therefore inclined to regard anxiety-states as a reproduction of the trauma of birth.”³¹

However, it is precisely this introduction of the trauma of birth,³² which was meant to explain the genesis of anxiety, that instead represents an issue which Freud is well aware of. In fact, the separation from one’s mother at birth is strictly speaking not just pre-subjective, but even pre-individual, since a child at this stage does not yet have any consciousness, consciousness that could register the affect of anxiety as an unpleasant feeling. In other words, a child has no ego at birth, while the ego is, according to Freud, the place where anxiety is felt. Freud is indeed well aware of this deadlock: “Now it would be very satisfactory if anxiety, as a symbol of a separation, were to be repeated on every subsequent occasion on which a separation took place. But unfortunately we are prevented from making use of this correlation by the fact that birth is not experienced subjectively as a separation from the mother, since the foetus, being a completely narcissistic creature, is totally unaware of her existence as an object.”³³

As some commentators have observed, among which Jacques-Alain Miller in his “Introduction” to the reading of Seminar X and Ruth Ronen in her book *Aesthetics of Anxiety*, although the idea of the trauma of birth appears to be empirically wrong, it still has an important theoretical value. Namely, in a modified way it is used by Lacan as a point of departure for what Miller considered to be the ground-breaking aspect of Seminar X: a completely new definition of object, which will crystallise itself as the *object petit a* in Seminar XI. According to Miller, the previous phase of Lacan’s Seminar was indeed strongly characterised by the Hegelian-Kojévian notion of the “dialectics of desire” and the operation of *Aufhebung*. As Miller argued, in this context the whole emphasis was on the development of the concept of the symbolic, while the concept of the real was somehow marginalised or “sublated” (*aufgehoben*) into the former. In short, at this stage – and this is mostly evident in Lacan’s Seminar IV *La relation d’objet* –

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³² The trauma of birth is a concept that Freud takes from Otto Rank.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

“Lacan uses the object exactly as signifier”³⁴ so that nothing remains irreducible to the symbolic order of linguistic differences. Accordingly, Lacan here also insists on the premise that the subject, which is by definition the subject of the signifier, enters into a symbolic intersubjective relation with the big Other precisely on the condition that he or she loses part of his or her own being, which amounts to an autoerotic *jouissance*. In other words, *jouissance* becomes inaccessible for the subject *qua* speaking being.

The first reframing of the object with respect to this initial conception occurs in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Therein, Lacan not only sets up the concept of *Das Ding* as a dimension of total *jouissance*, but also articulates the “*jouissance* of transgression”³⁵ of the symbolic Law as a form of the encounter with the traumatic Thing (total *jouissance*). Precisely to the extent that the *jouissance* of *Das Ding* is prohibited for the subject of symbolic Law, the subject experiences a superegoic sense of guilt or symbolic indebtedness every time that he or she transgresses this prohibition, that is, when he or she transgresses the limit between the dialectics of desire and *jouissance* as the inner heterogeneity of the symbolic.³⁶

Now, following Miller’s categorisation of the “six paradigms of *jouissance*” stretching throughout almost thirty years of Lacan’s teaching,³⁷ the transition from Seminar VII to Seminar XI is characterised by what he calls the “fragmentation” of *jouissance*, that is, by the fragmentation of the total *jouissance* of *Das Ding* into the fragmented *jouissance* of partial drives. It is against this background that Lacan sets up the “new definition of object,” which in Seminar XI crystallises into the form of object *a* (as both the object-cause-of-desire and the object of the partial drive), whereby Seminar X and the articulation of the affect of anxiety seem to be the decisive step on the way toward the articulation of this most crucial concept in Lacan’s theory.

³⁴ Miller, “Introduction”, p. 25.

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter, W. W. Norton and Company, London and New York 1992, especially pp. 191–203; hereinafter cited as *Seminar VII*.

³⁶ As Lacan puts it: “Every act of *jouissance* gives rise to something that is inscribed in the Book of debts of the Law” (Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 176.)

³⁷ See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Paradigms of *Jouissance*”, trans. Juan Jauregi. *Lacanian Ink* 17, pp. 8–47.

Now, the question is how Lacan redefines the object in Seminar X, which Miller considers to be the “workshop” for Seminar XI. Briefly, his redefinition concerns the shift from the object as the object of desire, which can be translated into the signifier, to the object as cause-of-desire, which is developed, and this is most important, on the basis of the subject’s separation from the organ of satisfaction. As both Miller and Ronen emphasised, it is here that Lacan refers to Freud’s theory of the trauma of birth, which Freud takes from Otto Rank: what is crucial in the moment of birth is not the separation of the child from his or her mother, but from the organ-membrane which is exactly the organ of the child’s full satisfaction. Regarding this point, Ronen suggests that anxiety emerges in the moment of this separation between the child and the organ-membrane, so that it actually causes the “dropping off” of the child, which then further implies the child’s dependence on the “mOther” (Ronen). Analogously to this separation of the child from the organ of full satisfaction, Lacan suggests that the subject enters into intersubjective symbolic relations precisely via losing a part of his or her own body, a part of his or her own autoerotic *jouissance*, which is embodied in the *objet petit a* as a constitutively lost object. This is the origin of the articulation of the subject *qua* “lack of being”. As he puts it, the subject as the subject of the signifier emerges via the *niederkommt* of him- or herself as the object; he or she must traverse the logical moment in the constitution of subjectivity, which is the moment of “being dropped” (in both senses of the term “being”):³⁸ the subject must go through the moment of losing a part of his or her own being (materialised in the object *a*) in order to be alienated into the net of signifiers and enter into the dialectics of desire – and the passage through this logical moment signalled by the affect of anxiety.

Against this background, which locates anxiety in the interval between *jouissance* and desire, Lacan unfolds the very logical status of anxiety in the constitution of human subjectivity in the first place. In fact, he stresses “not the *mediating* function of anxiety between *jouissance* and desire, but its *median* function,”³⁹ in order to conclude that anxiety is “an intermediary term between *jouissance* and desire in so far as desire is constituted and founded upon the anxiety phase,

³⁸ “The *niederkommen* is essential to any sudden moment at which the subject is brought into relation with what he is as *a*” (Lacan, *Seminar X*, p. 110).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

once anxiety has been got through.”⁴⁰ These, at first glance very dense formulations, are nevertheless quite clear: anxiety is in the first place conceived not as the cause itself, but as the logical objective signal that marks the limit between the symbolic reality of the desire and the real of *jouissance* – note Lacan’s emphasis that anxiety does not have the mediating but the median function.

So, anxiety in its basic form emerges precisely when the subject finds itself at the extimate (Miller) position between two spaces: on the one hand, there is the space of desire, while, on the other hand, there is the space of *jouissance*, which Lacan in Seminar VII associates with the place of “neighbor” and “evil.” It is by way of anxiety signalling the subject’s position at the limit between these two spaces, at the extimate position between inside and outside, that Lacan introduces the new, more elaborate definition of object, which consists precisely in the difference that in “anxiety, we are dealing with it [with the lost object] at a moment that logically precedes the moment at which we deal with it in desire.”⁴¹ To briefly unpack this formulation, the difference Lacan introduces in Seminar X is the difference between object *a* as the object of *jouissance*, whereby anxiety emerges when the subject is directly, in a “non-dialectical” manner, confronted with the object of *jouissance* – and this is the reason Lacan insists that “anxiety is not without the object” – while the subject enters the dialectics of desire precisely by way of separating itself from the object of *jouissance*, which transforms the object *a* into the object-cause-of-desire. In other words, the object that is supposed to be separated from the subject in order to cause his or her entry into the symbolic realm of the Other is in anxiety too close. Anxiety as a “signal of the real” thus marks this peculiar subjective position at the point of the zero degree of subjectivity, beyond which the subject as the subject of the signifier can no longer “vanish into signifier” and may experience his or her subjective destitution. The task is now to focus more in-depth on the twofold structure of the object that Lacan advances in Seminar X.

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***Jouissance*-remainder: A New Paradigm of the Object**

So, if in the first eight years of Lacan’s Seminar the object was in one way or another used as a signifier so that nothing remained outside the intersubjective

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

symbolic relation between the subject and the Other, the beginning of Seminar X introduces a completely new, perhaps “non-dialectical,” rather than simply anti-dialectical, conception of the object, which will subsequently become the *objet petit a* properly speaking. As soon as Seminar X begins, in fact, Lacan introduces the schema of subjective division:⁴²

A	S
\$	A
<i>a</i>	

What is this schema about? In brief, it is not about the success, but rather about the failure of the intersubjective relationship between the subject and the Other. The starting point of this division is the mutual alienation of both instances: in order to interrelate between each other, the subject (initial S) and the Other (unbarred A) have to lose a part of their own being in order to mutually recognise each other. The outcome is their mutual barrier, which is the price the subject and the Other have to pay in order to be recognised by each other. However, the whole point of this schema is that in the last instance this mutual recognition and alienation fails to succeed, since an additional element is produced. There is something that remains outside as an irreducible remainder of this division, something that persists as radically heterogeneous with respect to the intersubjective symbolic relationship: this is what Lacan calls the object *a*. As Miller pointed out, here, the object *a* should be grasped not simply as a remainder that can be further symbolised through the dialectics of desire, but rather as an “absolute remainder” that marks the point of the irreducible heterogeneity or immanent obstacle within this very same dialectic of desire. As he puts it: “Absolute means separation from any rapport with the dialectic. The remainder is an obstacle to the dialectic and to the logic of the signifier, in the sense that this remainder remains insoluble, one cannot resolve it nor dissolve it.”⁴³

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The starting point of the articulation of such an irreducible or absolute remainder is Lacan’s modification of his own theory of the mirror stage and particularly of the primary identification that functions here as the “libidinal normal-

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴³ Miller, “Introduction”, p. 22.

ization.”⁴⁴ With this term Lacan articulates the fact that *all quantity* of libido coming from the *id* is – without any remainder – successfully invested in the mirror image by means of which a child’s *ego* is constituted. As said, in Seminar X, Lacan radically modifies this conception, according to which there is no left-over in the projection of the libido into the image. To begin with, let us focus on the following passage from the beginning of Seminar X, where Lacan introduces two other registers into the mirror stage theory, that is, the symbolic and, as we shall see, the real as well.

Already, just in the exemplary little image with which the demonstration of the mirror stage begins, the moment that is said to be *joyful* when the child, grasping himself in the inaugural experience of recognition in the mirror, comes to terms with himself as a totality functioning as such in his specular image, haven’t I always insisted on the movement that the infant makes? This movement is so frequent, constant I’d say, that each and every one of you may have some recollection of it. Namely, he turns round, I noted, to the one supporting him who’s there behind him. If we force ourselves to assume the content of the infant’s experience and to reconstruct the sense of this movement, we shall say that, with this nutating movement of the head, which turns toward the adult as if to call upon his assent, and then back to the image, he seems to be asking the one supporting him, and who here represents the big Other, to ratify the value of this image.⁴⁵

Slightly different with respect to the point he makes in the “Mirror Stage” text, Lacan here immediately adds the symbolic dimension that is already present at the level of the primary identification with the specular image: the child recognises himself in the mirror image, yet he turns toward the Other, who supports him, seeking a “ratification,” that is, a symbolic gesture confirming the validity of the truth of the mirror image. However, this dynamics of imaginary recognition and of its symbolic confirmation by the big Other immediately opens up a third dimension, the real: what emerges in this intersubjective process of recognition as an irreducible stain is precisely the gaze as the surplus enjoyment, which derails the attempt at the full enclosure of the dynamics of imaginary recognition and its symbolic ratification. As Lacan adds later on: “Investment in

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⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, “Mirror Stage”, in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Co., London and New York 2006, p. 76.

⁴⁵ Lacan, *Seminar X*, p. 32.

the specular image is a fundamental phase of the imaginary relation. It's fundamental inasmuch as there's a limit. Not all of the libidinal investment passes by way of the specular image. There's a remainder.⁴⁶ What, then, is this remainder that does not pass the investment in the specular image? Briefly, it concerns in the first place the autoerotic enjoyment that is invested at the level of the body, and, more precisely, at the level of the erogenous zones of the body.⁴⁷

As we can observe, already at this initial level the object *a* starts acquiring its double role: on the one hand, the subject, in order to constitute itself as the subject of desire and of the signifier by alienating himself in the Other, he must lose a part of his own being embodied in such an autoerotic *jouissance*, while, on the other hand, this loss itself transforms the object *a* into the object-cause-of-desire – losing the object causes the metonymic sliding of desire. What the subject unconsciously relates to in the Other through the dialectics of desire is thus what he fantasmatically conceives to be the missing part of his own being. Traversing the limits of desire supported by unconscious fantasy thus implies entry into the space of *jouissance*, where the subject directly encounters the constitutively lost object around which the drive circulates.

Anxiety as “a signal of the real” thus emerges exactly at the moment when subject as the subject of desire is stuck and directly confronted with the object of *jouissance* as real. As Ruth Ronen puts it: “it is the insistence of the drive beyond the pleasure principle that causes anxiety, and this insistence will be reformulated by Lacan when referring to anxiety as a signal of the Real.”⁴⁸ It is not the loss of the object, but the subject's inseparateness from the object that causes anxiety, insofar as it prevents the subject from constituting itself as the subject of desire, which is always already the desire of the Other. That is why Lacan insists that anxiety emerges not when the object is lacking, but when it is lacking this lack itself. To illustrate this point, Lacan comes back again to Freud's case

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁷ “At this place of lack where something can appear, last time I put, in brackets, the sign (– φ) [a sign for imaginary castration]. This indicates for you that there emerges here a relationship with the libidinal reserve, namely, with that something that doesn't get projected, doesn't get invested in, at the level of the specular image, which is irreducible, for the reason that it remains profoundly invested at the level of one's body, the level of primary narcissism, of what is called autoerotism, an autistic *jouissance*.” (*Ibid.*, p. 45.)

⁴⁸ Ronen, *Aesthetics of Anxiety*, p. 91.

of *Fort-Da* play, the play in which the barely speaking child (Freud's grandson) plays with the reel (object *a* as a representation of the Mother *qua* object of desire), throwing it away (*Fort*) and dragging it back (*Da*), while mumbling *Fort-Da*: "What the child asks of his mother is designed to structure the presence/absence relation for him, as is demonstrated by the originary *Fort-Da* game which is a first exercise of mastery. A certain void is always to be preserved, which has nothing to do with the content, neither positive nor negative, of demand. The disruption wherein anxiety is evinced arises when this void is totally filled in."⁴⁹

The void at stake is precisely the void set up by castration, which separates the subject from the object of *jouissance*. As Lacan stresses in Seminar XI, in *Fort-Da* play the emphasis should not be put on the assumed mastery, as Freud does, but on the split of the subject: the subject establishes him- or herself as the subject of desire (which is by definition the desire of the "mOther," to use Ronen's expression again) precisely by getting rid of the constant presence of the object – the loss of the object transforms the latter into the cause-of-desire. Conversely, anxiety, as different from the feeling of fear, arises precisely when the gap of castration that separates him from the object of satisfaction is filled in by the object of *jouissance*, which should be constitutively lacking – again, this is why Lacan repeatedly states that "anxiety is not without object." More specifically, the object at stake is precisely the mother's breast, whose closeness disrupts the distance/separation that is necessary for the oscillation between the signifying dyad (*Fort-Da*) and the constitution of the subject of desire. Thus, what is anxious for the child is not his nostalgia for his mother's breasts, but, on the contrary, their radical closeness – the object is so close that the subject cannot really differentiate from it. This is indeed most evident in all those situations when the mother is putting constant and un-exhaustive pressure upon the child with her closeness:

Don't you know that it's not longing for the maternal breast that provokes anxiety, but its proximity? What provokes anxiety is everything that announces to us, that lets us glimpse, that we're going to be taken back onto the lap. It is not, contrary to what is said, the rhythm of the mother's alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and ab-

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Seminar X*, pp. 64–5.

sence. The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely the moment when the relationship upon which he's established himself, of the lack that turns him to desire, is disrupted, and this relationship is most disrupted when there's no possibility of any lack, when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially when she's wiping his backside. [...] Anxiety isn't about the loss of the object, but its presence. The objects aren't missing.⁵⁰

Importantly, as Lacan's own rereading of the "mirror stage" example suggests, the loss of the object that then returns back to the subject and causes anxiety already precedes the emergence of the Oedipus complex. According to both Miller and Ronen, this is why Lacan insists on articulating anxiety as a signal for something that is caused by a real separation of the organ of satisfaction and no longer by any agent of castration that operates in the castration anxiety that is framed by the Oedipus complex. Lacan's formulation "beyond castration anxiety"⁵¹ thus signifies the anxiety that precedes any involvement of a paternal metaphor, which already displaces anxiety into the net of the Oedipal drama and phobia as one of the outcomes of the repression of the Oedipus complex. As Miller claims: "the Oedipal drama is effaced if one takes seriously this term [castration anxiety] as principle, that is to say that the principle is at the level of the organ as such. This means: the principle of castration anxiety is not at the level of any agent of castration, of any Other uttering threats, it is not inscribed in the Oedipus."⁵²

Miller thus sums up the main achievements of Seminar X in the following manner: "The Seminar on *Anxiety* accomplishes at the same time the disjunction of the Oedipus and of castration, the generalization of castration as separation, and the loss of the phallus-signifier, at the same time that the function of the *objet petit a* begins to come to the fore."⁵³ It is on this terrain, which can be grasped as nothing other than the *topology of the body*, that Lacan puts forward a redefinition of the libido, since the latter here no longer fits the concept of desire but that of *jouissance* properly speaking, which in Seminar XI of the next year he explains by resorting to the famous myth of lamella. According to Miller, the myth of lamella "is a myth to give life to the libido conceived as an

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵² Miller, "Introduction," p. 50.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

organ. Lacan introduces it as the new paradigm of the lost object, a paradigm which will replace the role of the phallus in castration.”⁵⁴ As we have already mentioned, what is crucial here, in this “new paradigm of the lost object,” is the shift from the previous conception of libido in terms of desire to the conception of libido as an “irreal” organ of *jouissance*, which “is isolated by the effect of a natural loss, a loss in which there is no agent.”⁵⁵

However, although Miller in his reading stresses this shift and the invention of object *a* properly speaking – that is to say, the object *a* as a “*jouissance*-remainder,” as a “piece of body,” which, in its different forms, “give[s] body to *jouissance*”⁵⁶ and precedes “any agent of castration” – to such an extent that he speaks about Seminar X in the very Deleuzian terms of “anti-Oedipus,”⁵⁷ this is misleading to say the least. For instance, the disjunction between castration and the Oedipus complex does not at all imply that the drives at the pre-Oedipal level are not framed precisely by the phallus as the signifier of castration, whereby castration itself is conceived as the cut of the real, and should not be confused with the unary trait. Ironically enough, it is Miller’s insight from his other classical text “On Perversion” that clarifies this ambiguity. In fact, rather than opposing Oedipal drives to anti- or non-Oedipal drives, he argues that “the pre-Oedipal drive is not pre-linguistic or raw,” which is to say that “what Lacan called Other is already there in the drive.”⁵⁸ How, then, can the drive be regarded at the same time as pre-Oedipal, yet not unshaped by the Other? The answer to this fundamental question comes from Lacan’s rather peculiar articulation of the Other: the latter is not just merely the order of signifying differences but also includes an “*ontological negativity*”⁵⁹ as its own (negative) cause. In fact, in order for something like *jouissance* to emerge as essentially different from pleasure – *jouissance* is by definition “beyond the pleasure principle” – and to which anxiety is attached as an affect/signal, a specific ontology is required, as Alenka Zupančič boldly argued, ontology that includes the negativity (the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller, “On Perversion”, in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, ed. R. Feldstein, B. Fink, and M. Jaanus, State University of New York Press, New York 1996, p. 315.

⁵⁹ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 16.

real), whereby the latter should be grasped as a cut of the real and is as such the cause of the traumatic status of *jouissance*. It is the structure of the unconscious, which includes such ontological negativity, that I will try to briefly unpack in my final, concluding, section.

Toward a Materialist Metapsychology: Anxiety, Ontological Negativity, Cause, and the Real

For Lacan, the unconscious, rather than referring simply to the repressed unconscious content, is instead structured around what he calls a “pre-ontological” gap or negativity, which, as he puts it, “does not lend itself to ontology,” precisely because it refers to the point where knowledge and being fail to mutually correspond. As he puts it in a famous passage in his Seminar XI:

The gap of the unconscious may be said to be *pre-ontological*. I have stressed all too often forgotten characteristics – forgotten in a way that is not without significance – of the first emergence of the unconscious, namely, that it does not lend itself to ontology. Indeed, what became at first apparent to Freud, to the discoverers, to those who made the first steps, and what still becomes apparent to anyone in analysis who spends some time observing what truly belongs to the order of the unconscious, is that it is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized.⁶⁰

What I suggested calling the *third dimension of being* at the beginning of this article refers precisely to what Lacan points to here with the expression “the unrealized”: this expression points to the peculiar status of the above-mentioned gap of the unconscious, which is conceived not simply as non-being, as he stresses, but should instead be regarded as “ontological negativity”, which amounts to the cause or, more precisely, the negative cause due to which the existing reality is essentially structured as pathological.

In order to properly grasp this point of “ontological negativity” it is necessary to further focus on Seminar XI, where Lacan elaborates the Freudian hypothesis of so-called primal repression (*Urverdrängung*). Therein, at the point of explaining the “necessary fall of one signifier” for the emergence of the symbolic order of language, Lacan defines the elements in this operation in the following manner:

⁶⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, pp. 29–30.

“There is, then, one might say, a matter of life and death between the unary signifier [S1] and the subject [\$], *qua* binary signifier, cause of his disappearance. The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* [ideational representative] is the binary signifier. This signifier constitutes the central point of *Urverdrängung*.”⁶¹ In this passage, Lacan makes it clear that the symbolic order of language constitutes itself as such and starts running according to the “logic of the signifier” only when one signifier – Lacan calls it “binary” – is repressed. This primally repressed signifier is the real as the place of the emergence of the subject itself, which can be read, here, simply as the barred signifier. Furthermore, the primally repressed signifier amounts to what Lacan in the essay “Science and Truth” (but also on many other occasions) conceives as the “material cause,” which suggests that the primal repression of the first signifier is formative for the structure of language as such. In short: it is primal repression that structures the language according to the “logic of the signifier” so that the unary signifier that is the point of the subject’s unconscious symbolic identity represents the subject for all other signifiers. If there were no primal repression, no barred signifier, then there would also be no subject to be represented by one signifier for other signifiers. To make this point clear enough, it is worth citing a longer passage from Zupančič’s recent book *What Is Sex?*:

the human (hi)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with *one signifier “gone missing.”* We could indeed say that nature is already full of signifiers (and at the same time indifferent to them); and that at some point one signifier “falls out,” goes missing. And it is only from this that the “logic of the signifier” in the strict sense of the term is born (signifiers start to “run,” and to relate to each other, across this gap). In this sense, and from this perspective, speech itself is already a response to the missing signifier, which is *not* (there). Speech is not simply “composed of signifiers,” signifiers are not the (sufficient) condition of speech, the condition of speech as we know it is “one-signifier-less.” Humans are beings roused from indifference and forced to speak (as well as to enjoy, since enjoyment appears at the place of this deficit) by one signifier gone missing. This temporal way of putting it (“gone missing”) is an expression of what would be better formulated as the signifying structure emerging not simply without one

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⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

signifier, but rather *with-without* one signifier – since this “hole” has consequences, and determines what gets structured around it.⁶²

The fact that the “hole” produced by one signifier “gone missing” has consequences and “determines what gets structured around it” implies that the ontological negativity or deficit at stake amounts not simply to the “conditions of possibility,” but to the “material cause.” As Lacan stresses in his “Science and Truth”, the psychoanalytic conception of the “cause” substantially differs from the scientific one insofar as it is “not the cause as logical category, but as causing [*causant*] the whole effect”; it is the “truth as cause.”⁶³ Specifically, as we have already hinted, the primary outcome of the so-conceived “material cause” is that the signifying order starts running across the gap of the ontological negativity following the “logic of the signifier,” producing further effects of metaphor and metonymy. “[T]he signifier represents the subject for another signifier,” here means that the (unary) signifier functions as a metaphor for the subject (it replaces the subject or starts representing him or her), while because it represents the subject for all other signifiers it makes the subject (as repressed) metonymically contained in the signifying chain and in the fantasy as well – the object *a* in fantasy is but the metonymy or the desire of the subject as the lack of first signifier.⁶⁴

Importantly, Freud, in his own articulation of primal repression, does not fail to make it clear enough that the point of the repression of the first signifier is also the point that *fixes* the drive:

We have reason to assume that there is a primal repression, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the drive [*die psychische (Vorstellungs-) Repräsentanz des Tribes*] being denied entrance into the conscious. With this a *fixation* is established; the representative in question persists unaltered from then onwards and the drive remains attached to it.⁶⁵

⁶² Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, p. 47.

⁶³ Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth”, in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Co., London and New York 2006, p. 738.

⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Against the Politics of Jouissance”, available at: <https://www.lacan.com/zizliberal.htm> (accessed: 16 September 2019).

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Repression”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, Vintage, London 2001, p. 148; translation modified.

In this passage, the greatest attention needs to be paid to this crucial formulation in Freud's psychoanalysis: unlike the standard understanding, Freud here clearly says that what is repressed is not the drive itself, but rather its "(ideational) representative [(*Vorstellungs-*) *Repräsentanz*]" or signifier. In this sense, primal repression by no means directly concerns the drive, but rather its representative or signifier as the "subject's marker of this representation."⁶⁶ Furthermore, the real character of primal repression consists in the fact that this primal repressed representative is not at all something that would first be conscious and then repressed only afterwards. Rather, as Zupančič has already stressed several times, this representative appears already for the first time as repressed. The primal repression thus also causes the emergence of the object *a* as a materialisation of the negativity (real/void) in the form of the surplus enjoyment. In short, at the place of the ontological deficit or the absence of full satisfaction there emerges the surplus enjoyment, the surplus *jouissance* in the form of object *a* as the object which is produced by the circulation of drives.

Moving from these premises, the singularity of the topology of the unconscious as articulated by Lacan soon becomes clear. This topology, in fact, revolves around the hole of primal repression (the primary repressed signifier) resulting in a twofold structure: on the one hand, the subject as that which one signifier represents for another signifier, while, on the other hand, the drive as the "headless subject" which circulates around the very same hole. Lacan does not fail to make this clear:

This articulation leads us to make of the manifestation of the drive the mode of a headless subject, for everything is articulated in it in terms of tension, and has no relation to the subject other than one of common topology. I have been able to articulate the unconscious for you as being situated in the gaps that the distribution of the signifying investments sets up in the subject, and which figure in the algorithm in the form of a lozenge [◊], which I place at the centre of any relation of the unconscious between reality and the subject. Well! It is in so far as something in the apparatus of the body is structured in the same way, it is because of the top-

⁶⁶ Alenka Zupančič, On Repetition, *Sats – Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1/2007), p. 39.

ological unity of the gaps in play, that the drive assumes its role in the functioning of the unconscious.⁶⁷

The “common topology” shared by the subject and the drive (as the “headless subject,” which is to say, the not-yet-subjectivised subject) already implies the presence of the Other in the drive: since the Other actually includes the hole of the primally repressed as its own cause, this implies the very “contamination” of the erogenous zones of the body (anatomical holes) with the phallus and castration from the very beginning. This means that the primal repression causes the emergence of the phallic signifier which (symbolically) marks these zones as a support of *jouissance* – by way of the male sexual organ lacking in the image of woman⁶⁸ – and the phallic object as object *a*. This is the main reason why the drive in psychoanalytic theory cannot be considered to be something “raw” but rather to be something always already “cooked,” as Miller has put it: the drive is shaped by the Other, which includes the negativity, from the very beginning, that is, from the moment the child speaks his or her first words. The Oedipus complex, in turn, appears to be only secondary with respect to this fundamental hole of the primal repressed signifier, secondary in the precise sense of being fundamentally a reaction to or consequence of this originary disposition.

Importantly, here we are in a position to properly grasp the complexity of the “displacement” of affects advocated by Lacan. In fact, as Adrian Johnston has rightly pointed out, in parallel with Freud’s twofold repression process, which consists of primal repression and everyday ordinary second stage repression proper or “after-repression,” whereby the latter hits the signifiers that are by association connected with primal repression, at the level of affects we are also dealing with “two senses of displacement”: “first, the shuttling of an affect from one signifier-like ideational representation to another (a displacement of affect corresponding to secondary or proper repression); and second, the split between an affect and its nonrepresentative ‘representations’ introduced with the origi-

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 181; translation modified.

⁶⁸ As Lacan puts it: “It is thus that the erectile organ – not as itself, or even as an image, but as a part that is missing in the desired image – comes to symbolise the place of *jouissance*.” (Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious”, in *Écrits*, p. 697. On this, see also Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*, Verso, London and New York 2015, the chapter entitled “The Organ and the Animal”.

nary advent of the mediation of signifiers (this mediation amounts to a primal repression of affects through irreversibly displacing them into the foreign territories of symbolic orders).⁶⁹ However, although at first glance this might imply a neat separation between the primal repressed signifier and affects in general, Johnston himself further stresses that such a neat separation is questionable to say the least. In fact, while the displacement at stake, on the one hand, transforms affects in emotions or *senti-ments* (feelings-lies) as something essentially deceptive,⁷⁰ this, on the other hand, does not lead to a conclusion about the neat separation between signifiers and affects, and, I would add, far less between the primal repressed signifier and anxiety. Namely, if there is something like *lalangue*, that is, an enjoyment of blah-blah as the “other satisfaction” which emerges in the very place of the absence of the sexual relationship,⁷¹ this then immediately implies “libidinally charged orifices of the mouth (when [nonsensical sound is] vocalized) or the ears (when heard).”⁷² Due to nonsensical sound (the voice as different from speech) traversing the symbolic order of signifiers, the latter are libidinally charged in the same way, or, better yet, with the same gesture as the anatomical orifices of the body – there is, for Lacan, a “common topology” of body and language as far as subject *qua* speaking being is concerned. There are at least two highly important implications deriving directly from this observation, both of which concern the relation between anxiety and primal repression: first, if there is something like the enjoyment of language, which Lacan advances especially from Seminar XVII onwards, this, as in the case of enjoyment as such, implies the existence of the abovementioned ontological structure, which ultimately causes something like *jouissance* as different from pleasure; and second, if anxiety is relieved by phobia, which displaces the affect in the territory of the symbolic network, whereby this network itself runs across the gap of primal repression or “one-signifier-less,” as Zupančič puts it, then anxiety emerges precisely in the passage between two dimensions, that is, in the curved space between the traumatic *jouissance* we feel and signifying expression as a form of displacement into external mediation (language), which already implies domes-

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⁶⁹ Johnston, “From Signifiers to *Jouis-Sens*”, p. 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Co., London and New York 1998, especially pp. 51–63. For the overarching assessment of variations of *jouissance* in Seminar XX, see Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016, Chapter 1, pp. 1–21.

⁷² Johnston, “From Signifiers to *Jouis-Sens*”, p. 142.

tication and thereby the distortion of anxiety (its transformation/distortion into fear as a “known danger,” as Freud puts it). In short, anxiety is not displaced into signifiers as other emotions; instead, it is displaced to the object *a qua* the object of the surplus *jouissance*, which is at the same time the effect of primal repression, since the *jouissance* emerges in the very place of the primal repression as the surplus/excess, and also as the inner “otherness” in language itself.

We can now slowly start moving toward the conclusion, by making it explicit why the affect of anxiety emerges at the moment of the subject’s encounter with the object of *jouissance*. Anxiety as a signal of the real emerges not simply due to the encounter with the surplus enjoyment in the form of the object of *jouissance*, but because the object of *jouissance qua* object *a* is actually nothing but the materialisation of the ontological negativity set up by the primally repressed signifier. It is because of this ontological disposition that there can be something like the surplus of satisfaction, which affects the subject with a traumatic experience. In other words, it is because of this ontological negativity, of this not nothing, but “less than nothing,” as Žižek would put it, that the encounter with the object may appear traumatic or uncanny and may cause anxiety.

Ultimately, this is the true materialist dimension of anxiety as “a signal of the real”: by emerging at the point of the subject’s encounter with the traumatic *jouissance*, anxiety literally signals the ex-istence of the real as the cause, which implies that if the structure of the unconscious did not entail the negativity *qua* cause as an integral part of itself, that is, as the immanent negative cause, rather than an external condition of possibility, there would be only fear, not anxiety. However, this, in turn, also means that without the affect of anxiety as a material signal of this very same ontological negativity (the real) the latter would remain only a speculative-abstract hypothesis. Anxiety can thus be regarded as an affective correlate and support for such an ontological negativity conceived as cause. And, if, according to Lacan, psychoanalysis, unlike science, which deals with formal causes and scientific laws, deals with the “material cause,”⁷³ and if anxiety as a signal is related to this very same material cause, it can also be regarded as a truly *material(ist) affect*.

⁷³ Lacan, “Science and Truth”, p. 743.

Importantly, on this point we should not confound anxiety as the cause of symptom-formation with ontological negativity as the material cause. Namely, as Ronen suggested, “anxiety is thought of as the *cause of the symptom*, while the symptom itself is formed in order to relieve anxiety,”⁷⁴ whereby in relation to negativity as the material cause, anxiety should be regarded as its *affective correlate or support*. In other words, negativity is the cause of the emergence of the traumatic surplus enjoyment, while anxiety, insofar as it emerges in the moment of the subject’s encounter with such a traumatic enjoyment, functions as a signal of the subject’s encounter with *jouissance* as well as the cause of the subject’s separation from *jouissance*, which then results in his or her entry into the dialectics of desire and symptom-formation. In this respect, anxiety is an affective product of negativity in the form of a signal, and moreover a two-sided signal, which can signal both the approaching encounter with the real and as well the moment of the actualisation of this very same encounter. As such, anxiety is thus first of all a signal of the ex-istence of the ontological negativity, which only makes the subject’s encounter with the real something traumatic (and not simply frustrating, painful, etc.). If, according to Miller, the point of psychoanalysis is the “deduction” of the (death) drive as the embodiment of the ontological negativity (the real as that which insists in the signifying chain) by means of an analytic interpretation of the subject’s symptoms, then it is clear why Lacan assigned to anxiety the role of “a crucial term of reference”: anxiety is the sole signal or material affect⁷⁵ that does not deceive as to the success of this deduction insofar as it signals/proves not simply the grammatical structure on which the drives run, but also the ex-istence of the epiphenomenal or meta-psychological dimension of the drive, that is, the ontological negativity, which causes the drive to take the shape of grammatical linguistic oppositions, as well as its traumatic status. In this respect, anxiety as a subjective affect also has a distinctively objective status in psychoanalysis.

⁷⁴ Ronen, *Aesthetics of Anxiety*, p. 79.

⁷⁵ To be sure, one should also consider in this respect anxiety’s “sister” affect: the shame. However, as mentioned above, Joan Copjec’s brilliant discussion of the relation between anxiety and shame needs a separate account, which goes beyond the scope of this contribution.

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