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# Anxious and Precarious: Entanglements of Affect and Labour in Contemporary Culture

**Michiel Rys and Ali Shobeiri**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has made it palpable, anxieties can turn into pervasive affects with detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of the individual. To be anxious is to be on edge, not only psychologically, but also ontologically and existentially; or to use Heidegger's terms, it is to be in a state of "groundless floating".<sup>1</sup> Ranging from general anxiety, PTSD, OCD, and phobias to the simple sentiment of being out of sort, anxieties operate as harbingers of imminent disruptions. Often linked with the concept of "disorder", anxieties are mostly mentioned in a context that frames personal and socio-economic behavioural patterns in terms of pathology, normality, and abnormality, which implicitly refer to normative views of what constitutes a fulfilled, 'good' life. It is no coincidence that anxiety, as a heightened state of insecurity and being-alarmed, has been on the rise because of the radical transformations of the welfare state and the liberalisation (i.e., deregulation) of the labour market. These macro-economic factors have eroded former assurances and made normative fantasies of the 'good life', centred around notions of upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, increasingly unattainable. Lauren Berlant famously called "the emergence of a precarious public sphere" in which "optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy", while under pressure, are still the object of our strife, a state of "cruel optimism."<sup>2</sup> While anxiety seems to be omnipresent, it also runs counter to what has been described as the official happiness agenda, i.e., the ensemble of practices and instruments to measure and foster our sense of contentment, which together form what William Davies has so aptly called the "happiness industry."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in the neoliberal age happiness has been redefined as an enterprise, a state of being that the individual subject can control as part of a broader project of self-optimisation in function of the economy. In the words of Sam Binkley, (neo-)liberal happiness is "what one feels when one has acted on one's own, in one's own interest, at some risk and according to some calculus of probability – and succeeded. In short, there is no happiness, in the strict sense,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

without risk.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, negative feelings – including depression and anxiety – are pathologized and disavowed as personal failures to shape your own happiness. In reaction, critics like Lynne Segal (*Radical Happiness*) have insisted that we need to abandon the individualistic, success-based notion of happiness. According to Segal, negative modes of being like depression, misery and anxiety and how these are reflected in alternative cultural traditions, past and present, can expand our horizon and make us more aware of other forms of positivity beyond the experience of success, for they render us “more sensitive to the pain of others.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, anxiety is intrinsically related to the narratives that shape our understanding of why a vision of the ‘good life’ is at risk, as it is often induced by the actual risk or the imagined threat of losing a (relatively) stable status. It is against this background that Guy Standing, for instance, sees anxiety as fundamental to the precariat’s affective state of being, while public intellectuals and writers like Ilija Trojanow identify continuous *Angst* as a dominant affect in present-day economies marked by a (the threat of) social regression.<sup>6</sup> Anxiety is no longer an individual affect but a collective state of being and, therefore, a social phenomenon.

As Rudi Laermans has recently pointed out, anxiety caused by a sense of insecurity is now inherently part of our common life.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, sensations of fear and anxiety cuts across different aspects of our social reality and are intrinsically related to how we deal with our precariousness – understood in the ontological sense as intrinsic vulnerability<sup>8</sup> – and, more generally, with contingency. As Laermans convincingly argues with a variety of examples (ranging from anxiety for viruses, climate change and terror to loss of social status, fear of failure, fear of commitment etc.), our inability to accept that it is impossible to control every aspect of life, generates anxious feelings. In that regard, the notion that global economic, climate, health and other crises happen beyond our control, only feeds into anxious feelings. These anxieties about real and imagined threats are further stirred (and instrumentalised) by populists, mainstream and social media. The articles collected in this issue reflect on this “polymorphous” existence of anxiety, which constantly oscillates between the psychological and the physiological, the private and the social, the real and the imagined, thus allowing it to become simultaneously an affect, sign, idea, or symptom.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to its entanglement with labour and affect, anxiety has been a driving force for a myriad thinkers, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Sartre, Camus, and Dostoevsky, for whom anxiety would be a kind of “neuroexistentialist” mode of being.<sup>10</sup> While

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Binkley, *Happiness as Enterprise: An Essay on Neoliberal Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2015), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), p. xi.

<sup>6</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury 2011), pp. 33-41. Ilija Trojanow, *Der überflüssige Mensch: Unruhe bewahren* (München: dtv, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Rudi Laermans, *Gedeelde angsten: Kleine sociologie van de maatschappelijke onzekerheid* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) and Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Bettina Bergo, *Anxiety: A Philosophical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Gregg D. Caruso and Owen J. Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

for Kierkegaard anxiety was the first existential instance of affective intensity,<sup>11</sup> which could both corporeally and pre-reflectively impact the self, Nietzsche radicalized this move by putting anxiety at the kernel of his concept of the decisive moment (*Augenblick*) of joyous affirmation.<sup>12</sup> Freud, too, pivoted his theories of trauma and repression on anxiety, for it could hover between the body and the mind, between the palpable and the elusive, thus propelling the interplay of libido and death. Next to existentialism and psychology, anxiety has also become an integral thread in recent phenomenological approaches to a life worth living.<sup>13</sup> For them, anxiety functions as the quasi-intentional imaginative anticipation<sup>14</sup>: a sui generis mode of psychopathological existence.

Due to the entanglement of economic developments and affective ecologies, anxiety has become a recurrent theme in theoretical descriptions as well as in cultural representations of precarious work. It is no coincidence that recent volumes on representations of precarity highlight anxiety as a widespread and powerful cultural trope. In *Literary Representations of Precarious Work*, anxiety is one of the “ugly feelings”<sup>15</sup> running through the case studies, from Swedish coming-to-age novels to British experimental zines of young academics. In *The Idle Feel* (2020), Mathies G. Aarhus identifies anxiety as one of the characteristic affects of class in contemporary novels about unemployment in a post-Thatcherite society.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen understand anxiety as one of the key feelings mediated in contemporary fiction. Anxiety is an effect of a neoliberal economy, in which the individual subject is expected to take risks, which necessarily comes with the possibility of failure and the subsequent fear thereof.<sup>17</sup> Exactly because labour is one of the main instruments to realize visions of a good, fulfilled life, representations of themes like risk, unemployment, social regression, precarization, poverty, and so on, are particularly well-suited to explore the affective ecologies of the present.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the kaleidoscopic manifestations of anxiety in history and its pertinence to our present time, the collection of articles in this issue asks the questions: How do literature and visual culture position anxiety in relation to work and affect? How can anxiety unfold or occlude a specific discourse of precarity? In which way can texts and images become the conduit of mitigating or exacerbating anxiety? What types and figures of anxiety are mediated and with what narratives, rhetoric, and metaphorical means? What forms of (waning) agency and solidarity are connected with the imaginary of anxiety? To what extent can new media technologies conduce, repress, or even transfigure everyday anxieties?

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<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York and London: Liveright Publishing, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Dylan Trigg, *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Stefano Micali, *Phenomenology of Anxiety* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Mathies G. Aarhus, *The Idle Feel: Unemployment and the Affects of Class in Contemporary Culture* (Odense: PhD, University of Southern Denmark, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen (eds.), *Precarity in Contemporary Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). In particular the chapters in the first part on ‘feeling’ are of interest, by Liam Connell (‘Anxious Reading: The Precarity Novel and the Affective Class’) and Mathies G. Aarhus (‘Anxiety in the Precariat: The Affects of Class in James Kelman’s Fiction’).

<sup>18</sup> See Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds.), *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014) and Michiel Rys and Bart Philipsen (eds.), *Literary Representations of Precarious Work, 1840 to the Present* (Cham: Palgrave, 2021).

In the opening article to this issue, Sarah De Mul searches for ways to further nuance Mark Fisher's observation that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. She argues that current scholarship of the contemporary culture of overwork, stress and burnout could benefit from notions of care in recent feminist theory and literature. Against this background, De Mul reads Kikuko Tsumura's *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* (2015) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) – two examples of the 'burnout novel' – for more caring worlds beyond a society driven by profit and success.

Daniel López shows how contemporary workplace novels convey strong critiques of neoliberalism by exposing the alienating effects of flexible works. The work of Kathrin Röggla (*wir schlafen nicht*, 2004) and Isaac Rosa (*La habitación oscura*, 2013) illustrate how the trope of the uncanny actualises a longstanding Marxian tradition to articulate different ways in which precarious labour conditions impact our psychological and physical wellbeing as well as our ability to form interpersonal connections in and outside of the workplace.

In her analysis of Olga Ravn's *The Employees: A Workplace Novel for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century* (2018), Marta Lopes Santos demonstrates how in this futuristic novel, objects salvaged from an alien planet are endowed with affective powers over both human and humanoid protagonists. Herein, Santos argues, lies their critical potential: the uncontrollable desires these objects evoke confront characters with their own alienation and the impossibility of their fantasies of a good, fulfilled life. In doing so, the novel, set in the future, offers a critique of late-capitalist labour conditions.

Ali Shobeiri's article delves into the aesthetic operations and ethical implications of representing emptiness as a surrogate for anxiety within the photographic genre of late photography. By discussing *The Great Empty*, a photographic essay published by *The New York Times* in March 2020, he puts forward that this essay juxtaposes landscape images with sombre captions in order to articulate anxiety as a mode of "gesturality": a sui generis communicational mode that simultaneously galvanizes and paralyzes the viewer.

Temenuga Trifonova's and Wim Peeters' articles engage with the representation of precarity and anxiety in contemporary film. Both investigate how recent films appropriate and reconfigure existing traditions, in an attempt to create a new formal language to visualise the affective-precarious condition. Trifonova identifies several dominant narrative motifs in French films made between the 1980s and 2020s that take precarity and precarization as their subject. She draws attention to an important shift in attitudes to work and class struggle, a shift indicative of the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism. Peeters' article complements this approach; he demonstrates that this shift is not only captured in French but also in Belgian, British and German cinema. Films like Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *La Promesse* (1997), Ken Loach's *It's a Free World* (2007), Christian Petzold's *Jerichow* (2008) and Ulrich Seidl's *Import Export* (2007) not only show the different degrees and guises of precarious lives, they also capture how living in insecurity and anxiety entails difficult ethical dilemmas related to the use of violence, the responsibility and care towards others.

In the closing article to this issue, Maria Menzel reads Nathan Fielder's docu-comedy *The Rehearsal* (2022) against the backdrop of theories of emotional labour. Fielder's series offers a critique of the pressure to perform authentically in a professional setting, which can cause anxiety in employees. Indeed, the increasingly vague boundaries between public and private, professional and intimate spheres are characteristic working conditions in

neoliberalism. Alienation effects are, Menzel argues, a possible stir a critical awareness among spectators.

By bringing together diverse perspectives and methodologies from visual and literary studies, this issue thus explores the polyphonic representations of anxiety and precarity in contemporary cultures, aspiring to show how such instances educe the entanglement of affect and labour across various platforms of living.