

Post-digital Angst
Reflective documentation

Part of the thesis project "Post-digital Angst – An Arts-Based Research on the Manifestations
of Angst in the Digital Milieu"

Submitted by Mong Sum Joseph, LEUNG

PhD Programme Artistic Research (PhD in Art)
University of Applied Arts Vienna

Supervisor: Prof. Gabriele ROTHEMANN

Examination committee members:

Prof. Gabriele ROTHEMANN

Mr. Chi-Wo LEUNG

Prof. Günther SELICHAR

Dr. Harald KRAMER

Prof. Miya YOSHIDA

Vienna, 10/2025

Name: Mong Sum Joseph, Leung

Thesis title: Post-digital Angst – An Arts-Based Research on the Manifestations of Angst in the Digital Milieu

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For *Annie*, my mother –
who has given me life, again and again.

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Abstract

English version

The thesis investigates the phenomenon of Post-digital Angst through an aesthetic, ethnographic and philosophical inquiry. It asks: *How is Angst manifesting across the Digital Milieu*, and *what form(s) does it take?* Drawing upon existential philosophy, psychoanalysis and cultural theory, it examines how Angst as an ‘affect’ manifests in the Digital Milieu – not only as a pathological distress, but more importantly, as an existential, relational, and epistemological potential that reveals the vital dimensions of our lives.

As an ‘arts-based research’, the thesis approaches Post-digital Angst not only as a theoretical concept, but also as a condition to be embodied and explored through artistic practice. Supported by ethnographic and philosophical methods, the project produces both *aesthetic* and *conceptual* responses. It culminates in a body of ‘research-creation’ that does not merely represent Angst, but also speculates and reflects on its affective and epistemological complexity.

The thesis is structured across three analytical dimensions – (1) the *personal and existential*, (2) the *social and intersubjective*, and (3) the *political and epistemological*, all of which explores how Angst emerges as both a lived experience and a critical force that engages with our lives in the Digital Milieu.

Chapter one, ‘*Direct Angst*’ takes on an existential and psychoanalytical approach in analyzing one’s anxious encounters with digital information – particularly moments of ‘information overload’, ‘latency’, and ‘recurrence’. These experiences are understood as *phenomenological ruptures* that momentarily disrupt our immersion in digital content and expose the subject to deeper existential tensions that remain relevant regardless of age.

Chapter two, the ‘*Dynamics of Angst*’ shifts from the ‘personal’ to the ‘interpersonal’, examining Angst as an affect with an ‘intersubjective’ origin. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy, the chapter investigates how networked technologies compress interpersonal space and intensify a sense of ‘Post-digital Proximity’ – a condition that is both *relational* and *corporeal*, closely related with other social affects such as Shame and Hostility. Subsequently, Angst is theorized as a socially operative ‘force’ that circulates through the Digital Milieu, catalyzing forms of ‘Post-digital Violence’. It is in this regard that the chapter calls for the development of an ‘ethics’ responsive to the intensities of hyperconnectivity.

The final chapter, the ‘*Dispositif of Angst*’ explores Angst as a ‘Apparatus’ in the Foucauldian sense – a strategic configuration of power that governs attention and shapes subjectivities. Here, Angst is reconceptualized as a form of socio-political Anxiety – an affective device capable of filtering perception and producing knowledge. While the ‘Dispositif of Anxiety’ is critiqued for its disciplinary and manipulative function, the chapter

also reclaims it as an emancipatory ‘power’. Through the cultivation of ‘conscious Anxiety’ – an ethically mobilized form of vigilance – the chapter proposes that ‘Angst’ could in fact, be transformed into ‘Achtung’ (alertness), an affective attentiveness that could interrupt apathy and reactivate ethical engagement.

Through the interplay of theory and artistic practice, the project not only analyzes the experience of Post-digital Angst but also gives form to it – harnessing research-creation as a mode of inquiry that reveals its affective and epistemological potential. Ultimately, the thesis contends that our experience of Post-digital Angst must not be understood as a byproduct of technology, but rather a dynamic affect – at times *disruptive*, at others *revelatory*. While it could weigh on us as an affective burden, it could also serve as an ethical compass, guiding us toward critical reflection and ethical responsiveness to the ever-changing conditions of the Digital Milieu.

German version:

Die Dissertation untersucht das Phänomen der Post-digitalen Angst durch eine ästhetische, ethnografische und philosophische Untersuchung. Sie stellt die Frage: Wie manifestiert sich Angst im digitalen Milieu – und welche Form(en) nimmt sie an? Aufbauend auf existenzieller Philosophie, Psychoanalyse und Kulturtheorie wird analysiert, wie sich Angst als „Affekt“ im digitalen Milieu zeigt – nicht nur als pathologisches Leiden, sondern vor allem als existenzielles, relationales und epistemologisches Potenzial, das wesentliche Dimensionen unseres Lebens offenlegt.

Als künstlerisch-forschende Arbeit (arts-based research) begreift die Dissertation Post-digitale Angst nicht nur als theoretisches Konzept, sondern als Zustand, der durch künstlerische Praxis verkörpert und erforscht werden kann. Gestützt durch ethnografische und philosophische Methoden entwickelt das Projekt sowohl ästhetische als auch konzeptuelle Antworten. Es kulminiert in einem Korpus von Research-Creation, das Angst nicht lediglich darstellt, sondern sie spekulativ befragt und ihre affektive sowie erkenntnistheoretische Komplexität reflektiert.

Die Arbeit ist entlang von drei analytischen Dimensionen strukturiert – (1) der persönlichen und existenziellen, (2) der sozialen und intersubjektiven sowie (3) der politischen und epistemologischen – und untersucht, wie Angst sowohl als gelebte Erfahrung als auch als kritische Kraft im digitalen Milieu wirksam wird.

Kapitel eins, Direct Angst, verfolgt einen existenziellen und psychoanalytischen Zugang zur Analyse von Angst-Erfahrungen im Umgang mit digitalen Informationen – insbesondere in Momenten von „Informationsüberflutung“, „Latenz“ und „Wiederholung“. Solche Erfahrungen werden als phänomenologische Brüche verstanden, die die Immersion in digitale Inhalte unterbrechen und das Subjekt mit tieferliegenden existenziellen Spannungen konfrontieren, die generationenübergreifend relevant bleiben.

Kapitel zwei, The Dynamics of Angst, verschiebt die Perspektive vom „Persönlichen“ zum „Zwischenmenschlichen“ und untersucht Angst als einen Affekt mit intersubjektivem Ursprung. In Anlehnung an Emmanuel Levinas’ ethische Philosophie wird dargestellt, wie vernetzte Technologien den zwischenmenschlichen Raum verdichten und ein Gefühl der

Post-digitalen Nähe intensivieren – ein Zustand, der sowohl relational als auch körperlich ist und eng mit anderen sozialen Affekten wie Scham und Feindseligkeit verknüpft ist. In diesem relationalen Kontext wird Angst als sozial wirksame Kraft begriffen, die durch das digitale Milieu zirkuliert und Formen post-digitaler Gewalt auslösen kann. Daraus ergibt sich die Notwendigkeit, eine Ethik zu entwickeln, die auf die Intensitäten digitaler Hypervernetzung reagiert.

Das abschließende Kapitel, *The Dispositif of Angst*, untersucht Angst als ein Dispositiv im foucaultschen Sinne – eine strategische Konfiguration von Macht, die Aufmerksamkeit lenkt und Subjektivität formt. Hier wird Angst als Form sozial-politischer Anxiety rekonzeptualisiert – ein affektives Instrument, das Wahrnehmung filtert und Wissen produziert. Während das Dispositif der Angst für seine disziplinierenden und manipulativen Funktionen kritisiert wird, wird es zugleich als emanzipatorische Kraft zurückgewonnen. Über die Praxis einer bewussten Angst – einer ethisch mobilisierten Form der Wachsamkeit – wird vorgeschlagen, dass Angst in Achtung transformiert werden kann: eine affektive Aufmerksamkeit, die Apathie unterbricht und ethisches Engagement im digitalen Zeitalter reaktiviert.

Im Zusammenspiel von Theorie und künstlerischer Praxis analysiert das Projekt nicht nur die Erfahrung der Post-digitalen Angst, sondern verleiht ihr auch Form – und nutzt Research-Creation als Erkenntnismodus, der ihr affektives und epistemologisches Potenzial sichtbar macht. Letztlich argumentiert die Arbeit, dass Post-digitale Angst nicht als bloßes Nebenprodukt der Technologie verstanden werden darf, sondern als dynamischer Affekt – mal störend, mal aufschlussreich. Sie kann als affektive Last empfunden werden, zugleich aber auch als ethischer Kompass dienen, der uns zu kritischer Reflexion und ethischer Responsivität gegenüber den sich ständig verändernden Bedingungen des digitalen Milieus führt.

(The German translation of the abstract was generated using OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-4) and was subsequently reviewed and edited by the author for accuracy and clarity.)

Project Introduction and Research Context

“The form of anxiety has changed, but the experience remains relatively the same”. (May, 1977, p. xv)

In the “The Meaning of Anxiety”, existential psychologist Rollo May (1977, p. IX) suggested how if one ventures deep into the nature of our modern lives, across politics to cultures, we will “athwart the problem of anxiety at almost every turn”. May’s interpretation of Anxiety was first published in the 1950s, a time when the Internet was still at its infancy, yet his vista remains pertinent 70 years later, when digital technology has flourished, and people’s lives are ever-more *networked*. Despite the rapid technological advancement, Anxiety remains an issue, if not *the* issue confronted by many, and we have remained bounded by this “riddle of Anxiety”. (Ibid. p. XV)

While the *anxious core* of our contemporary lives has persisted, the *manifestations* of Anxiety have indeed varied and multiplied along with the development of the Digital Milieu. The aim of this research is therefore to survey these changing *form(s)* of Anxiety (or *Angst* and *Anguish*, within the lexicon as set down in this research, for reason that shall be further explained below) and the central queries that drives this research are thus – “*How is ‘Angst’ manifesting across the Digital Milieu? and What form(s) does it take?*” It is through these questions that the research aims to examine the multitudes of ‘Angst’, ‘Anguish’ and ‘Anxiety’ in the Post-digital context.

Here we shall first illustrate the two key concepts that underpin this research, namely (1) ‘Angst’ and (2) the ‘Digital Milieu’. It is worth noting that these illustrations are formulated with an intentional generality, as they serve only as initial compasses, and not delimitations for the research. Such formulations shall therefore leave adequate room for the research to expand along with new findings and outcomes in its upcoming course.

Keywords

Angst

While the English word ‘Anxiety’ has been commonly applied in different contexts, it is the intent of this research to adopt the German counterpart of the word – ‘Angst’ in its title to describe the overarching object under investigation.

This semantic decision was made with reference to the preceding discourses from the branch of Philosophy known as ‘Existentialism’, notably with Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) being a precursor for this school of thoughts. (Blackburn, 2016) One of the earliest ruminations on the issue of Angst or in Danish ‘*Angest*’ in philosophy could be traced back to Kierkegaard’s well-known publication – ‘*Begrebet Angest*’ (1844), which was later translated as ‘The Concept of Anxiety’ (Kierkegaard, 1844). While the common English translation for the German word ‘Angst’ is indeed ‘Anxiety’, Bettina Berge (2021, p. 357) had pointed out how the word ‘Angst’ in fact entails dual senses in English – both that of

‘*Anguish*’ and ‘*Anxiety*’. This equivocation could be attributed their mutual root from the Latin *angor*, which originally denotes ‘constriction’ in two discrete senses: (1) “a passing but intense torment” and (2) “a relatively permanent state of disquiet”. These two senses of constrictions thus entail a difference in *duration* and *intensity* that had later ensued between ‘*Anguish*’ and ‘*Anxiety*’. While some writers have used the two terms interchangeably, this semantic nuance have led to others’ differentiations of the terms (Crocq, 2015, p. 321). Cicero for example, defined ‘*Anguish*’ (in Latin: *angor*) as the very state of anxiety or “current anxiety”, in which one suffers in the moment. In contrast, he considered ‘*Anxiety*’ (in Latin: *anxietas*) as a form of “trait anxiety”, which describes one’s proneness to Anxiety, without necessarily being in the state of Anxiety at present. (Cicero, 1877, p. 138) (Ibid, 2015, p. 320) Other differentiations have focused on a psychological/somatic distinction between the two terms, with ‘*Anguish*’ being a “*somatic* experience of constriction” and ‘*Anxiety*’ being a *psychological* condition of “worrying”. (Ibid, 2015, p. 321)

With the consideration of the possible semantic nuance that might arise across the English term ‘*Anxiety*’ and ‘*Anguish*’, this research is inclined to adopt the German word ‘*Angst*’ as an overarching term in order to include the broadest sense of the concept – a phenomenon that is both “physical” and “psychological” or both a “sensibility” and an “emotion” that situates between “corporeity and mentality” (Bergo, 2021, p. 4). Due to this liminal status of *Angst*, the research will thus follow Bergo in considering *Angst* as an *affect*¹; in the sense that we are *affected* by it both sensually and emotionally (Ibid.), thus positioning it in the beyond the mind-body dualism.

Not only does the consideration of *Angst* as an *affect* allows the research to avoid the typical mind-body dichotomy, but it also allows the examination of *Angst* to move beyond the personal level, and enter into a socio-political dimension. Crucially, *Angst* as a sensibility and emotion does not only function within the individual but also travels beyond individual bodies and functions across relations. Following what Sara Ahmed (1969 -) called “the sociality of emotion”, where emotions are considered as a form of “social and cultural practices” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8), this research will also study the *sociality of Angst*, of which situates it in a wider relational context. *Angst* will therefore be examined as an affect that

¹ Originated from the work of Spinoza, the concept and definition of ‘affect’ has been subjected to discussion within the field of affect studies. As summarized by Ott (2017), there are two main conceptualizations of affect. The first conceptualization sources from the Spinozian “*affectio*” and it takes on a “psychological approach” which holds affect as a form of basic and “elemental emotion” that arises in one’s body. The second conceptualization sources from the Spinozian’s “*affectus*”, which is commonly associated with works of Gilles Deleuze and considers affect as an intensive and impersonal force that acts upon bodies. This conceptualization of affect is sometimes explicitly contrasted against “emotion” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 207) in its formulation.

Regarding this delineation within the studies of affect, some scholars have attempted to bridge the two approaches. Given the multifaceted nature of the concept, this research will consider *Angst* as an affect that is both an *emotion* and an *intensive force*, that functions on the individual-personal level, as well as on the socio-political level.

functions across the body and the mind, as well as the realm of the subjective and the intersubjective.

Digital Milieu

In contrast to the common term ‘Digital Age’, which implies a specific temporal dimension, the research wishes to opt for the term ‘Digital Milieu’, as it denotes an accumulation of circumstances that is not only temporal, spatial but also multidimensional. The formulation of the term ‘Digital Milieu’ references the work of Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984), who conceptualized the term “milieu” as follows:

“The milieu is a set of natural givens – rivers, marshes, hills – and a set of artificial givens – an agglomeration of individuals, of houses, etcetera. The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it. It is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since an effect from one point of view will be a cause from another”. (Foucault, 2009, p. 21)

The research holds that the Digital Milieu is chiefly characterized by the habituation of digital technology in the daily surroundings, to the extent that one might not even be aware of the “*digital-ness*” of their lives as it has already been naturalized in our Being. This is akin to the notions of the “Post-digital”, or “Post-internet”, where “we have long since gone beyond the novelty value of digitalization” (Klein, 2021, p. 29) and that digital technology is now “entangled with everyday knowledge and media practices” of our daily lives (Ibid. p.33). The Digital Milieu is thus not only confined to the Internet and the so-called digital realm, but also encompasses other co-existing dimensions that are permeated by digital technology. It is therefore not only digital, but also personal, political, physical, ecological and many more – in the sense that all of these aspects are entangled with the digital, as the digital is entangled with all these aspects within the milieu. Overall, the Digital Milieu is constituted of various co-existing milieus, which together, forms a wider environ (*umwelt*)² that is ultimately permeated by digital technology and as Foucault put it, produces an “overall effect” (Ibid.) on everyone who lives in it.

Correlatively, the ‘Post-digital Angst’ does not merely persist on the digital plane but also spans across the co-existing spheres and *circulates* within the milieu. As phrased by Foucault, the milieu is a field where the circulation of “causes” and “effects” take place. (Ibid.) This *circulatory* quality is decisive, as it presumes the importance of relationality in the formation of the milieu. The Digital Milieu is therefore structured upon heavy circulations – that of data and information, but also importantly, affect. It is through this affective circulation and

2 In illustrating the work of biologist Jakob von Uexküll, Georges Canguilhem (2001, p. 19) explained the following distinctions across the terms “*umwelt*”, “*Umgebung*” and “*Welt*”: “*Umwelt* designates the behavioral milieu that is proper to a given organism; *Umgebung* is the simple geographical environment; and *Welt* is the scientific universe”.

relations that Angst could take on various forms in affecting different bodies across the Digital Milieu.

Sourcing from the articulation of Foucault, the Digital Milieu is thus characterized as (1) an accumulation of various conditions and dimensions that are permeated by the naturalization of digital technology and (2) a site that is structured upon substantial circulations of, but not limited to data, information and affects that permeates across the digital plane and other co-existing dimensions.

Angst and the Digital Milieu

Building on the concepts of ‘Angst’ and ‘Digital Milieu’, the compound term ‘Post-digital Angst’ does not necessarily derive from our direct encounter with digital technology, yet it is so often that digital technology, in some ways or the other, is entangled with our experience of it (for example: digital technology could propagate Angst without being the source of it). Given how the research is predominately empirical in nature, it does not seek for a conclusive theorization or delimitation of the Post-digital Angst. Instead, it aims to examine the possible manifestations and contours of such phenomenon through theorization and artistic practice. It is precisely through the experimental nature of this research that a wide-range of ideas could be incorporated.

Research Methodology

Angst as a Form of Tacit Knowledge

It could be intuitive for one to apprehend the concept of the ‘Post-digital Angst’; often through recalling and perhaps even re-experiencing their own anxious encounters in their everyday lives. This quick ‘apprehension’ of Angst is perhaps not arbitrary; etymologically, the word ‘apprehension’ could be traced back to the late Latin verb “*apprehendere*”, meaning “to-grasp”. Following this lineage, the modern usage of the word ‘apprehension’ includes two crucial denotations: (1) “to understand” (*to have grasped*) and (2) “to be anxious” (*to be grasped*) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). By this logic, one is to grasp (apprehend) the concept of Angst when they are simultaneously grasped (apprehended) by Angst. This has ascribed Angst with a degree of agency in its functioning and it is so often that Angst has grasped us before we have come to grasp it. The latency in our realization of Angst has thus led to its common manifestation as an initial “trembling” before we could properly apprehend it (Bergo, 2021, p. 2). This suggests how Angst often functions as a form of “tacit knowledge” – a “nonlinguistic, intuitive, and even at times unconscious form of knowledge” as first labelled by Michael Polanyi (Donmoyer, 2008, p. 861). The question remains how could we better access and communicate this elusive knowledge and embodied experience? In this regard the research aims to utilize aesthetics and theorization as a tool, specifically in the format of an ‘arts-based research’ (ABR) in facilitating the apprehension of Angst as a form of “tacit knowledge”, which at times resides in our immediate experience.

Arts-based Research, Ethnography and Philosophical Inquiry as Tools

Arts-based research (ABR) “operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit knowledge” (Barrett, 2007) ³. To unleash one’s intuitive understanding, artist-researchers often utilize aesthetics, paired with theoretical exposition as tools for engaging their perceptual senses, which facilitates the development of artistic renderings and later conceptual articulations. ABR thus prioritizes aesthetics and experience of “qualities” (Eisner, 2017) as an initial point of departure for further conceptual differentiations. It is precisely through this active awareness of our experiences that we could “make sense” of the qualitative world (Ibid.), or in this project’s context, “make sense” of the ‘Post-Digital Angst’.

Based on the aesthetic and sensorial qualities observed, the research aims to further study their meanings under a wider socio-political context. Thus, the project adopts a methodological approach that integrates ABR with ethnography and philosophical inquiry. Through this integrated methodology, the researcher produces a series of artistic works emerging from intuitive and immediate experiences, accompanied by a substantial ethnographical analysis and philosophical reflections. Such an approach enables a dynamic "gazing back and forth" across multiple positionalities (Ellis, 2008), effectively bridging "the personal and the political" dimensions. Consequently, this facilitates an exploration of ‘Post-Digital Angst’ not only as an affective experience but also as a culturally situated practice (Adams, et al., 2022).

Artistic Practice and Reflexive Documentation

Through the method of ABR, ethnography and philosophical inquiry, the research aims to produce both an aesthetic and theoretical account of the Post-digital Angst comprised of two parts: (1) a body of artistic works that surrounds the issue of Angst in the Post-digital context and (2) a reflexive documentation containing the theoretical and philosophical insights produced throughout the research. It is worth noting that the research holds neither the artistic practice, nor the reflexive documentation as the leading component, but instead relies on the reciprocal and dialogical developments of both parts in formulating a comprehensive account. In this regard, the reflexive documentation is not merely an explanation or justification for the artistic practice, instead it offers the practice a “discursive form”, thus allowing it to enter into “dialogue with existing practical and theoretical paradigms” (Bolt,

³ The exact subject/term in Barret’s (2007) discussion was “creative arts research”, which the research holds as an associated term under the wider umbrella of “arts-based research”. As a field that is under ongoing rapid evolution, the term “arts-based research” encompasses a wide range of definitions and approaches that might be impossible for one to fully encapsulate. Still, Greenwood (2019) suggested that “The key elements that unify this diverse body of work are: it is research; and one or more art forms or processes are involved in the doing of the research”. It is also noted by her that “a common feature within the wide range of approaches is that they involve aesthetic responses”.

2007, p. 33). Ultimately, the reflexive documentation serves as a platform where potential constellations could be formed, and new ideas could emerge - new strands of thoughts might be initialized from existing discourses and result in new artistic practice, or inversely, the process of artistic practice could initiate new theoretical formulations that contribute to existing discourses. This cyclic tension between the artistic practice and the reflexive documentation serves an investigative *force*, one that propels the arts-based research into an open-ended possibility. By giving an ethnographical, philosophical and artistic account of Angst's manifestations in the Digital Milieu, it is the aim of this research to formulate an aesthetics of the Post-digital Angst – in the dual sense that the research hope to offer a narrative account of the Angst as perceived, as well as renders such experience into works of art.

(De-/Re-) contextualization As an Artistic Strategy

Angst as an experience arises from our encounters with various 'objects' in the Digital Milieu. These 'objects' are not necessarily material in nature, as they could also be "immaterial" or even "imagined" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 7). The term 'object' here is therefore considered in the broadest sense that it serves as an 'object' to a 'subject'; that it is not primarily defined by its immanent property, but by the subject's relation to it. In other words, an object could essentially be anything that the subject's intention is directed towards. This phenomenological approach enables the many possibilities of what an object could be; perhaps an image, a sentence, a place, but also a circumstance, a mood, a concept. In the most profound situation, the object could be a lack, where the absence of the object is in-itself an (non) object. Ultimately, it is through our contacts with these objects that Angst is manifested.

The research will start by examining how our daily encounters with various objects give rise to Angst in the Digital Milieu. Due to our situatedness, it is so often that we are unaware of the affective potential of these banal objects (e.g., images, sounds, user-interfaces, and conditions etc.), which are entangled with us in implicit ways. As an artistic strategy, the project will adapt these pre-existing objects in producing artworks, thus situating them into an artistic context. This serves as what Barone (2008, p. 31) called an "aesthetic remove", which enables the viewers to be "temporarily bracketed off from the 'real world' "in their reconsideration of these objects in an alternative/aesthetic perspective. The adaptation of these objects could involve little to no material alterations, and the primary "artistic act" resides in the manipulation of these objects' contexts, which is achieved through the processes of (1) De-contextualization and/or (2) Re-contextualization⁴. In 'De-

⁴ The research has predominantly derived this method of '(De-/Re-) contextualization' from the practice of 'straight photography', which is in fact, highly context-dependent.

contextualization', the objects are directly extracted from its original surrounding and presented as-itself. This aesthetic suspension allows the viewers to focus on their immediate experience of the objects, while creating space for one to reflect on the affective relations in between. In 'Re-contextualization', the objects are actively situated into contexts that are different from their original ones. Such dislocation makes play of the objects' indexicality while offering the viewers an alternative meaning to their habitual understanding.

This strategy of '(De-/Re-) contextualization' is in fact akin to the method of 'Appropriation', which has primarily been linked with art movements such as Dadaism, Pop Art and subsequently, the Pictures Generations (Evans, 2009) (Eklund, 2004). While both terms denote the process of adapting pre-existing materials into an art context, Appropriation as a method is chiefly associated with the interrogation of "originality" and "authenticity" (Chilvers & Graves-smith, 2009). This is perhaps implied in the etymology of the word 'appropriation', which derives from Latin "*appropriare*", meaning to "make one's own". (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) On the contrary, the proposed terming of (De-/Re-) contextualization aims to withdraw from the connotation of 'ownership' and takes on a more neutral tone in highlighting the gesture of 'context-shaping' as an artistic act. This term thus specifies on the actual processes of suspending pre-established associations (to de-contextualize) and suggesting alternative meanings (to re-contextualize).

To engage in 'context-shaping' is essentially to create meaning, which is crucial in the Digital Milieu, as we are facing a saturation of information, but a lack of meaning. Perhaps it is through the now ubiquitous act of "remixing" (Lessig, 2008), where individuals could create their own meaning out of the information abyss. In a similar spirit, the research hopes to utilize the strategy of (de-/re-) contextualization for revealing the ways in which we are affectively related to various objects, as well as how these relations could bring forth Angst's manifestation in the Digital Milieu.

Project Preposition and Structure

A common usage of the term 'Digital Anxiety' situates it in a pathological context, where individuals are struggling with anxiety that arises from their frequent, and at times addictive engagement with digital technology (Dizik, 2017). While this could indeed be a form of Angst in the Digital Milieu, the research holds two counter-prepositions for enabling alternative formulations in this project:

As Susan Sontag put it, "because each photograph is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted. A photograph changes according to the context in which it is seen" (Sontag, 2005, p. 82). In the practice of straight photography, it is often that the photographers are composing their photographs to shape the context in which an 'object' is portrayed, rather than direct manipulating the 'object' itself. The significance of the context persists in the *way* that a photograph is showcased and *with* what it is shown, which essentially creates the specific contexts from which the image is *seen* by the viewers.

- (1) First, the Post-digital Angst is not necessarily pathological, as such viewpoint implies a need to address and resolve this “dysfunction”, which often involves practical “solutions” such as a digital detox. (Peper & Harvey, 2018) While it is true that one could suffer from Angst pathologically, an over-emphasis on the resolution risks normalization without comprehension, and the naïve refutation of Angst only neglects the opportunity for one to review the profound implications that it might entails. Ultimately, the research intends to reveal the possible implications and meanings of Angst in the Post-digital context, which could be resourceful and enriching.
- (2) Second, the pathological viewpoint is chiefly a psychological one, which renders the Post-digital Angst primarily as an individual experience. Yet, as previously formulated, the research does not only consider Angst as a subjective phenomenon, but also an intersubjective one; that it is simultaneously an individual affect, as well as a wider socio-cultural practice. This situates the Angst across the personal and the political, while enabling the various forms in which it could be manifested across the Digital Milieu, ranging from a personal sensibility to a socio-cultural intensity, or at times, a political apparatus.

Based on these counter-prepositions, the project is structured into a three-level architecture that concerns the ‘personal’ (micro), the ‘social’ (meso) and the ‘political’ (macro) dimensions. Such architecture enables the research to examine three main renditions of Angst in the Digital Milieu, which are detailed as follows:

On the personal (micro) level, the research will first study a form of ‘*Direct Angst*’, which denotes the Angst that resides in our most immediate experience in the Digital Milieu. The project will take on an existential approach in examining the various anxious moments in the Post-digital context (e.g., the loading screen, the notification sound, or the freezing of the computer, etc.), in the attempt to reveal the existential and spiritual insights that they potentially entail.

On the social (meso) level, the research will examine the ‘*Dynamics of Angst*’, which takes Angst beyond the realm of the subjective, into the intersubjective. In this context, Angst is not only considered as an individual affect, but also crucially, a relational one; that Angst could perform as a dynamic and intensive force that originates from our interpersonal relations and our socio-cultural practice. From this perspective, the project will examine the ‘sociality of Angst’, which indicates Angst’s intersubjective origin, as well as its potential to circulates and affect different bodies in the Digital Milieu.

On the political (macro) level, the research wishes to focus on the ‘*Dispositif of Angst*’, which concerns how Angst could be exercised as a strategic and political device for inscribing “gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses” (Agamben, 2009, p. 14) onto subjects in the Digital Milieu. If Angst is to be taken as an interpersonal *force* on the social (meso) level, it is hitherto considered as a type of productive power on the political (macro) level, which functions within a “heterogeneous ensemble” (Foucault, 1977/1980) of power relations

between various bodies, entities, institutions, discourses and many more amid the habituation of digital technology ⁵.

Overall, through the examination of the '*Direct Angst*', the '*Dynamics of Angst*' and the '*Dispositif of Angst*', the research aims to work toward an articulation of the 'Post-digital Angst' and its manifestations.

5 This understanding of power as-a-web contrasts the traditionally “monist” perspective that is associated with sovereignty (Frost, 2019, p. 159) and the study of the “Dispositif” is thus, less about the “specific edifices or designated sources” of power, but the “network, arrangement, or configuration” of power. (Bussolini, 2010, p. 91) It is therefore a useful concept for analyzing power relations in the Digital Milieu, where information, knowledge and thus power, functions in an ever-more diffused and nuanced manner. (Crano, 2020)

Chapter One – Direct Angst

What does it mean by the ‘Post-digital’? Is it not absurd to speak of the end of digital technology when the world is ever-more digitalized? To understand the term Post-digital, one must realize that it does not address the end of digital technology, but contrarily a socio-cultural climate that is already saturated by it (Blas, 2014), resulting in “new cultural, symbolic, and material forms” (Klein, 2021, pp. 28-29), as well as crucially, new affective forms. The post-digital condition is thus categorized by an uncertainty brought forth by such digital saturation and alludes to an unknown in our current circumstances. Amid this post-digital “messy state” (Cramer, 2014), the project wishes to study the form(s) of Angst that are manifested in the Digital Milieu.

As art critic Gene McHugh (2011) wrote in his performative WordPress blog, titled “*Post-Internet*” (<http://122909a.com/>),

“[A]ny hope for the Internet to make things easier, to reduce the anxiety of my existence, was simply over – it failed – and it was just another thing to deal with. What we mean when we say “Internet” became not a thing in the world to escape into, but rather the world one sought escape from... sigh... It became the place where business was conducted, and bills were paid. It became the place where people tracked you down..”
(McHugh, 2011, p. 5)

It is in the post-digital era when the conventional split between the digital world (primarily the Internet) and the actual (material) world has widely dissolved. As McHugh noted, there is no longer a clear separation between the Angst that we got from the ‘digital world’ and that from the ‘real world’, as *the digital world has become the real world*. The fact that we could never escape from Angst signifies how it remains a condition that is immanently rooted. The project therefore wishes to examine the issue of ‘Post-digital Angst’, not as a phenomenon that originates from digital technology per se, but rather as an immanent human condition that catches on the post-digital landscape. If the ever-frequent global emergencies have reminded us of one thing, it is that we have never been free of our burden of existential predicaments amid the uncertain future. In the face of the increasing disquiets in the current times, perhaps a revisit to our human conditions could be crucial in shedding light on how we should address these dreadful circumstances.

The first part of this project focuses on the Angst that we have encountered on a personal level in the Digital Milieu – what I called the “*Direct Angst*”. Through an autoethnographic approach, I wish to utilize my daily encounters in the Digital Milieu as handles for further ruminations on the issue of Post-digital Angst. My situatedness is therefore crucial, as it enables the incorporation of the most immediate and direct experience of Angst in my discursive formulation. This ethnographical reflection is further facilitated by my artistic practice, which functions as a process for various discourses and perspectives, whether personal or theoretical, to collide and synthesize. Thus, the reader is invited to join this exploratory journey, as I attempt to construct a constellation of meaningful connections.

A Sense of hollowness



Untitled (Face time), 2023 - From the series "Untitled (Conditions)"

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I would like to start with a sense of ‘hollowness’, which has instinctual arose when I try to apprehend the condition of our Post-digital Angst. While the word ‘hollowness’ is often used interchangeably with ‘emptiness’ or ‘nothingness’, my choice has been deliberated with reference to the semantic nuance it entails, which could provide insights regarding the nature of our Angst in the Digital Milieu.

Etymologically, it is not hard to notice how the word ‘hollow’ derives from ‘hole’, or in old English ‘*holh*’, meaning ‘cavity’ – ‘an unfilled space within a mass’. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) The state of hollowness is therefore neither solely positive nor negative, but a negative in positive, in other words, a state of privation amid abundance, contrasting it to that of emptiness or nothingness, which does not share such aporic nature. The feeling of hollowness is therefore one that is inherently ambivalent, as it is simultaneously full yet empty. In describing the plague of spiritual hollowness after WW1, T.S Elliot (1888 – 1965) wrote:

*" We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men...
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion"*

(Eliot, 1963, p. 79)

The conflicting experience of being both "hollow" and "stuffed" positions these "men" in a state of limbo, as the "stuffness" only contrasts their innate "hollowness". Alluding such state of ambivalence to our experience in the post-digital context, do we not find ourselves similarly stuffed with an abundance of information, yet remained internally hollowed? This 'stuffness' of information is nonetheless an accentuation of the spaciousness within us, as if a hole has been revealed in us.

To trace this affinity across the feeling of hollowness and spaciousness, one could turn to the Chinese character 「虛」 (pronounced as *heoi1* in Cantonese)⁶. The character of 「虛」 comes to entail two general meanings: 1) a feeling of hollowness and 2) a dwelling area (or sometimes a 'deserted area').⁷ The character therefore signifies the feeling of being hollow, but also the primal condition of spatiality that begets such feeling. Interestingly, 「虛」 was archaically used to symbolize a 'big mountain' 「大丘」 (*daai6 jau1*)⁸, and it is through the envisioning of a mountain that we can understand how the double meaning has been derived; when one embodies the mountain's extensive spatiality, an innate hollowness could consequently emerge.

6 Pronounced in Mandarin: xu1

7 When used to signify 'area', the character is written with the element of 'earth' 「土」 (*tou2*), resulting in the derivative form of the character 「墟」 with the same pronunciation.

8 The oracle bone script of the character 「虛」 can be dissected vertically with the top being 「虎」 (*fu2*), meaning 'tiger' and signifying for wild animals, while the bottom being 「丘」 (*jau1*), meaning 'hill' or 'mountain'. An image of a mountain full of wild animals could therefore be induced from such pictorial deconstruction. The referenced etymology was proposed by Ching Dynasty grammatologist Duan Yucai [段玉裁](1735 - 1815), with the original Chinese definition quoted as followed:

「虛本謂大丘。大則空曠。故引伸之爲空虛。」 (Yucai, 1939, p. 88)



Untitled (Mount), 2023 - From the series "Untitled (Conditions)"

The feeling of hollowness is therefore a symptom that is indicative of our immanent possibility, where an existential cavity and indeed, a hole remains inside of us, awaiting to be fulfilled and actualized. Do we not find ourselves in the Digital Milieu as if we are in the middle of a vast mountain, where the rapid technological development has unveiled to us an expansive spatiality and with it, possibility? Hollowness is thus the state of inertia that arises as the ‘paralysis of possibility’, where one is stuffed with an abundance and yet remains empty, in turn becoming what T. S Eliot called a “gesture without motion” (Eliot, 1963, p. 79) – a conflicting state in which one struggles with stagnancy and lethargy.

If the state of hollowness evinces as an inert orientation, Angst precedes such inertia and resides in the initial disorientation, manifesting as what Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) called the “dizziness of freedom” (Kierkegaard, 1844, p. 61).

For Kierkegaard, Angst arises when one realizes their freedom and existential possibility, thus discloses them to the “anxious possibility of being able” (Ibid., p. 44). It is therefore not surprising that one could feel dizzy in the Digital Milieu, when the extensive habituation of digital technology has granted us ability along with Anxiety, as one finds themselves in a constant struggle with their potential for making various choices. To situate this experience in the very moment of my writing, I have gathered research sources that span across four

desktops, 20 windows and 30 websites – all of which are running simultaneously on my computer as I converge pieces of information into a single word document. I am therefore *anxious*, not only because I must actualize this piece of writing, but also because I am confronted with the possible content that I am *able* to include in my work. The Internet has facilitated my ability to research, as it has enabled me to access various information embedded with hyperlinks. Yet, these hyperlinks will often lead me to other hyperlinks, which could go on *ad infinitum*, as if I am looking down into a “yawning abyss” of information. In the face of this overwhelming chains of information deferral and overload, I have often found myself instinctively drifting away from my thesis writing, as the ‘infin-
mation’ has made me ever-more anxious and I must confess that at times I simply wished to stay “inclosed” and remain hollow. Indeed, it might be an temporary solution for one to defend against Angst by retreating to hollowness, where our “apathy and lack of feeling” (May, 1973, p. 25) has allowed us to ignore and “shut up” (May, 1977, p. 45) the anxious possibility of oneself; to escape dizziness through laziness, of which nevertheless, fuels my persisting unfulfillment.

While the Digital Milieu is embedded with ever-more possibilities and choices, the experience of Angst and hollowness is certainly not exclusive to the post-digital condition. It would be too naïve for one to consider the habituation of digital and network technology as the main cause of our Angst, as our struggles with Angst has remained an existential issue that haunted us across all epochs. It is easy to blame the uncertainty of the post-digital condition as the cause of our Angst, but as Rollo May (1909 – 1994) has put it, “*on the deepest level, the question of which age we live in is irrelevant*”. (Ibid., p. 273) It is not that technological development has made us *free* in the Digital Milieu, it is that we have *always been free* existentially, or to paraphrase Kierkegaard, *we ourselves, are freedom* (Kierkegaard, 1849, p. 29). The possibilities brought forth by technological development merely awaken our innate freedom, which through our realization of it, has manifested as Angst. The moments of Post-digital Angst are therefore variations of our existential Angst, which arises when the ‘dizziness of freedom’ reveals itself in our daily experiences in the Digital Milieu. The Post-digital Angst is therefore not so much a new phenomenon than a situated revelation, and it is within the scope of this project to study the specific post-digital conditions and situations in which Angst is revealed.

A Revelation of Nullity

Perhaps the feeling of hollowness is only possible in the first place because there exists an essential *lack* in our Being – a “nullity” (or nothingness) that resides at the very basis of our existence. This is what Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) referred to as our primordial “guiltiness” (in German *Schuld*). Such existential “guiltiness” does not connote the colloquial or at times, religious sense of “blameworthiness”, nor does it imply any moral failure (Wrathall, 2021, p. 365). Rather, it refers to the ineradicable and unjustifiable “nullity” (in German *Nichtigkeit*) of our Being that we are nonetheless responsible for. Heidegger was explicit in suggesting that we did not “acquire” this nullity as it is not a result of the privation of something; rather, such nullity has primordially existed in the first place, as the basis of

our Being (Heidegger, 1927, p. 329). It is with this primordial nullity and guiltiness, where one could find themselves equipped with a “constant neediness” in their lives, (Scott, 2010, p. 61) and such “mode” of existence is what Heidegger called “Care” (in German *Sorge*).

While colloquially associated with ‘love’ and ‘sympathy’, the word ‘Care’ (*Sorge*) has originated from Latin *cura*, meaning “devotedness” as well as “anxious exertion” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 243). ‘Care’ is therefore a form of general anxiety, which fundamentally underlies the way we exist and engage with the world. As Heidegger explains:

“Having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining...All these ways of Being-in have concern [besorge] as their kind of Being” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 83, emphasis added).

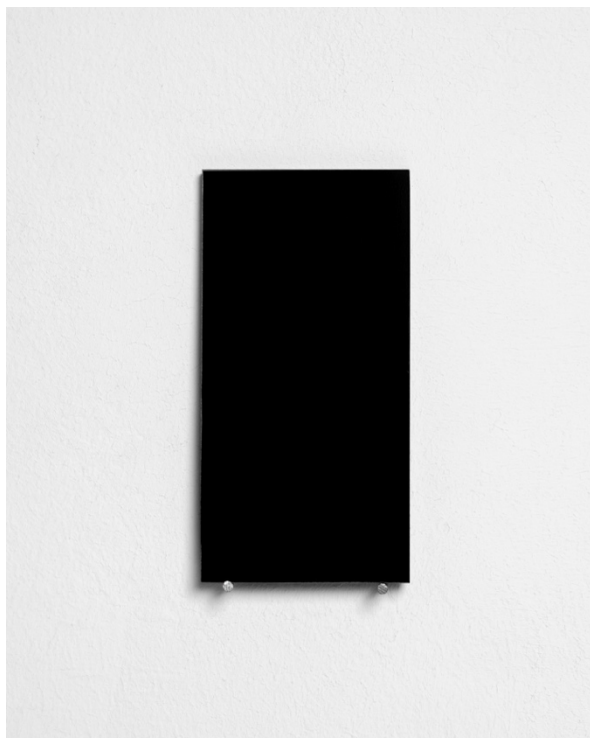
Thus, ‘Care’ predisposes our Being-in-the-world as the ontological structure of our existence and underlies everything we do – to the extent that even when someone is “neglecting, renouncing” or “taking a rest”, they are still existentially Caring, although deficiently (Ibid., p.83).

Amidst our lives in the Digital Milieu, one is often tasked with multiple things to take care of. The development of network technology has enabled us to take care of various tasks remotely, which heightened our sense of engagement with the Digital Milieu, as if we were dragged along by the rapid flow of information and communication, and from it comes frictions and anxiousness. Consider the times during the pandemic, we have managed to maintain our ‘care’ with the help of emails, social media and online meeting platforms like ZOOM and it is common for many to work even more during the lockdown as if they were dragged on 24/7 through virtual means. It is therefore easy for one to hold the digital infrastructure as the cause for our increasing need to ‘care’ and to accuse technology for dragging us along, yet the development of network technology and its extensive application are nonetheless part of the capitalistic mechanism, of which runs on our ontological ‘Care’ (*Sorge*) in its operation. It is therefore not so much that information, social media, or emails are dragging us, but rather we are the ones that are constantly grabbing them. The digital infrastructure simply functions as means for us to ‘take care’, and the very need to ‘care’ sources not from digital technology, but rather our ontological devotedness to the world, of which functions as the basis for the capitalistic mechanism. Perhaps this correlation between our anxiousness and the capitalist system shall be further investigated, but this has yet showcased the extensive nature of Anxiety across the various levels of our “Being-in-the-world”.

While ‘Care’ (*Sorge*) is a quotidian Anxiety that persists in our existence, Heidegger considered Angst as the profound and momentary “mood” that reveals the authentic nature of our Being. (Bergo, 2021, p. 34). For Heidegger, we exist for most part of our lives “inauthentically”, as we are regularly situated in our daily surroundings and immersed in our “average everydayness”. It is in this banality where we have mostly acted as “they-self”, as we have steadily fit into the crowd and “fled” from our true self (Heidegger, 1927, p. 230).

Still, there exists a profound moment when we come to our ‘conscience’ – when we are withdrawn from our everyday life and confronted with a sense of existential unsteadiness. This revelatory moment is what Heidegger called Angst, in which we are “individualized” from our everyday environments and brought “face-to-face” with ourselves. It is in Angst when one might encounter questions such as “what am I doing?”, “who am I?” or “what should I do?”, as we are “disclosed” to the “nullity” of our Being and the “utter insignificance” of what is in-the-world. At this very anxious moment, we have come to realize that there is not an absolute reason why we are who we are, and doing what we are doing. The fact is, we were “thrown” into the world without any choice, while constantly “projected” towards indefiniteness, only to ultimately reach complete nothingness upon death. Thus, Heidegger said: *“In that in the face of which one has anxiety, the ‘It is nothing and nowhere’ becomes manifest”* (Ibid., p.231).

Yet, such “nothing” is not “totally nothing”, but “nothing ready-to-hand” (Ibid., p.232) By realizing the “nullity” of our Being, we have also come to know the very possibility it entails. While in Angst, one is confronted with “the ‘nothing’ of the world”, they are also disclosed to the “ownmost potentiality-for-Being”, which includes the “freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself” (Ibid.). Ultimately, one could choose to live authentically by embracing the unavoidable “nullity” and “possibility” of their finite Being. Instead of being “carried along”, one could “resolutely” resume their existential responsibility and carry out their own choices in life.



Untitled (No Service), 2023

Screenshot from phone, mounted on aluminum dibond and laminated with plexiglass.

To situate the profound experience of Angst in the post-digital context, I would like to recall a personal encounter. On a Sunday afternoon, I was casually lying on my bed while scrolling through my phone. Since I was browsing through the social media and fully submerged in “they-self”, I was unaware of the fact that my phone was running out of battery. Thus, in a split second, the image on my phone was withdrawn and the screen has turned into pitch black. Amid such nothingness, another image has emerged – my reflection. While I have used the phone as a doorway for my daily escapism, it had become a mirror that confronted myself with myself; it is in such anxious moment when I was “withdrawn” from my daily (digital) environment and individualized into a pre-digital vacuum - in which I asked myself: *what am I doing?*

One of the most anxious experiences in the Digital Milieu is nonetheless the moment of ‘information latency’, which denotes the time for information to be transferred across servers and devices. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) A common example of such delay would be the time to load a webpage, or in the same manner, any piece of information that is to-be-accessed through digital devices. I have come to notice how the level of information latency correlates with the degree of one’s Angst: from having a weak signal, to losing the Internet access – our most radical Angst arises when our device has stopped functioning or indeed, become absented, leading to the loss of information-at-hand. While the term ‘latency’ is now widely applied in the context of information technology, it was originally derived from Latin *lateo*, meaning “concealed”. (Wedgwood, 1872, p. 378) Thus, it is in the moment of ‘information latency’ when the information-at-hand is concealed. Yet, this ‘concealment’ is also simultaneously an ‘unconcealment’; as it also unconceals ourselves from “theyself”. Since our worldly affairs in the Digital Milieu is highly entangled with the Internet and the digital infrastructure, the very concealment (latency) of the Internet and digital information withdraws us from our “average everydayness” and brings us face-to-face with ourselves as such, and it is in this moment of self-confrontation when one could become anxious.

I have noticed the tendency of myself texting more than often before my flight takes off, as there is an ever-strong desire for connection when one is facing the imminent loss of it. Yet, it is not so much that I am anxious about the absence of the social media and the Internet, but rather the presence of the ‘nothing’ that is revealed throughout the flight. It is amid the various selection of movies and entertainment when one is nonetheless compelled to ask: *What should I do now?* When confronting the “nullity” of our Being, one might feel uncomfortable or indeed, “uncanny”. This uncanniness in Angst is what Heidegger called “*unheimliche*”, which could be literally translated as “not-at-home”. As we are for most part of our lives “fallen” and “absorbed” in our everyday environments, we seek to stay in our comfort zone and dwell in a stable condition that makes us feel “at-home”. Nonetheless, such ‘homeliness’ is shattered when one has encountered profound Angst, in which they are withdrawn from the stability of their everyday lives and individualizes as oneself. It is therefore in Angst when the “everyday familiarity collapses”, and the experience of uncanniness (*unheimlichkeit*) arises, as one is indeed “not-at-home” (Ibid., p.233).

Although the moment of ‘information latency’ could induce Angst and ‘uncanniness’, it could also serve as a ‘moment of vision’ (in German *Augenblick*) for us to review our lives and recognize the indefinite possibility-at-hand. While such latency of information will only be gradually minimized by the rapid development of networked communication (e.g., the competition of 5G and many more generations ahead), there will always be existential moments when one is “individualized” and confronted with themselves. Essentially, it is not detrimental to be ‘wired in’, as this is simply the nature of our Being, yet one should always be aware of the imminent resurgence of Angst, as it will always continue to haunt us in various situations. Instead of fleeing from it, one should therefore embrace it by taking hold of the possibility and freedom ahead; only through which can we resolutely own our lives.

An Unheimliche Apparition



Seeing the Sun at Midnight, 2023

Lightjet print on fiber-based Baryta paper, engraving on plexiglass, wooden frame.

It is common to experience a sense of ‘uncanniness’ (unheimlichekeit) when encountering eerie and peculiar situations in life, which are often marked by a *presence of absence*, such as that in a haunting ‘apparition’.

I have once encountered a ghostly TikTok video while browsing Facebook (a rather strange phenomenon in-itself that is perhaps worth further discussion). The video was uploaded by a TikTok user called D.M.Wesley (@Dommatigian), who claimed that his apartment, built in 1932, was haunted. To prove his claim, he managed to capture a paranormal sighting with his phone (which can be access in the following link:<https://www.tiktok.com/@d.m.wesley/video/7158246494032727342>) (Wesley, 2022) In the video, Wesley was sitting in his living room when there was a loud and repetitive banging coming from his closet. The banging seemed to be directed towards the Cross that was hanging outside of the room, and it was eventually dropped on the floor as the hitting persisted. In attempt to trace the source of the banging, Wesley proceeded to open the door of the closet and look inside. Yet what he encountered was not a ghost, nor an animal, but rather ‘nothing’ – and it was then when the banging had stopped.

It was from a Taiwanese media page where I have seen the reposted video, from which I have read a comment left by a user who had jokingly posed a question that is rather profound - “*Is it scarier to have seen ‘something’ after you have opened the door, or to have seen ‘nothing’?*”



Chao Sheng Tsou

到底是開門之後有東西比較可怕，
還是沒東西比較可怕？

Like Reply 5w



The original Chinese comment left by User Chao Sheung Tsou (2023).

The answer to this rhetorical question is of course the latter – that it is profoundly ‘scarier’ to encounter “nothing” than “something”. Crucially, it is not ‘fear’ that we experience in the face of ‘nothing’, but rather Angst; as it is in ‘fear’ when one is threatened by definite entities within-the-world, whereas in ‘Angst’, one is confronted by an indefiniteness of “nothing and nowhere” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 230) Thus it could be less intimidating, or even comforting, to at least see a specter as opposed to nothing, since a specter is nonetheless a form of presence that could partially fill the “nullity-at-hand”. In case of horror films, do ghosts and monsters

not serve as a form of definite object onto which we can channel and fixate our ‘objectless Angst’? A specter is therefore a futile projection towards the “nullity” of our Being; an apparition that sources from our immanent Angst.



Apparition, 2023

Screenshot from phone, digital print on cotton, bespoke pullover/ Inkjet print on metallic paper, mounted on dibond, laminated with plexiglass

A set of two

An ‘apparition’ is thus not something “alien or new”, but rather what is once familiar, yet “estranged” or at times, “repressed”. The return of such forsaken familiarity is therefore “*unheimliche*” (uncanny or unfamiliar), in the literal sense that what is now “un-familiar” has resulted from the estrangement of what was once “familiar” (Freud, 1919, p. 245).

Prior to Heidegger, Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) had similarly discussed the issue of “uncanniness” in the widely influential essay “Das Unheimliche” (The Uncanny) first published in 1919. In search for the semantic meaning of “uncanniness” (*unheimliche*), Freud quoted Schelling in describing that the “*Unheimlich*’ is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Ibid., p. 224). Based on such definition, Freud proceeded to analyze the “unheimliche” from a psychoanalytic perspective and explain how such “unfamiliar” feeling in fact sources from the *recurrence* of what was once familiar. This could be the return of “infantile complexes” which was previously “repressed”, or the re-confirmation of “primitive beliefs” that were thought to be surmounted (Ibid., p. 249). In either case, what is considered “uncanny” involves the

“doubling” of oneself – the return of an estranged self that has come to haunt us from our past.

An apparition might seem daunting and foreign at first, yet upon closer inspection, one might come to realize a deep-seated *familiarity* that spectrally trembles. If one is to truly unveil the haunting specter, it can only be revealed that behind the shroud was an estranged face of our own.



Doppelgänger, 2023

Pure silver candleholders, 3D-printed candles in resin from found-model

A set of two

I have once walked by an antique shop and saw a pair of candleholders through the window. They seemed to be emanating a sense of “uncanniness”, as if they were a “double” that reaffirms each other’s presence. Yet I was not only interested in the holders per se, but also the spectrality they implied. Staring into the vessels, I started seeing an apparition; a recurrence of the candles that were once burned on these holders, as if their ghostly flames had returned from the past to the present and flickered before my very eyes. It was from the

“nullity” of these holders, where I saw the light and heat that was once aflame, as if what was hidden has come into light, revealing themselves as the holders’ haunting past.

The Internet essentially shares such spectrality of these flames, and the haunting nature of digitalization resides in the possibility for a piece of information to be infinitely reproduced, disseminated, and stored – a status close to immortality, with which it will remain forever transferrable and accessible, thus making it a specter that virtually lingers. At times I have re-encountered memes and cute animal videos on social media. Despite having seen them, I enjoy my revisit to them, as they serve as a reminder of a laugh and provide me with a sense of familiarity and warmth. On the contrary, perhaps one could imagine the Angst for having leaked their personal information online – sextapes, nudes, identifications, passwords and more; a part of our deeply private and personal self that will remain forever accessible and reproducible, thus leaving one in agony and helplessness as they are repeatedly haunted by their previous self.

When we encounter repeating objects, numbers or events in life, it is common for one to experience a sense of “helplessness”, as there arises an impression that one is trapped in a loop of “inescapable” recurrence (Ibid., p. 237). For Freud, such repeating experience is “uncanny” as it reminds us of an instinctive compulsion in our unconsciousness – what he called “repetition compulsion”. Such compulsion is so powerful, that it could override our basic instinct to seek pleasure and compel us to repeat even the most traumatic experience in our lives. It is thus, in a loop of repeating patterns when one can feel hopeless, as if they are “daemonically” possessed and dominated by our uncanny compulsion to repeat (Ibid., p. 238).

Looking through this psychoanalytical lens, we can find similar experience from YouTube advertisements, which seems to be recurring in an “uncanny” way. Consider the experience of browsing YouTube, our ‘desire’ to watch video is often rejected by the spontaneous and repetitive episodes of advertisements. Psychoanalytically, such rejection could be considered as a form of “castration”; a concept that is of course, not to be taken in a literal fashion, but rather in the sense that we have encountered “the loss of a prized object” and the “separation” from what we desire. It is through such “object-loss” that one has come to be anxious, thus developing an impulse to repress (Freud, 1927, as cited in May, 1977:142). While being rejected, we are contrarily offered ‘the skip button’; a chance to reconcile our loss and repress our Angst. Yet, what we have learned from Psychoanalysis is that “*repression knows no negation*” (Vardoulakis, 2006, p. 101), and our urging desire to repress the ad has only served to register it. As our ‘Angst to repress’ grows stronger within a five-second window, whatever is shown in this period has nevertheless been reinforced by our very attempt to repress it. Thus, even without watching the full advertisement, we could still be haunted by this five-second fragment. While one could go on with their life thinking that they have successfully skipped the ad, it will come to be “uncanny” when the slogan or melody of the ad suddenly recurs in their minds. Often in the most banal moments, one could find themselves involuntarily humming the melody of the ad and repeating the catchline; and only

by then, has one come to realize their possession by this capitalistic specter, which persists to recur in haunting us.

A Call of Unknown in the Post-Digital



Untitled (W), 2023
Resin-coating on UV print, laminated on acrylic with magnet.

The Netflix series “Black Mirror” directed by Charlie Brooker (2011) portrayed a dystopian world, in which the development of new technology has led to many uncanny and dark events. Yet what is truly “uncanny” about the series resides not in the detrimental development of technology, but rather in the recurrence of human conditions that we have yet to escape. Despite the extensive technological development, we have remained haunted by our existential struggles; “isolation”, “lack of meaning”, “freedom”, and “death” (Yalom, 1989, p. 8) – a set of unanswerable questions that has persisted to interrogate us, as if a call of unknown that is spectrally ringing across space and time.

I was once texting a friend in the elevator, to whom I was sending a question. Yet, due to the lack of signal, the question was trapped and suspended on my phone. It is in this moment of

‘information latency’, when what was originally directed outwards turned inwards, and the banal ‘question’ had momentarily morphed into a more profound form of ‘questioning’ – an existential interrogation of my life.

These suspensive moments in the Digital Milieu could indeed be anxious, yet one is nevertheless offered a chance to reflect upon their lives and realize the possibility-at-hand. It is common for us to remain “inclosed” when facing such ‘anxious questioning’, yet Kierkegaard (1844, p. 124) has told us that “*freedom is constantly communicating*”. While there is no absolute answer to one’s existential vocation, the way to “authenticity” remained in the process of communication. It is in Angst when one might feel uncomfortable and uncanny, but it is also in this existential vacuum when we come to realize our freedom – our freedom to live, our freedom to change and our freedom to pick up this ‘call of unknown’.

Chapter Two – The Dynamics of Angst

Perhaps it is anxious for one to receive a ‘call’, not because of the call per se, but rather because of the ‘caller’, to whom we must respond.

It is in the Digital Milieu when we are ever-more aware of the presence of others, and it seems difficult to remain solitary, with much of our post-digital lives built upon networked communication and social media platforms. Still, the hyperconnectivity of our age is nevertheless a manifestation of the essential ‘sociality’ of our existence, whereby we have always already been subjected to a primordial exposure to the Other, preceding any time or era. In the following chapter, I would attempt to articulate the intersubjective nature of our Post-digital Angst, which serves to reveal our imminent relations with others, as well as an ethical responsibility that we must come to embrace.

While what has been discussed in the first chapter primarily involves Angst that originates within the unity of the subject, it is in the second part of the project where we would attenuate the confines of subjectivity and foregrounds the intersubjective nature of our existence. The fact is our lives are never solitary and have been primordially *ethical*; our irrecusable relations with others could thus engender an ‘intersubjective Angst’ or at times, an ‘Anguish’. It is therefore necessary to consider Angst in a relational context – as a dynamic affect with an intersubjective origin, capable of translating sensibilities into actions while leading oneself to the Other. This chapter thus foregrounds the ‘dynamics of Angst’, which avows the intersubjective nature of Angst and its affective potential in the Digital Milieu.

The Other as a Stranger

In our daily existence, we inevitably encounter the presence of other individuals. Despite one’s attempt to identify with them, there will always remain irreducible differences between us. We might seek to assimilate the others into the ‘Same’ through a pursuit of similarities, or worse, a reduction of the others into manipulable categories, but despite any efforts to ‘totalize’ the Other through identification, a *leakage* of alterity will always ensue, with the Other subsisting as an unfathomable infinity that will always transcend one’s full comprehension.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995) has designated the term “the Other” (*autrui*) to address other human beings and their absolute differences from oneself (Blackburn, 2016, p. 345). For Levinas, we come to encounter the Other as a “Stranger” (*l'Etranger*) who we never know. As he put it:

“Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [l'Etranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site.” (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 39)

This has perhaps come to contrast our common experience in the Digital Milieu, when networked technology has unified most of us by designating everyone as a ‘friend’, but how much do we really know each Other amid this appearance of intimacy? While we make connections with various people online and validate each other’s presence on social media, there is always a degree of ‘plasticity’ that comes to define these virtual relationships. The fact is, social media platforms have already preconfigured ‘friendship’ or ‘fellowship’ as the default relation between individuals, thus reducing other potential types of relations and flattening the nuances in our engagement with the Other. It is therefore a form of ‘friendship of tokens’, which has reduced interpersonal relationships into a default modality defined by codes ⁹. While it has become all too easy to assume ‘intimacy’ with the Other through online communications, we must not forget the essential dimension of Alterity that remains beyond us. No quantification of metadata could truly capture the absolute Other, which sees the Other as a living and breathing being that is radically beyond oneself. Afterall, the Other remains a Stranger with an absolute remoteness, inviolable by the most advanced technology and unreachable by any speed and connectivity.

The Proximity of the Other

Although we can never truly know the Other, we do nevertheless encounter them. For Levinas, we encounter the Other in a paradoxical relationship, one that is *near yet distant*. Despite being a Stranger, the Other is also a “Neighbor” (*Le prochain*), to whom I am primordially responsible. Though infinitely out of reach, the presence of the Other nevertheless appeals to me, as if they are “obsessively” approaching, getting “closer and closer”, “never close enough” (Ibid. p. 82). Levinas referred to such “closeness without distance” as “Proximity” (Ibid. p. xix), which is not to be understood as an objective “state” of closeness that is reduced to a “modality of distance or geometrical contiguity” (Ibid. p. 101). Rather, it is the very immediacy that afflicts me in the approach of the Other – one that urgently presses on me as an “absolute presence” while overwhelming me before I can gather myself (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 78) ¹⁰.

The hyperconnectivity of the Digital Milieu thus takes on a secular form of ‘closeness without distance’ – a ‘Post-digital Proximity’ – where boundaries are dissolved, and distance is suppressed by networked technology. The Other thus approaches me as digital

⁹ Interpersonal relations could never be exhausted by a fixed identification, just as how ‘friendships’ do not come in any measurable forms or shapes. ‘Relationships’ therefore comes to be an intensity that entails a multitude of nuances, each subjected to its own specific context.

¹⁰ When I was a kid, I used to have a recurring dream. In the dream, I would find myself in a spacious area that wasn’t exactly a room, but more of a foreign horizon. In an instant, the space would start to compress, crushing me in the middle and rendering me breathless. It was in the middle when I would find myself in a set of strange gears, rotating firmly on each other, ruthlessly grinding – and that’s when I would wake up. *For me, this is precisely the immediacy of Proximity*, a “restlessness” triggered by a sense of Alterity; one that penetrates your skins and trembles even in your dreams.

significations; from the office to the bedroom, there is a relentless urge for my response, a presence that kept me awake in the middle of the night. “Proximity” is therefore not only a physical interval between two points in space, but the very disturbance of the Self – a “restlessness” that troubles the “I” that is at home (*chez soi*) (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 37). It is precisely this Post-digital Proximity that has come to engender a type of Angst that is intersubjective in nature – an Angst that manifests not only when one is existentially confronted with oneself (as described in Chapter. 1), but also when one is approached by the absolute Other – when one is confronted by the call of the 'Face'.

The Visage of the Other

For Levinas, the primary Proximity of the Other arises in the Face-to-Face relation, in which the infinite Other expresses themselves in the appearance of a “Face” (*le visage*). The Face is not only a set of recognizable features that renders into a visible image, but rather comes as an ‘epiphany’ of the infinite Other, as it breaches into my horizon of everyday experiences and exposes me. (Levinas, 1996, p. 10). One does not simply ‘see’ the transcendental Face, as seeing it would already imply a reduction of the Other into an object of their intentional consciousness (Davis, 1996, p. 46). Rather, the Face ‘visits’ me and ‘expresses’ to me, coming to me as an exposure from the Other. The encounter with the Face is thus not an active ‘disclosure’ from my side, but an exterior ‘revelation’ that comes to me from the “Without” (Levinas, 1961/1969, pp. 65-66). As Levinas put it:

“The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming a image [...] It does not manifest itself by these qualities [...] it expresses itself.”
(Levinas, 1961/1969, pp. 50-51)

While in the Digital Milieu, we see the Other on social media through their profile pictures – pictures of their appearances, their avatars, their *faces*, all these representations of the Other remain flawed “images”, which only renders as “a captive manifestation” of the Other that inevitably fails to truly show their absolute otherness. Paradoxically, the more a social media profile is curated, the less it seems for us to truly know the person. Despite all forms of information that we can gather about them, we never come to know the Other ‘personally’, as they do not “*stand in a form, like an object abides in the plasticity of an aspect*” (Levinas, 1974/1991, p. 87). No profiles, virtual and physical alike, could therefore completely capture the Other in their strangeness, as their “exteriority” necessarily “*overflows any plastic images it leaves in me*” (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 51).

To encounter the Face is therefore not to see its plastic features; its “qualities”, but rather to take *the Face as the Face* – the Face of the absolute Other, thus restraining from reducing the Other into any contents of my mind. As Levinas once put it in an interview: “*The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!*” Without needing to give any descriptive meaning for the Face, it is already the “*meaning all by itself*”, coming to be a “You” (*Vous*), an absolute Other who engenders my intersubjective existence and calls upon my primordial responsibility to another Being (Levinas, 1982/1985, pp. 85-86).



You, 2024

The utterance of the word “You” rotates into a sonic envelope. / 3D nylon print.

Our encounter with the Face is therefore “straightaway ethical”, as it is this very exposure to the Face that calls me into question, suspends any of my action, and directs me towards another being. This “calling into question” of oneself is thus what Levinas called “*ethics*”. (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 43)

The Face comes to me as an imperative ‘ethico-force’ that commands me from a dimension of ‘*Height*’. Yet it is not forceful because it “opposes power with more power”, rather it commands me by an utmost ‘vulnerability’ and ‘passivity’, which appeals for my ethical respond. The “Face” is therefore that of the “the Orphan”; the “poor one”, who solicits me through their “hunger and destitution” (Levinas, 1982/1985, p. 75). Without any covering or mask, the naked and defenseless gaze speaks the very commandment – “*thou shalt not kill*”, which serves as a “no” that opposes my power and violence over it. It is not a “no” of hostility, but a “no” of absolute defenselessness, operating as *passivity in its utmost activity* while calling for my restraint. (Levinas, 1987, p. 21) (Morgan, 2011, p. 69)

Through its moral summons, the poor Face “*attests the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me*” (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 219) and it is from this epiphany that I have come to realize my ethical responsibility – both to the individual in front of me and to all of humanity alike ¹¹. Such primordial responsibility evinces an “interhuman” community ¹², which is neither biologically, nor umbilically rooted, yet unifies us before any interfaces or cables, and remains impossible to be *unplugged*. (Levinas, 1982/2003, p. 165)

The Post-Digital Visage

How then, do we come to encounter the Face of the Other in the Digital Milieu?

Social media has served as a derivative of the primordial Face, an *interFace*, which has engendered the Post-digital Proximity that we are currently experiencing. Yet, it is inherently a ‘plastic image’ - a *mediated* face, which comes to be a surface with rigid expressions. The InterFace is thus mediation par excellence, which contrasts the *immediate* Face of the Other by being always processed and never first.

We are therefore confronted with a ‘closeness of mediation’, which operates as a compression of space that presses on our cheeks and forces us in Proximity with the mediated Other. The interFace approaches me in various forms of impersonal icons and meddling significations, which does not ethically ‘plead’ for my response like the primordial Face of the vulnerable, but ‘prompts’ for my attention through a set of quantified metrics; strategically tasking me to react with a ‘plead of calculation’. It is therefore no longer the Face of total nudity and defenselessness, but rather a proxy face that is easily anonymous and by nature, *insincere*.

¹¹ My grandfather once shared a childhood memory of his that traced back to World War II when China was still under Japan’s invasion. As a kid, my grandfather had seen a critically injured lady lying on the street, immobilized and on the verge of her death. Unable to speak, the lady looked at my grandfather in a silent gaze, in a passivity of all passivity, appealed for help. This gaze had always burdened my grandfather after all these years, on which he apologetically confessed - “*I was only a kid back then, there is nothing I could do*”.

Perhaps his memory serves to remind us that the Face exists not merely as a theoretical construct but rather a very real encounter - a Face in all its flesh and bones, appealing to us.

¹² In Levinas’ writing, the concept of the ‘interhuman’ served as an alternative to the earlier term ‘fraternity’ (*fraternité*) (Bernasconi, 1999, p. 83). The patriarchal language employed in Levinas’ works had drawn considerable criticisms. By choosing terminologies such as “Fraternity” over “Sorority”; the “Son” over the “Daughter”, his writings had privileged a masculine standpoint over a feminine one. Levinas had eventually come to recognize the possible hazards of his terminologies, with his masculine language slowly fading in his later works. (Rat, 2013)



Visage, 2024

Facebook avatar icon UV printed on acrylic glass, Silver Votive plate

Contrasting the ‘Face of Height’ that lies beyond our grasps, the interFace has come to be ‘superficial’ and ‘thin’, taking the form as a glass plane that is easily *handled*. While it offers the false impression of transparency and accessibility, the InterFace in reality, embodies

opacity and austerity. Through mediation, the InterFace mitigated interpersonal nuances that radiate in face-to-face relations – *bodily gestures, tonalities, intensities, affects*, all are essential to breathe words into flesh, but are diminished when mediated. It has thus lost its warmth, just as the residual heat from the cheek imminently fades with distance. While the primordial Face has called for ‘care’, the InterFace has facilitated ‘carelessness’, operating under the guise of intimacy while risking the propagation of indifference.

Destitution Behind the InterFace

Still, we should remember that behind the formality of the interFace is nevertheless a trace of ‘destitution’, and while mediation has blunted our senses for the Other’s vulnerability and tenderness, *it is always in the encounter with frailty when care first stirs*. Every signification from the InterFace has remained an appeal from the destitute Other, approaching with its hunger and supplicating for our response. While these significations could take on various forms such as posts, messages or likes, the right way to approach these significations is not to only see it in its semantic contents, but to discern their very “signifyingness”, which is first and foremost an ‘assignation’ from the frail Other – antecedent to any semantic content and information, calling for our response. (Levinas, 1974/1991, p. 5).

It is easy to notice an extreme hunger for attention in our digital culture, but to truly understand this attention-seeking behavior requires first, the suspension of judgement. One should not simply dismiss this thirst for reactions as an act of narcissism but to recognize the immense destitution that it has entailed – a destitution that has nevertheless stemmed from an utmost hunger, seeking for response. Every online signification is therefore an ‘appeal to relate’, and behind any attention-seeking act lies a vulnerable user that is soliciting for care. In the end, every user is first a ‘seeker’ before they are a ‘speaker’, and it is thus not so much a question of why some are soliciting attention through extreme measures, but rather how one should address this drought of care, so pervasive, that even *hate* is taken as a slight dew of *love*.

We must relearn not only to see from the optics of the third-party, but to meet the eyes of individuals in all their flesh. To truly engage with an online ‘post’ from an Other is not to read its content alone, but to encounter its underlying solicitation and realize our capacity to respond. It is through this encounter with the vulnerable Face when we could realize our ethical responsibility to the Other, both online and offline, coming to be oriented as what Levinas called “*the-one-for-the-other*.” (Levinas, 1974/1991, p. 85)

The Visage of Surveillance

While we commonly encounter the Face of the Other in the Digital Milieu as the InterFace, we are simultaneously confronted by another ‘visage’, operating more as a ‘vision’, namely the watchful guise of ‘Surveillance’.

Surveillance *faces* us daily, but remains anonymous and expressionless, unable to be met. It is thus not a 'Face', but simply an 'eye', coming to be a vision that does not originate from a Face of flesh, but persists as an all-encompassing 'stare', ceaselessly watches in a disembodied and spiritless manner. Unlike the Face of the vulnerable, Surveillance does not emerge out of destitution, but rather an effort to control. If even the most forceful commandment requires a degree of willingness from those who are commanded, Surveillance does not command but directly 'seizes', coming to be a savage that does not solicit but voraciously devours. It does not plead like the primordial Face, nor even prompt like the interFace, but simply 'takes', capturing us as tokens of pure indifference. Surveillance is therefore 'impartial' – not so much that it is ill-motivated, but rather unmotivated, impassionate and apathetic. Contrasting to the passivity of a destitute Face, it operates through sheer activity and exploitation, taking everything with a blank stare and bluntly does. While the interFace has 'disrespected' distance through intrusive mediations, Surveillance has simply 'dismissed' distance.

It is therefore not a 'gaze' but a 'stare' that targets us in Surveillance. A stare differs from a gaze as it lacks emotional substance. If the optics of *gazing* implies desire and brings forth disturbance, the *stares* of Surveillance does not even disturb, as it approaches in absolute covertness, predatorily stealth. It is thus a silent imposition that comes to be eerily convenient. While the eye of Surveillance takes on many physical forms such as cameras, it is in the Digital Milieu when it has further concealed itself by dissolving into latent algorithms, obviating even the prosthetics of the lens, and capturing not only our visual appearances but also our behaviors and tendencies that we ourselves are unaware of. Such visual camouflage is further accompanied by its extensive assimilation into our daily lives, which sees its presence being legitimized in the name of 'convenience'. The danger of Surveillance in the Digital Milieu has therefore, stemmed from our very *indifference* towards it – the problem is: we might know that we are being surveyed while our data extracted and exploited for profit, but we nevertheless willingly accept it in exchange for our digital experiences. This voluntary surrender and selective ignorance are precisely what constituted the greatest threat of post-digital surveillance.

After all, the stare of Surveillance comes to be an institutionalized vision of the Other – a look that is so radicalized, becomes objectifying and annihilates the genuineness of the 'first-person'. It is therefore an attempt to reduce and totalize, reflecting *a devour of the ethics by politics*. While we should strive to recognize the vulnerable Face behind the InterFace, we should, on the contrary, cultivate vigilance toward the watchful Eye of Surveillance, so subtle, that it is easy to condone its vision of malice.

A Pressing Accusation and Post-digital Shame

Other than an excess of information, it is in the Digital Milieu when there is simultaneously an excess of 'faces', so confronting, that it afflicts a sense of accusation. As I am surrounded by the Others in the Digital Milieu, I find myself under pressure and "singled out". The Other persecutes me through various notifications while accuses me for an "indebtedness before

any loan", eliciting for my response (Ibid., p. 111), and it is amid this pressing 'accusation' from the Other that I have become encumbered *in my own skin*.

Recall the time when we commute on public transport and a flux of Others boarded; is it not in this affective instant of clausturation when we are forced to contract inwards and drawn to our breath, growing increasingly aware of our own embodied presence? The Proximity of the Other therefore exposes 'me' and awakes the 'I', summoning one to squarely face the Other in their solicitation. While an individual loses themselves in "earthly nourishments" prior to encountering the Other (Levinas, 1979/1987, p. 64), it is when one is exposed to the Face of the Stranger when the ignorance of Being recedes into the background and the sense of Self emerges. The confined sense of selfhood is thus revealed by the encirclement of the Other. Through the exposing 'accusation' from the Other, one is "stripped of their pride" and becomes shamefully *naked*. (Levinas, 1974/1991, p. 110)

It is perhaps not so much what we have done that makes us 'shameful', but the very *exposure* itself, which uncovers our vulnerable passivity and finds us in an inescapable 'nudity'. As Levinas put it:

"Shame arises each time we are unable to make others forget [faire oublier] our basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot bury or cover up." (Levinas, 1982/2003, p. 64)

One imminently feels ashamed when they cannot stop the Other from gazing at the naked 'I', and this inability to escape from the Other afflicts a physical sensation described by Levinas as "too tight in its skin". 'Shame' therefore, does not merely manifest psychologically, but also physiologically, emerging through our sensibility when exposed to the gaze of the Other as the "sheer visibility of our Being" is revealed. (Levinas, 1982/2003, p. 36).

The 'visibility' of oneself thus plays an important role in our embodiment of Shame. It is generally unnerving for one to be 'seen', especially when we were previously unaware of such vision from the Other and unable to cover our nakedness. The hyperconnectivity of the Digital Milieu has heightened our exposure to such pervasive visibility, with us growing ever more aware of ourselves and increasingly subjected to a 'Post-digital Shame'. Recall the time in the pandemic when most of us frequently engage with Others through online meetings; one could easily feel ashamed for having accidentally unmuted themselves or turned on their cameras during a public call – coming to be 'naked' (sometimes in a literal sense) and unable to escape from such unexpected exposure. Inherently, the very sensibility of being 'seen' always implies the presence of the Other, which resembles the gaze of a Stranger beyond my reach. When faced with this accusing vision, one could embody a constriction within themselves; an 'Anguish' that draws us back into our utmost inwardness amid the presence of the Other. Being 'seen' is thus to be accused and judged by the Other's ambiguous gaze.

Do we not feel agitated when we send a text message to another person on a messaging platform, only to find the message being marked as 'seen' without any response in return? The absence of a reply leaves us in a state of uncertainty, as we are now 'seen' by the Other without any reassuring acknowledgment in return. This sense of 'asymmetry' inherently

renders one passive, as they are confronted with their own vulnerability and feelings of Shame. The message has come to resemble one's naked body, laid bare in front of the Other's unflinching gaze without any approval or praise. To be left on 'seen' in a chat is thus to open oneself to accusation, becoming exposed to the judgment of the Other's inscrutable view. It is in this state of nakedness when one finds themselves subjected to the gaze of the Other, but also crucially, their own critical judgment, coming to be *self-accusing*. As Levinas put it: "*For what is the meaning of shameful nakedness? It is this that one seeks to hide from the others, but also from oneself.*" (Ibid). The visibility that gives rise to Shame, therefore, does not only stem from the Other's gaze, but also take root from within, as *I become my own accusation*. We often 'cringe' away from embarrassing social occasions and become momentarily captured by memories of shameful acts in the past. Though I am no longer 'seen' by the Other in the present, my body nevertheless shrinks from the trace of their gaze, as I accuse myself through a vigilant vision from the within and grow intensely conscious of my own nudity then and now, remain "riveted" to myself (Ibid).

The post-digital Shame we embody now emerges from the unprecedented fact that never have we been exposed to so many faces simultaneously. Parallel to the overwhelming Proximity of the Other, the brimming visibility of our post-digital lives has engendered an ever-growing urge for one to compare themselves with the Other – an infinite measurement that cannot help but inevitably evinces one's inadequacy. Amid a culture for showcasing achievements online, one could quickly fall into the abyss of self-measurement, which only elicits insecurity and enviousness.¹³ To measure is always to *curb*, and the detriment of measurement stems from its imminent reduction of differences, which will always render oneself lesser and thinner, producing a set of limiting metrics that simplifies varied identities and alternative potentialities. The recurrence of 'self-measurement' has thus driven out the narcissism that plagues the Digital Milieu, where one encounters both the accusing gaze of the Other and their own, becomes 'swollen' in Shame and eager to respond through the most extravagant display. It is thus an act of boasting, *a swelling of oneself*. As one is unable to cope with their own vulnerable nakedness, they are charged with an impulse to dress up and cloak their bare self with all embellishments available, desperately hoping to match the Height of the Other. Contrary to the common conception of 'narcissism' as being full of oneself, the exact opposite is true, that the *narcissist is full of Others*. Without reconciliation with one's own vulnerability amid the Other's gaze, the narcissistic 'I' will only further harden and freeze amid icy metrics, leaving one increasingly fortified and impenetrable.

¹³ This tendency of 'self-measurement' or otherwise known as 'social comparison' has been clearly illustrated through Meta's (previously Facebook) own research regarding Instagram's impact on teenagers. According to an investigation carried out by the Wall Street Journal, "*In one study of teens in the U.S. and U.K., Facebook found that more than 40% of Instagram users who reported feeling "unattractive" said the feeling began on the app. About a quarter of the teens who reported feeling "not good enough" said the feeling started on Instagram*". (Wells, et al., 2021)



Untitled (Narcissistic), 2024 - From the series “Untitled (Conditions)”

The Other as Trauma

The encounter with the accusing Other has thus come to be a ‘trauma’ – an intrusive force that breached into my horizon and inscribed traces of alterity deep in my flesh, sustaining as a ‘laceration’ that can never be healed.

Trauma, by its innate character, always relates to a wound of the past, which had long been sustained before one comes to be aware of their lasting effects in the present. It therefore manifests as a lingering trace from an encounter that we can never catchup. Levinas posited that one has been traumatically exposed to the Other before they can recall, rendering it an affective event that is ahistorical and immemorial, echoing from a time that precedes our memory. We have therefore always already been assigned by the Other traumatically prior to any of our willful commitment. As he put it:

Here the blow of the affection makes an impact, traumatically, in a past more profound than all that I can reassemble by memory, by historiography, all that I can dominate by the a priori - in a time before the beginning. (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 88)

The persecution from the Other is therefore a traumatic “inspiration” that comes from the beyond, manifesting as an ‘affectivity’ that overwhelms the rational mind, resulting in a “disequilibrium, a delirium” of oneself. (Ibid., p. 101) This “deafening trauma” of Alterity “breaks the thread of consciousness” and hits me before I can know it, subjecting me in a “passivity of all passivity” in the Face of the Other. (Ibid., p. 111) (Critchley, 1999/2005, p. 75) The ‘force of Alterity’ thus emerges as a bodily affect that precedes any of my conscious awareness; an affective “ambiguity” that situates across the body and the mind, between the “sense” and the “non-sense”. (Bergo, 2021, p. 31) It arises as a dynamic sensibility that ‘moves’ me before I could consciously reflect, and it is precisely this corporeal nature of the force that has rendered our bond with the Other ‘affective’ from the very first instance. (Critchley, 1999/2005, p. 79).

Through this affective ‘violence’ of the Other, we have been inscribed with something “foreign”, which manifests as the very sensibility of “having-the-other-in-one's-skin” (Levinas, 1974/1991, pp. 101, 115). This “immanentization of Otherness” engenders an Anguish, wherein one contracts to the point of “fission” and becomes inverted inside-out, coming to be a “reversion of convexity into concavity” that “turned me to an Other”. (Bergo, 2021, p. 31) (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 289). In this way, it is an intersubjective Anguish that has marked the very commencement of one’s subjectivity, which sees one being awakened as a *responsible subject*, incarnating as a passive “I” that must respond to the Other. If the Heideggerian ‘Angst’ denotes the moment when Dasein is disclosed to the nothingness of Being, the Levinasian ‘Anguish’ emerges when we are exposed to the Other and persecuted to our *skin*, originating from our very traumatic subjection to the Other. As Levinas put it:

“This anguish is not the existential “being-for-death,” but the constriction of an “entry inwards,” or the “hither side” of all extension. It is not a flight into the void, but a movement into full-ness, the anguish of contraction and breakup.” (Ibid., p. 108)

What charges me in this Anguish is therefore a ‘responsibility’ to the Other, which binds me as a “hostage” and will not let me slip away - “without evasion, without shirking”, burdening me with “a responsibility stronger than death”. (Ibid., p. 195). This ‘Anguish’ is thus precisely an ‘interpersonal responsibility’ in ‘corporeality’.



Phantom Vibration, 2024

A vinyl record featuring the iPhone's default vibration pattern sonically stretched 20x times and progressively surfaces back to its original form. (<https://vimeo.com/953276287>)

Do we not embody an intersubjective Anguish in the Digital Milieu, wherein even the virtual Proximity of the Other could elicit corporeal sensations in us? The unexpected 'rings' and 'prompts' from our phones, for example, reach us affectively before they do cognitively, capable of instigating an pre-conscious tensing of our body that precedes our comprehension of its semantic contents. Notifications prompts are therefore affective 'visitations' from the Other, which first and foremost manifests as a 'sensibility' that operates in our flesh. These virtual 'prompts' land like a *visceral punch*, which breaks into my horizon of daily activities and summons for my response. One's unease towards the bombarding notifications is thus a bodily repulsion – an embodied Anguish that stems from a precarity towards the unexpected intrusion of the Other ¹⁴. Given the potentially traumatic nature of these prompts, even the

¹⁴ Levinas had similarly spoke of the case of the "doorbell", which interrupts the individual's daily activities. (See "Phenomenon and Enigma" published in 1957/1967/1987) (Levinas, 1987, pp. 61-73) The ringtone from our smartphone, however, comes not only as a form of acoustic interruption, but often a physical one with a

most delightful melody could turn into a recurring nightmare when being used as a ringtone; as the acoustic pattern could gradually become a sign for the intrusive Other, resembling a haunting omen that could strangle air.

When facing all the persecuting prompts in the Digital Milieu, one could grow 'susceptive' even in the absence of the Other, as they could find themselves in an heightened sensibility for any unexpected 'visitations'. For Levinas, it is through this traumatic encounter with the Other that we have developed a "pre-originary susceptiveness" (Ibid., p. 122), which sustains as an affective wounding that is 'imprinted' in us, akin to a 'bruising' that diachronically burns in all our future encounters with the Other. The common experience of 'Phantom vibration' in the Digital Milieu demonstrates such 'bruising', whereby one could feel their phone vibrates even when there is not any notification. As one immanentizes the persecuting prompts in the Digital Milieu, their body could become imbued with a 'susceptiveness' towards Alterity, with the Other lingering like a phantom under our skin, persisting as a void that momentarily transfigures through our physical convulsions. Phantom vibrations are therefore a 'bodily trembling of Alterity', a visceral echo that resonates from an unrecalable past. It comes as an affective trace that has been preconsciously inscribed in one's body, indicative of a sensitized bruise that is never to be healed.

All relationships are therefore necessarily 'traumatic', in the sense that one's horizon is imminently breached by an unassimilable Other. Still, it is precisely through this Trauma when one could encounter 'transcendence' – of what is radically beyond oneself, and it is when one is traumatically exposed in a 'passivity of all passivity', when 'activity' could first be engendered.

From Anguish and Shame to Responsibility

While the persecution from the Other engenders Anguish and shame, it is simultaneously through such exposure to the Other when we have first become ethically 'responsible'. For Levinas, it is precisely in the approach of the Other when we are "affectively interrupted", emerging as a socially awoken "I" that is 'elected' and tasked with an ethical responsibility. (Bergo, 2021, p. 416) As he put it:

"[...] to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility. This surplus of being, this existential exaggeration that is called being me - this protrusion of ipseity into being is accomplished as a turgescence of responsibility." (Levinas, 1996, p. 17)

Though one could feel traumatically 'persecuted' by waves of notifications prompts, it is precisely through such sensibility of persecution when one is 'elected', coming to be a responsible 'I'. Despite being affectively interrupted and wounded by the Other, one is

vibrational pattern that accompanies the 'notification prompt', further positioning it as a bodily sensation of the Other's unexpected intrusion.

simultaneously imputed with a “turgescence” of responsibility, and it is in the face of such ethical ‘swelling’ and ‘Anguish’, when the ‘I’ takes shape – coming to be conscious of oneself in a visceral responsibility.

For Levinas, this accusation from the Other resembles the *Logos* (λόγος) – the word of God, to which the Self responds like Abraham with “me voici” or “here I am”. (Critchley, 2008, p. 57). As he put it: “*The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone*”. It is thus in this affective moment of accusation when the Self, despite all its inadequacy, becomes an “I” and comes into discourse with the infinite Other. ‘Shame’ and ‘Anguish’ are therefore what first put me into question, suspended my arbitrary actions in the face of the Other and fundamentally marked the beginning of interpersonal relationships (Peperzak, 1993, p. 176).

While one might feel accused and persecuted by the various ‘Faces’ in the Digital Milieu, it is precisely through such Proximity of the Other, when one is ‘elected’, coming to be awoken by an ‘intersubjective Anguish’ that reminds us of our responsibility to the Other. The moment when our phone rings is simultaneously when we are elected as an ‘I’, charged with a corporeal responsibility that we must embrace. Despite its intrusive nature, social media could nevertheless serve as a source of reminder, alerting us of the vulnerable Face beyond oneself, while prompting us to consider the destitute Other. Though traumatic in nature, the urgent Call from the Other is precisely what fractures our barriers and directs us towards the Other, as one transforms into an empathetic “I” that embodies an openness crucially required in this age of ever-growing estrangement. Ultimately, we must strive to remember the Others beyond oneself, for it is through this openness to the Other that ‘transcendence’ is first made possible – when one is “called on the brink of tears and laughter to responsibility” while a ‘Goodness’ beyond one’s pleasure is established. (Levinas, 1974/1991, p. 18)

The Dynamics of Angst and its Ripples

Through the work of Levinas, we have examined the intersubjective nature of our Post-digital Angst, which demonstrates how many of our anxious experiences in the Digital Milieu pertains to our irrecusable relations with the Other and the ethical responsibility that we must confront. Levinas' philosophy helps us understand the nature of an ‘intersubjective Anguish’, which emerges as an affective and ethical sensibility in the Face of the Other. It is therefore an ‘Anguish’ (a corporeal ‘Angst’) that is dynamic in nature, operating as a bodily intensity that effectuates a ‘disequilibrium’ in oneself and ‘moving’ us towards the Other. This ‘Anguish’ is therefore what dynamically engenders the very possibility of interpersonal relationships.

Yet, to further study the ‘dynamics’ of Angst is not only to understand its nature as an intersubjective affectivity, but also to examine the consequent ‘impacts’ it might bring forth. Beyond studying the nature of our Post-digital Angst, we should also explore the socio-psychical ‘ripples’ it produces, including its interrelation with other affective experiences and the potential activities it might cultivate in the Digital Milieu.

Angst and Hostility

A common affect that is interrelated with Angst is 'Hostility'. Etymologically, the word 'Hostility' originated from the Latin '*Hostis*', meaning "enemy" or "stranger". (Wedgwood, 1872, p. 322) If, as Levinas suggested, that the Other who intrudes into our horizons has remained a 'Stranger' that can never be known due to their radical alterity, this very "unforeseeableness" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 199) is precisely what could elicit my hostile response, provoking a defensive stance that is nonetheless rooted in my insecurity towards the absolute Other. Hostility can therefore be understood as an affect that is inherently 'reactive' and 'intersubjective', which is always directing outwards and implicating both the Other to which it is directed, as well as the antecedent relation from which it arises.

Hostility's afflictive nature stems from one's inherent vulnerability in a relationship, where the individual has first and foremost been passive when exposed to the unknown Other. To follow Levinas's account, it is through encountering the Other that one embodies an 'intersubjective Anguish', which affectively disturbs their horizon and confronts them with an interpersonal responsibility. 'Hostility' is thus the affective urge to negate such responsibility, arising as an attempt to refuse the Other while closing oneself off. Rollo May, for instance, has noted how one's inability to cope with 'responsibility' could often engender Hostility. As he put it:

"Clinical experience yields many examples like the following: A dependent person, finding himself in a situation of responsibility with which he feels he cannot cope, reacts with hostility both toward those who have placed him in the situation and toward those (usually parents) who caused him to be unable to cope with it" (May, 1977, p. 222)

It is in encountering of the Other when one is rendered 'ethically responsible', and this could certainly induce Angst within oneself. As the Other corners me with their Proximity, the reactive affect of Hostility could naturally emerge as a defense against this traumatic intrusion that halts my autonomous life. One's hostile reaction is thus a desperate attempt to 'retaliate', aiming to restore their lost autonomy in the face of the pressing Other. In this light, it is not surprising that most perpetrators of aggression primarily consider themselves victims, with their inability to cope with the Other as an ever-stranger unfortunately translating into Hostility. Their hostile impulses towards the Other are therefore always 'self-justified' by projecting a similarly hostile Other, who they believe wanted to hurt them in the first place; as psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1885 - 1952) put it, the self-justification is the following: *"It is not the individual himself who wants to cheat, to steal, to exploit, to humiliate, but the others want to do such things to him"* (Horney, 1937/2007, p. 70).

The fact is our relationship with the Other has always remained conflicted. On one side, the Other could come across as potentially hostile towards us, while on the other side, they remain someone that we could depend upon. It is thus in this conflict between '*Hostility*' and

'Hospitality' when Angst (referred by Horney as *Anxiety*¹⁵) could emerge. For Horney, Anxiety and Hostility share a reciprocal relationship, "*with one always generating and reinforcing the other*". (Ibid. p. 74) This conflicting dynamic could be traced in one's childhood development, who might have unfortunately encountered parents that were either hostile or indifferent, thus failing to provide them with the necessary affection and security. Such lack of care could render the child "helpless" and "isolated", engendering what Horney called "Basic Anxiety" (Horney, 1945, p. 41) and therefore, easily provoking their "reactive hostility in defense" (Horney, 1937/2007, p. 74). While a child might develop hostile impulses against their negligent parents, they must nevertheless remain dependent on them. This conflicting experience between their hostile impulses and the simultaneous need for dependence could ultimately lead to their repressed Hostility and the reciprocal Anxiety, coming to be a 'vicious cycle'. As Horney summed up perfectly, this conflicting feeling is precisely "*I have to repress my hostility because I need you*" (Ibid., p. 86).

Post-digital Violence ¹⁶

As Horney postulated, repressed Hostility could revolve within the person "*as an affect which is highly explosive and eruptive, and therefore tends to be discharged*" (Ibid., p. 67). It is therefore in this explosive discharge of Hostility when *Violence* is engendered, emerging as a 'performance of transgression' beyond the threshold of oneself, against the Other.

How then, is Violence being performed in the Digital Milieu? A major aspect of Post-digital Violence stems from its primary execution through networked communication. Contrary to the immediacy of physical violence, it is precisely the seeming airiness and effortlessness of such mediated Violence that renders it evermore impactful and severe. In this regard, I would like to postulate three interrelated forms of Post-digital Violence, namely '*Symbolic Violence*', '*Circulatory/ Impassive Violence*' and lastly, '*Systemic Violence*', all of which share a mediated nature to varying extents and comes to be performed via the extensivity of networked communication in the Digital Milieu.

Symbolic Violence:

Much of the Post-digital Violence is performed through *symbols*, which is taken in the widest sense to denote all forms of linguistic expressions. In the Digital Milieu, symbolic violence has become the predominant mode of interpersonal transgression, executed through the

¹⁵ While the term 'Anguish' is used to denote a more bodily Angst, the term 'Anxiety' will be employed in the socio-psychical context.

¹⁶ While Levinas considered the Face of the Other as the call for our ethical conscience and acknowledgement, the contrary 'negation' of the Other has simultaneously remained a possibility and even at times, a "temptation". In fact, this very temptation to negate the Other, or what I take as 'hostility', is precisely what has rendered 'violence', and 'murder' the "most banal incident of human history". (Levinas, 1961/1969, pp. 198 - 199)

mediation of malice-charged languages in various forms and media, replacing the traditional role of physical violence. Despite being symbolic in nature, the affective impact of such violence is not any less severe than the physical ones, as it could be just as intense and visceral to those who suffered from it.

As J. L. Austin (1911 – 1960) has rightly noted: "*to say something is to do something*" (Austin, 1962, p. 120). Symbols and indeed, language are inherently 'performative'; they do not merely describe the world, but 'act' upon it, capable of shaping our lived realities. Other than informing us, symbols first and foremost 'affect' us. Consider the performativity of symbols in ritualistic ceremonies; a religious icon is never solely defined by its formality but rather derives 'authenticity' through its 'affective performance'. For the believers, religious symbols are not just information, but operate as the surrogates of 'divinity', which is what has saturated these symbols with its affective potential in the first place. The 'reality' of religious icons is therefore paradoxically established through a reference to 'spectrality', coming to be defined precisely by what it is *not*. This conferred divinity that empowers the icons, is what Judith Butler (1956 -) referred as 'historicity', which serves as the "history" that has become "internal" to the icons, giving the icons their "force" and is carried along with their performance, coming to be "invoked and reconsolidated" in the moment of its display. (Butler, 1997, p. 36)

Through its performance of divinity, religious symbols come to be substantiated, operating beyond their mere formalities. While the affective performance of religious symbols is highly dependent on whether their perceivers are familiar with the lexicon of the referenced religion, one could nevertheless be 'affected' even when they are not familiar with the context. A self-proclaimed atheist might easily trivialize a blessing from a priest or shaman, since they do not consider themselves a believer of such religion, but they must nevertheless acknowledge that a sense of unease could arise when a 'hex' is performed on them. What has become so real in a hex is not 'divinity', but rather the 'hostility' of an Other. This performance of '*hostility in a symbolic form*' comes to be materialized through one's affective embodiment and manifests as an interpersonal Anxiety. In the same light, the affective nature of direct symbolic violence, such as hate speech or verbal abuse, primarily functions like a 'hex', which is essentially the '*performance of hostility*' from an Other. The linguistic content of these abuses has therefore become secondary to its perceiver, as the embedded hostility first punctured its symbolic carrier and violently transgresses the individual, stabbing them 'affectively' before it does 'symbolically'. It is precisely through this affective and performative nature of language that symbolic violence can be 'transubstantiated', capable of inducing an *Anguish* that is physically felt.



Untitled (Traumatic Blessing), 2024

Engraving of the 'Sign of Benediction' on plexiglass, coated with pepper spray.

Yet, the power of symbolic violence extends beyond its immediate affective impacts, as its ultimate brutality lies in its ability to shape 'essence' through a process of symbolic habituation and sedimentation. This power of language in shaping things is what Slavoj Žižek (1949 -) following Heidegger, called the “essencing” ability of language. As he put it:

“A fundamental violence exists in this “essencing” ability of language: our world is given a partial twist, it loses its balanced innocence, one partial color gives the tone of the whole.” (Žižek, 2008, p. 68)

Often through the articulation of language, things are given its ‘essence’, a tint of color that affects our perception on reality. Language, therefore, does not only convey meanings, but actively construct and impose “a certain symbolic field”, which determines our way of approaching the world (Ibid. , p. 60).

Symbolic violence in the Digital Milieu is often performed in the act of ‘name-calling’, which involves the painting of a tainted image to defame and debase a target. This unjust figuration of an individual (or a group) reduces them in a desecrating projection¹⁷, and it is through this caricature where the subject becomes restrained and diminished (Crignon, 2004, p. 104). The online culture of ‘meme-ing’, in this sense, could operate as a form of symbolic violence, particularly through its potential production and dissemination of biased representations. While traditional propaganda aims at populating ideology with a claim to objectivity, memes do not claim to be objective; rather, it is vehemently celebrated for its partiality and arbitrariness. The overtly 'partial' and 'casual' nature of memes is precisely what makes them so popular, and consequently, so dangerous, as it excuses the immense violence that it could produce, much like how the most offensive utterances are often excused when ‘it’s only a joke’. Yet, is it not often through jokes that the most harm is sustained? A joke is never just a joke, when it has the potential to shape identities that take root in reality. Under the guise of its humor and arbitrariness, memes could therefore serve as potent vectors for the proliferation of various discriminatory ideologies. To grasp how *realistic* memes truly are, we need only consider how nearly impossible it is for a person to be 'un-memed' once they have become a meme icon. It is precisely through this restraining and enduring effect that we can witness the ultimate violence of language.¹⁸

Circulatory and Impassive Violence:

The types of symbolic violence mentioned above remains relatively ‘direct’ in its operation, where its forceful trajectory could still be traced back to a perpetrator (or a group of them),

¹⁷ Levinas was highly critical of the figurative production of ‘images’, which was extended to his critique on the arts. To see his critique, please refer to his essay ‘*Reality and its Shadow*’, first published in 1948. An elaboration on the Levinasian critique of ‘figuration’ could also be read in ‘*Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image*’ (2004) by Philippe Crignon.

¹⁸ Levinas had remained an iconoclast based on the same logic, as he recognized how an icon of the Other, a *figuration*, will always remain an unjust representation and ultimately, an act of violence.

who has directed such violence against their targets. Yet, such 'directedness' of violence gradually fades as our lives become increasingly integrated with the milieu of networked communication. Consequently, the notion of a clear 'bad guy' who commits violence is progressively replaced by a more diffused and commonly shared evil.

Much of the hate speech that has proliferated online transcends the mere act of name-calling; it doesn't just transgress by painting a tainted image of its target but achieves its ultimate violence through the 'circulation' of such image. It is precisely through this process of circulation and habituation that makes 'memes' such a powerful medium. Consider the humiliating act of 'doxing', where private documents such as images or information of individuals are spread online. The aim of this act is for these private aspects to reach and circulate in a broader social milieu, where the subject is forcibly *exposed* and humiliated, coming to be *seen* and stigmatized through the public eyes. Such threat of online humiliation echoes historical practices of public shaming, which has classically served as a method of criminal punishment elicited by sovereign power. Yet, it is in the Digital Milieu, where this 'power of punishment' could be wielded by anyone at their discretion, often not for the greater good of a community, but rather for the sake of asserting personal power.

A profound tragedy of symbolic violence lies in the fact that such accusations not only permeate one's surrounding community but also sediment at the very core of the individual. When confronted with a symbolic abuse, the accused subject often subconsciously aligns with the unjust allegations before any rebuttal occur. This phenomenon exemplifies what Butler referred as our "*primary vulnerability and susceptibility to the call of recognition*" (Butler, 1997, p. 26). Despite the inherently unfair and unjust nature of these accusations, the subject often becomes a subconscious believer of these unfounded claims, and it is precisely through this internalization that we come to understand the insidious power of language in shaping both our social reality and our deepest sense of self.

While previously, victims of bullying could physically escape their tormentors, today most acts of bullying occur online. It is this mediated nature of Post-digital Violence that has rendered it more diffused and inescapable. As Ute Frevert (1954 -) has noted in her studies of humiliation, the "internet follows everyone everywhere, stopping time and levelling space", and its "considerably more difficult for victims of online attacks to defend themselves". (Frevert, 2020, p. 137) It is through the pervasiveness and relative 'permanence' of the internet, that trauma sustained from online hate-speech could persist far beyond its initial transgression. This enduring nature of online content amplifies a sense of despair and 'powerlessness', which is what characterizes the severity of this violence.

At the core of public shaming lies what Frevert termed "the power of witnesses" (Frevert, 2020, p. 3), or indeed, the power of 'gaze'. It is precisely through the gaze of the public, that an act of humiliation is granted its shaming power. One must therefore not forget that *our very own gaze has the same power*. Often unwittingly, we have facilitated such violence by watching and sharing debasing contents, with algorithmic structures designed to utilize our attentions for promoting circulations. This has led to a form of 'impassive violence' that we

have all, in some way or another, committed. Violence is not necessarily performed with intentionality or hostility, as trauma could still be sustained without intended aggression. In fact, the most traumatizing violence is often committed in moments of one's total ignorance. The colloquial Chinese phrase 「無情力」, literally translated as the "impassive force," describes the unrestrained 'power of ignorance', which often results in an explosive damage that cannot be estimated or contained. One might recall accidentally striking a body part and experiencing excruciating pain. The severity of such force is achieved not so much by its physical mass, but by its unexpectedness; its *ignorance*, leaving the force uncontained. The violence of such impassive force therefore lies in its very lack of restraint, and the damage caused by it often exceeds a directed and intentional force. Even in the case of direct conflict, the individual who wishes to harm the Other is arguably conscious of their use of force and executing a degree of moderation, but it is often in our 'total ignorance' that the most violent force is performed beyond our control. At times we might not recognize the potency of certain digital contents, but an 'impassive violence' could already be committed simply by 'witnessing' and participating in the chain of digital circulations. Such dispersion of force through social media resembles a chain of 'blind punches', gaining momentum through a 'circulatory amalgamation', and creating damage that cannot be visibly seen. In this context, the notion of a single 'evil perpetrator' has faded, as we come to realize how we might all be contributing to this impassive and unintentional, but nevertheless extremely injurious violence. You might not have meant it, but the damage is done, nonetheless.

Systemic Violence:

The above elucidation leads us to examine the most profound and radical form of violence in our current era, which is the 'systemic violence' intrinsic to the Digital Milieu. This violence is precisely the Post-digital 'system' itself, characterized by the pervasive imposition of digital infrastructures and its algorithmic governance of our daily lives. This alludes to Žižek's account of an "objective violence", which is mostly 'invisible' and inherent to the "normal" state of things". Despite its apparent subtlety, systemic violence often produces "catastrophic consequences", not through overt disruptions, but through the "smooth functioning" of the system (Žižek, 2008, p. 2). It is therefore this very latent violence that has engendered and facilitated the first two forms of violence; enabling 'symbolic' violence such as hate speech to reach an unprecedented breadth in the Digital Milieu, while utilizing our 'impassive force' in its propagation and circulation.

What renders this systemic imposition so violent is its 'inescapability', compounded by our frequent inability to recognize its problematic nature. This is perhaps what is implied by the term 'Post-digital'; that we have been irreversibly transformed by digital technology, with no possibility of reversal, and it is precisely through this 'naturalization of digital technology' that power can be ever more efficiently executed. As Byung-Chul Han (1959 -) observed:

'Structural violence is not violence in the strict sense of the word. Rather, it is a rulership technique. It makes it possible to rule discreetly and much more efficiently than ruling by violence' (Han, 2017, p. 78).

The pervasive naturalization of digital infrastructure has empowered those with access and control over these structures to forge and manipulate an 'affective economy'. In this economy, our emotions and affects are algorithmically triggered and capitalized into resources, as affective intensities are translated into quantified attention spans, hit rates, and clicks. Under the structural encumbrance of the Digital Milieu, we find ourselves in the paradoxical position of being both the 'contributors' and the 'victims' of this violence; we produce contents that we ourselves consume, unwittingly perpetuating the very exploitation that we suffer, as big tech corporations breed wealth from our affects. The biggest danger of the Digital Milieu is therefore the false sense of equality and commonality that it seemingly offers, when in fact this apparent flattening of hierarchy through networked communication is simply a mask for a more latent forms of hierarchical structure, characterized by a widening gap between those who passively dwells within the digital platforms, and those who possess the power to shape the very topology of this system.

The potency of systemic violence is clearly demonstrated in an infamous Facebook experiment in 2012, in which researchers tested on whether "emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion" by manipulating the news feeds of Facebook users. (Kramer, et al., n.d.). The results have unsurprisingly confirmed that emotions could indeed be transferred, "leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness". Yet what is troubling about this experiment is not so much its results, but instead, the very possibility that Facebook and other social media platforms can effectively manipulate users' emotional states through a selective operation of its algorithms. It is under these powerful algorithms that we are all subjected to a systemic violence, where our emotions and affects are exploited and capitalized, trapping us in an inescapable web of affective exchanges with one another.

Of all emotions and affects, Angst/Anxiety remains the easiest to spread, capable of traversing various individuals and creating an aggregated impact on a greater socio-political scale. As Sara Ahmed (1969 -) put it, feelings are always "suffused with ideas and values" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 208). It is therefore not merely the affect of 'Angst' that traverse and circulate across the milieu, but also the very 'ideas' that are associated with this intensifying force of anxiousness, which could lead to the conditioning of attitudes and in turn capable of eliciting explosive reactions that drastically shape the socio-political milieu.

Dynamically Restrained

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed ways in which Angst could function as a 'dynamic force' that transverses across oneself and the Other. On the one hand, the excess of 'Faces' and the 'Proximity of the Other' in the Digital Milieu could serve as a source of an 'intersubjective Anguish', which *dynamically* troubles us both physically and mentally. On the other hand, Angst could serve as a potential catalyst for other interrelated affects and translate into various socio-political impacts, particularly in its interrelation with 'Hostility' and the potential precipitation of 'Violence'. The relational nature of Angst has thus been illustrated, demonstrating how Angst, as an affect, could originate from the

Other as an intersubjective affectivity, but also function as an explosive force that could go against the Other, and it is precisely this ‘intersubjective’ quality of Angst that has engendered its very dynamics.

The etymology of the word ‘dynamic’ could be traced back to the Greek word δύναμι (dúnamai), which denotes ‘the condition of being able’ (Wedgwood, 1872, p. 232). Such condition of ‘ability’ inherently extends beyond the Self, as one is never just ‘able’, but always ‘able-to’. Consequently, ‘power’ is not an intrinsic quality possessed by an individual, but rather a phenomenon that emerges from interpersonal relations. One’s ‘power is thus always ‘conferred’ and ‘enabled’ by the vulnerability of the Other, and it is through this inherently relational nature of power that an ethical responsibility inevitably emerges.

While the Proximity of the Other could be highly ‘demanding’, and even ‘persecuting’ in the Digital Milieu, we must recognize that we, too, remain *a demanding Other for the Other*. Realizing this essential power dynamic compels us to acknowledge our ethical responsibility to those around us. Our discussion of various Post-digital Violence revealed how the effortlessness of networked communication has masked the profound impacts that we could actually produce. While the wielding of power, in itself, does not necessarily lead to damage, it is often in the absence of its oversight and control that detrimental impacts could be rendered. In face of this ‘powerlessness over power’, perhaps we might turn to Levinas’s conception of ‘ethics’, which is not viewed as a set of rules, but rather as a ‘calling into question’ of oneself - a critical self-evaluation that suspends our own ‘freedom’ out of the respect for the Other. As Levinas put it:

‘To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a "moving force," this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder.’ (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 303)

At times the least that we can ‘do’ is to ‘not do’; to restrain this ‘moving force’, which is often more challenging than taking actions. It is precisely in this ‘self-questioning’, when ‘conscience’ could be rendered, as we learn to manage this dynamic force of ‘freedom’ both in its enforcement and its restraint. While the Proximity of the Other could induce Angst, it is perhaps a necessary affect that serves to ‘put us in question’, as it could provide a much-needed halt before our ignorance causes further harm. This ‘dynamic regulation’ of oneself could be achieved through a vigilance *for* the Other, and not *of* the Other. Consequently, it should manifest as a proactive ‘witness’ grounded in respect, rather than a reactive ‘suspicion’ born of precarity.

When addressing the ‘power of witness’ in public shaming, Frevert spoke of its two-sidedness:

“Witnesses can approve of acts of shaming and intensify them. But they can also disapprove. Power relations can be turned on their head, shaming those who shame.” (Frevert, 2020, p. 3)

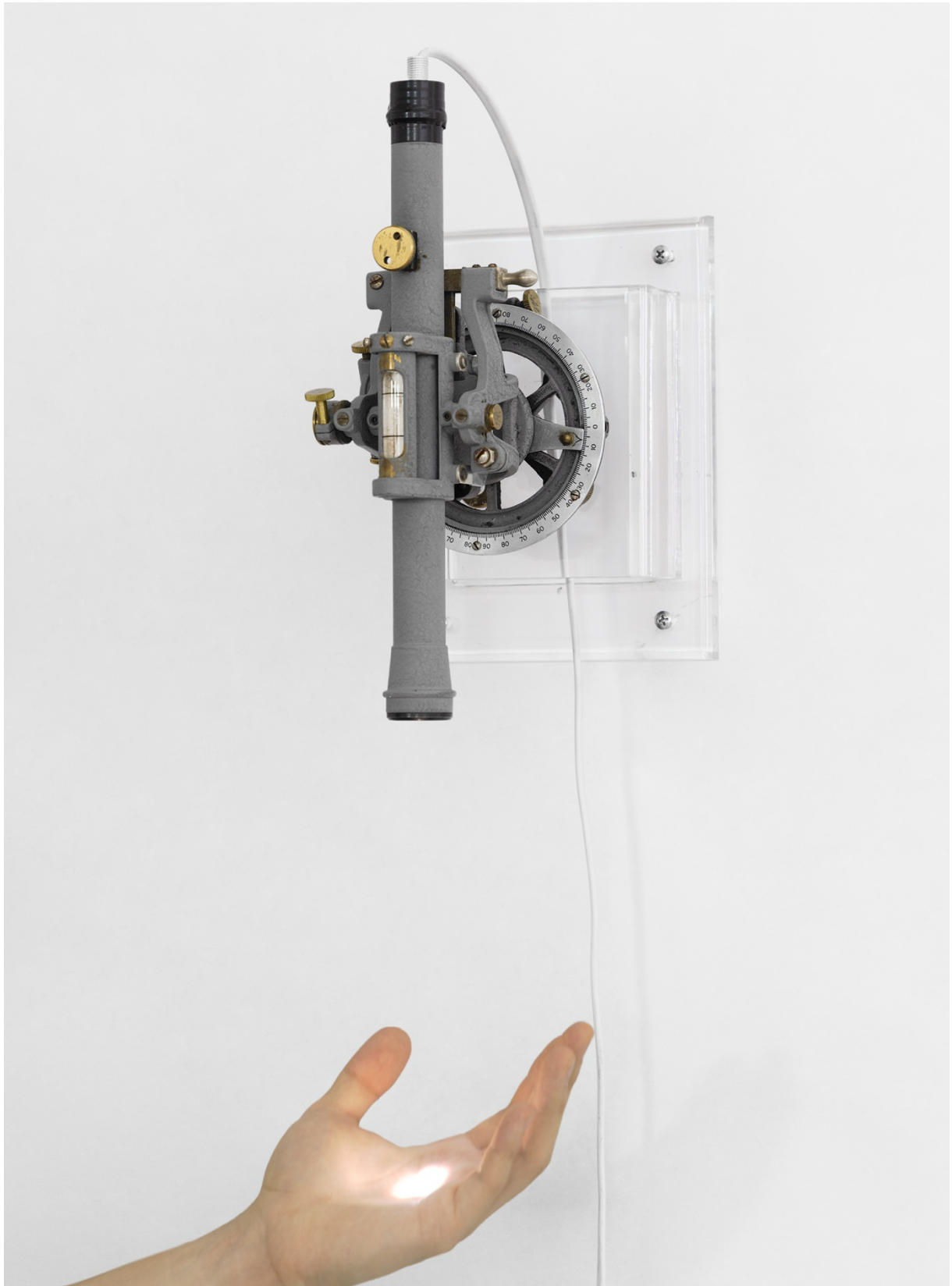
‘Witnessing’ is, therefore, by no means a passive act. On the contrary, it has come to be a proactive state of awareness crucial to the practice of justice in a community. It demands mindful consideration of what lies beyond oneself, while requiring us to actively 'see' and 'acknowledge' the Other despite our infinite differences. It is thus in this act of witnessing, that we have come to embrace our responsibility for the Other. In this light, the dynamic restraint of our power, guided by an ethical witnessing of the Other, has become an imperative in the Digital Milieu.

Chapter Three – Dispositif of Angst (Anxiety)

If Angst/ Anxiety could operate as a dynamic force, it could certainly function as a form of 'power' that operates across a web of socio-political relations. The final chapter of this thesis, therefore, seeks to explore this 'powerful' nature of Angst (as a socio-political Anxiety), particularly how this deeply personal affect in fact holds immense socio-political significance when exercised as a form of 'Dispositif'; often deployed as a strategic and political device that shapes subjectivities and effectuates actions in the Digital Milieu.

The concept of 'Dispositif', originally French, is commonly translated in English as 'Apparatus'. It is understood here in the Foucauldian sense, as an "a particular configuration at a particular time that orients power relations" (Bussolini, 2010, p. 89). In short, the 'Dispositif' is a strategic 'set-up' that *disposes* our subjectivities, knowledge and the way in which we understand and engage with the world. The Dispositif is therefore always linked to "certain limits of knowledge that arise from it and, to an equal degree, condition it" (Foucault, 1977/1980, p. 196). It is thus an apparatus and infrastructure which produces a body of knowledge, shaping us as individuals while also reshaping itself in the process. This potential to 'condition' subjectivities is precisely why I would consider Anxiety as a form of Dispositif, as it often serves as an affective 'set-up' that orients us epistemologically, shaping our subjectivities, inscribing behaviors and ultimately positing "us in a particular direction" within the Digital Milieu (Ibid.).

Anxiety and Visibility



Dispositif, 2025

Found surveying transit level scope, acrylic mount, LED spotlight.

Anxiety is often concerted into a form of power in the socio-political milieu, acting as a decisive force that shapes and configures our approaches to various affairs. The fact that Anxiety ‘orients’ our perspectives of the world resonates its nature as a Heideggerian ‘mood’, which serves to “ tune (stimmt) the world like a stage, casting it in certain colors and brightness, within which we, the spectator, is absorbed”. (Kim, 2021) It is therefore by nature an affective ‘Dispositif’, operating as a disposing mood that orients us in our approach to the world. Crucially, this affective configuration determines not only what we *see* but also what *we don’t see*, and this limiting quality of Anxiety in shaping our ‘visibility’ of the world is precisely what renders it a ‘powerful’ apparatus.

Through and in anxiety, we are affectively arranged in ways that *subject* us to the world. This affective arrangement essentially holds us in a particular epistemological 'captivity', thus determining what we know but also don't know. When expanding on the concept of ‘Dispositif’, Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995) describes it as follows:

“[...]Dispositif] are machines that make one see and talk. Visibility does not refer to a general light that would illuminate preexisting objects but rather is made up of lines of light that form variable figures inseparable from an apparatus. Each apparatus has its regimen of light, the way it falls, softens, and spreads, distributing the visible and the invisible, generating or eliminating an object, which cannot exist without it.” (Deleuze, 2014, pp. 126 - 127)

In a similar vein, Anxiety functions as an apparatus that produces various beams of visible lights. These beams do not only guide our attention toward specific objects but also determine the range of what we can conceive (*see*), and subsequently articulate (*say*). Thus, one’s visibility does not only delineate the boundaries of their perceptions and conceptions, but also shape the discourse that they could engage in. The fact is, our ‘visibility’ is inextricably intertwined with our 'discursivity', and the Dispositif of Anxiety not only shapes the breadth of our knowledge but also establishes the boundaries of our speech. This issue of ‘visibility’ and ‘discursivity’ is deeply connected with our agency, as the less we can *see*, the less we can *know*, and the less we can *say*, the less we can *do*. What has been limited by the Dispositif of Anxiety is thus not only our understanding of the world, but also our very capacity to ‘say’ and ‘do’ within it. By orientating us affectively and fixating our attention on certain objects, Anxiety constrains the scope of our discourse, in turn limiting the actions that could be produced from it.

This very affective, and consequently, epistemological boundary imposed by the Dispositif of Anxiety likens to the experience of ‘tunnel vision’, which is a psychosomatic experience that is commonly encountered by anxious individuals. As one’s vision anxiously narrows down on a particular object, the individual enters a state of hyperfocus, becoming attuned to a specific issue while losing sight of everything else. In such anxious moments, blind spots naturally emerge, and one’s ability to conceive the broader picture becomes hindered. In a similar light, such constriction of visibility often manifests on a socio-political level, where individuals are not only physically bound to a limited vision, but also to an epistemological

constraint, resulting in the production of narrow knowledge and discourses under a particular affective framework. In this sense, what has been cultivated by the Dispositif of Anxiety is precisely a ‘tendency’, which affectively influences the knowledge and discourses we ‘tend’ to produce.

Anxiety therefore does not merely shape individual subjectivities, but also the socio-political dynamics within a milieu. It affects the milieu by serving as an affective filter, thereby delimiting the boundaries of how individuals come to perceive and conceive. This process cultivates biased tendencies and produces particular ‘mode(s) of thought’ within the milieu, in turn forming what was referred to by Foucault as ‘Episteme’ – an epistemological framework that limits what can be known and therefore said in the discourse of a given time. (Gutting, 2014, p. 13) The most viral ‘filter’ in the Digital Milieu is thus not any decorative or beautifying overlay designed by social media platforms, which governs our ‘modes of expression’. Rather, it is the subtle, yet powerful Dispositif of Anxiety, which governs our ‘mode of reception’ in the first place. Anxiety, therefore, has come to shape our subjectivities, altering what we can ‘see’ before we can even ‘say’ in the Digital Milieu, in turn structuring the knowledge and discourses of our times.

Anxiety-informing and informing-Anxiety

While the Dispositif of Anxiety functions as an affective filter that colors our subjectivities (what I would call ‘Anxiety-informing’), the knowledge and discourse that forms the ‘Episteme’ of our times is simultaneously shaping and molding our very experience of Anxiety (coming to be a process of ‘informing-Anxiety’). This recursive feedback between our knowledge and Anxiety is best demonstrated by the fact that, not only is our Anxiety shaping our knowledge of the world, but that we have also *learned to be anxious*. Thus, even in its apparent primacy, Anxiety proves to be an affect that is not fixed, but one that can be shaped, modulated, and strategically ‘informed’.

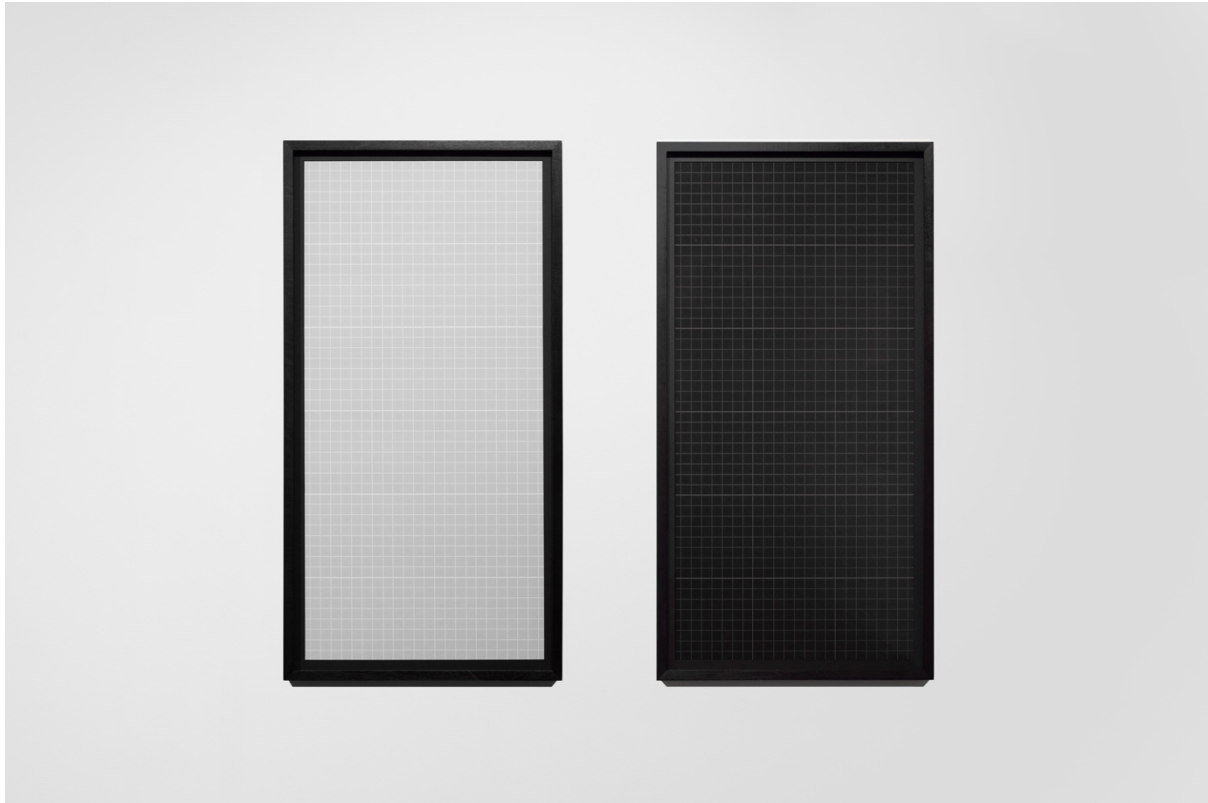
A ‘recursive cycle’ could therefore exist between our ‘knowledge’ and experience of ‘Anxiety’. While Anxiety could predispose us in a certain epistemological tendency, our existing knowledge and the ‘Episteme’ could similarly cultivate and intensify our Anxiety toward specific objects, thereby ‘conditioning’ our affective responses. This recursive interaction between Anxiety and knowledge is thus how the Dispositif of Anxiety operates – whereby Anxiety could be strategically induced through the manipulation of knowledge, in turn perpetuating a worldview through an anxious lens. Just as a body of tinged knowledge may emerge from pre-disposing Anxiety, Anxiety itself could recursively condition and inform this knowledge, and it is often in this vicious cycle that one posits a ‘fixated vision’ - whereby an epistemological rigidity has come to govern their beliefs, speech and actions.

This process of ‘informing-Anxiety’ is the most apparent in the Digital Milieu, where the production and consumption of information has become foundational to our daily lives, shaping not only our epistemological understanding but also conditioning how we emotionally and affectively engage with our surroundings. The strategic device of

‘disinformation’ perfectly illustrates how our affective experiences could indeed be conditioned and ‘informed’. In contrast to the common phenomenon of ‘misinformation’, which refers to the communicating of inaccurate information without intention to cause harm, ‘disinformation’ is distinctly characterized by its malicious *intent*. A piece of information that serves to ‘disinform’ does not necessarily have to be inaccurate or false, instead they might indeed be ‘factual’ or ‘true’, but what is crucial, however, is that such information is often *bracketed* – which sees it being casted as a spotlight that serves to direct and posit our affective intensity on certain subject or entity. While the information may be ‘true’ to a certain extent, the way it is being disseminated and used could render it ‘partial’ and ‘tainted’. What is primarily conveyed in a piece of ‘disinformation’, therefore, is not the information itself, but the underlying intent behind its circulation. Such gesture to ‘disinform’ echoes what Žižek described as “lying in the guise of truth” – that “*even if what I am saying is factually true, the motives that make me say it are false.*” (Žižek, 2008, p. 100) Hence when receiving a piece of information, one should not ask ‘what’ has been communicated, but ‘why’ has it been communicated? Perhaps one of the biggest lessons we could learn in the Digital Milieu is to see through the face value of information by locating the ‘affective tendency’ that foregrounds its intent, through which we can discern the very ‘cause’ that is supported by it. One should therefore not merely concern the validity and factuality of the knowledge claim, but come to be aware of its very nature as a ‘claim’, which always entails an underlying bias that has come to dominate such claim.

The Echo Chamber

The ‘recursivity’ between Anxiety and knowledge illustrates how biases and tendencies can be affectively ‘in-formed’, resulting in an Episteme that is structured as a closed-off ‘chamber’, where affective echoes reinforce its walls. As Anxiety shapes our knowledge, and knowledge recursively shapes our Anxiety, one naturally develops an affective tendency toward information that aligns with their underlying conditions and orientation. Such tendency of ‘affective alignment’ is thus what has often led to the formation of an ‘echo chamber’, where one's selective exposure to specific information only reinforces their preexisting beliefs and affects. It thus limits engagement with alternative perspectives, resulting in a process of ‘*epistemological particularization*’ that is self-perpetuating and feeding on-its-own. In this way, ideological biases and recurring anxieties take shape and ‘ossify’ precisely through the Dispositif of Anxiety, positing as an ever-particularized subjectivity.



Common Ground (Day/Night), 2025

Grids from google map, silver gelatin prints on fiber-based paper, museum acrylic, diptych.

A question must therefore be asked when we encounter a piece of ‘information’ in the Digital Milieu: “*What exactly has been in-formed?*” What does this piece of information mean, and how does it inform our subjectivities? Does it offer something new, or does it merely reinforce what is already in place? More than mere information, what we truly need is ‘*transformation*’ – a step beyond one’s existing epistemological boundaries through the exposure to the Other. It is through this process of informative and affective exposure to the Other that new perspectives could emerge, while empathetic understanding could take root. This constitutes the very act of ‘*Verstehen*’ (the German word for “understanding”), wherein one steps outside their particularized perspective – literally exiting the tunnel vision imposed by the Dispositif of Anxiety – and commits to the Other’s standpoint. In this sense, the deranging encounter with the Other has come to be the much-needed epistemological rupture for transcending this particularizing Dispositif; a moment of de-alignment that catalyzes one’s epistemological transformation, which never occurs through the sedimentation of self-owning facts but rather the radical openness to the Other’s destabilizing differences.

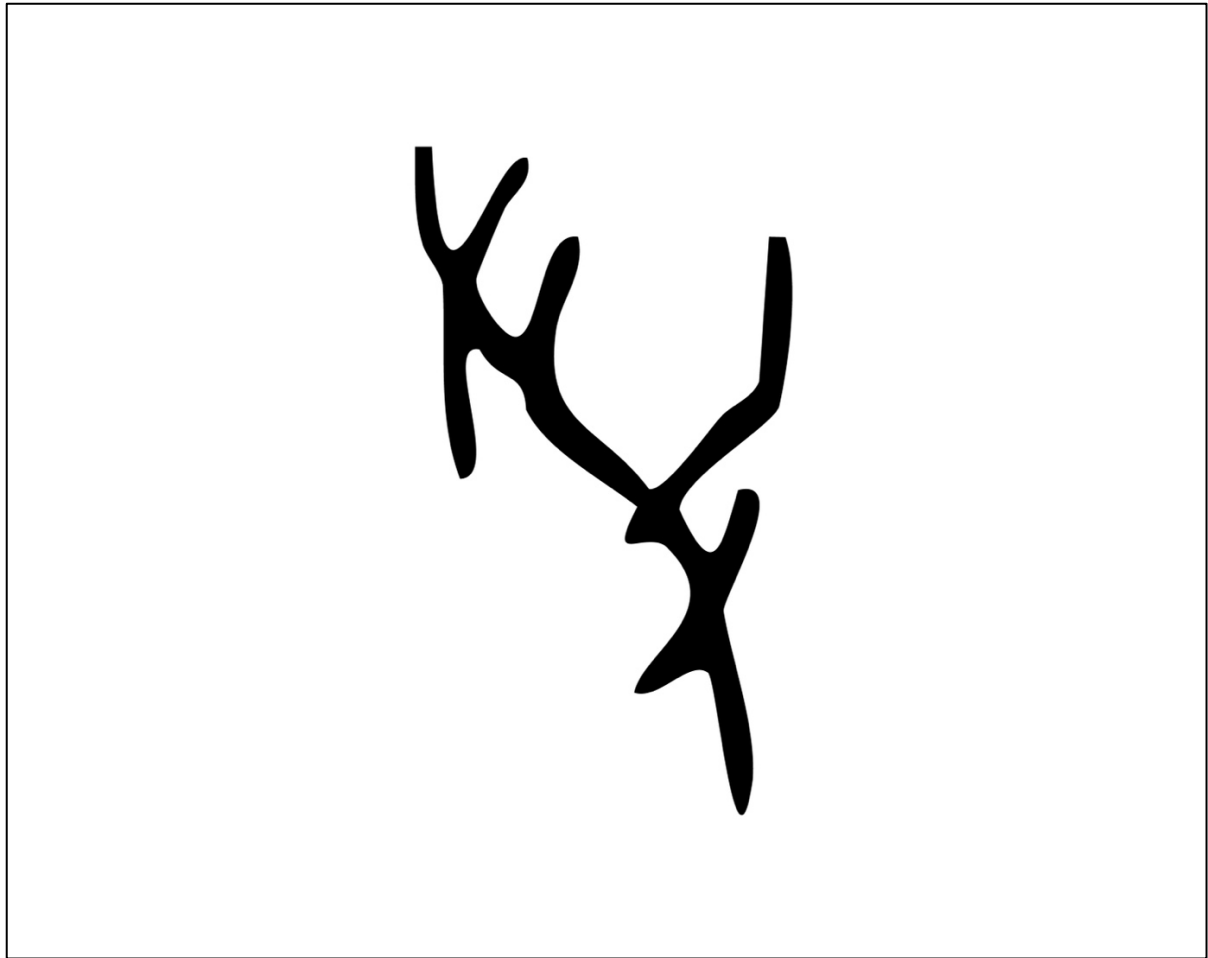
Anxiety thus operates as a traversing state between knowledge and affect, which sees it ‘shaping’ knowledge but also ‘shaped’ by knowledge. Despite the risk of a recursive cycle, it is on this middle ground of ‘continuous shaping’ where action and intervention remain possible – where the structural entanglement between Anxiety and knowledge is *always*

already a hope for transformation. While Anxiety could function as a Dispositif that reinforces affective biases, it could also serve as the necessary disruption for introducing new knowledge. Here, the difference between the two modalities of Anxiety – between that of ‘anxious *reservation*’ and ‘anxious *revolution*’ – lies in whether one allows themselves to be merely driven by it, or conversely, recognizes the looping force at play, prompting a necessary ‘Turn’ (*Kehre*) that could bring forth reorientation. Such active recognition is therefore what transforms Anxiety (*Angst*) into Alertness (*Achtung*), which could foster a stance amid turbulence and establish a ground upon which anxiety could instead be wielded as a beam of vigilance amid ongoing chaos.

The Fight over Anxious-power

In the Digital Milieu, the socio-political role of Anxiety has become increasingly pronounced, as it is Anxiety that has often invoked public ‘visibility’ and indeed ‘attention’ in the post-digital landscape, which has now come to be the primary form of capital that is continuously quantified and extracted by various parties. A pervasive competition for attention has therefore come to underscore the Digital Milieu, where various parties fight to capture fleeting moments of visibility in an environment saturated with information.

How should we conceptualize the gesture of this ‘fight’? The Chinese character 「爭」 (zaang1 in Cantonese), commonly translated as ‘disputation’, ‘conflict’, or indeed ‘fight’, might provide an interesting lens.



The oracle script of the Chinese Character 「爭」

The oracle bone script of the Chinese character 「爭」 depicts two hands (symbolizing two individuals) pulling on a plowshare together while farming. Initially, the character signified the figurative act of ‘plowing’, but only later did it semantically extend to denote ‘struggle’, ‘contention’, or ‘fight’. Yet, one fundamental gesture has nevertheless remained consistent throughout this semantic evolution – that of *pulling* – which has come to characterize the act of ‘fighting’ 「爭」 between two parties in the course of competition. (Research Centre for Humanities Computing, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2014) To ‘fight’ is therefore, not merely to resist the Other, but crucially to ‘pull’ towards oneself; to anchor one’s presence within the broader trajectory of direction and force, thereby grounding a sense of gravity within a communal space.

Within the Digital Milieu, this ‘pulling’ dynamics plays out in the competition for public attention, where various bodies engage in a continuous act of pulling, striving to define what is considered ‘attention-worthy’, in order to secure dedicated visibility. Crucially, this fight for attention and consequently ‘visibility’, is not merely a ‘virtual’ one, but very much an ‘actual’ and ‘material’ one, as it is often through our collective attention in the milieu that

socio-political conditions have come to be actually shaped. Through the affectively ‘disposing’ nature of Anxiety, our eyes come to be set on particular socio-political issues, and it is through the dedication of this visibility and attention that an epistemological and material ‘weight’ is conferred on an issue.

To see something as an ‘issue’ is to put forth its presence under visible light, which confer it with a degree of ‘heaviness’ and render it a ‘difficulty’ that ought to be solved. It is through this gesture of ‘discharge’ whereby an issue is thrown into spotlight, isolated and bracketed, creating a fracture that demands for our vigilant gaze.

Our anxious attention thus manifests as a weight of visibility – a gravity (*Schwere*) that grounds an issue while simultaneously demands for a distribution of material resources. Anxiety is therefore not only the Dispositif that sets our eyes on certain subject matter, but also the ‘force’ that could ‘materialize’ our concerns through the subsequent allocation of socio-political resources within the milieu. It is thus this materializing potential that renders Anxiety a form of *power* – an *anxious-power* that actively shapes ongoing socio-political conditions.





Schwerpunkt (Point of Gravity), 2025

World map published and printed circa 1816, Industrial steel ball / a set of two

From Anxious-power to Anxious-ethics – What *should* we be anxious for?

The fight over what we *should* be anxious about has therefore come to be an inherent power struggle – a contest for the ‘anxious-power’ within the current ‘economy of Anxiety’, where the very determination of ‘what matters’ in the milieu is at stake. In this struggle, Anxiety no longer functions as a mere individual affect, but as a distributed force, shaping collective perception, discourse, and consequently socio-political actions. It determines which crises are granted urgent attention and visibility, and which are pushed to the margins of public discourse.

More than a primal affect, Anxiety is therefore operating as a structuring force – one that simultaneously defines the ‘problem’ and frames its strategic ‘solution’. It is this anxious *intensity* that fuels the cycle of public concern, policy responses, and ultimately, resources allocation. Anxiety is therefore ‘*urgency*’ par excellence, which has come to underlie the very formation and operation of the broader socio-political Dispositif, governing the rhythms of attention, response, and intervention. Consequently, the question of what should be considered ‘urgent’ has become central to socio-political debates.

While the Dispositif of Anxiety is often “institutionally crystallized” and deployed as a state apparatus for governance and prohibition (Foucault, 1978, p. 93), it can simultaneously

function as a catalyst for progress and transformation. In times of major global crises – such as pandemics, climate change, geopolitical conflict, and war – the Anxiety surrounding these events plays a crucial role in mobilizing awareness and action. It is through our collective Anxiety that these critical issues gain traction, visibility, and urgency, ensuring they are not dismissed or forgotten. In fact, *we need to feel anxious about these issues*, as it is our very Anxiety that drives public discourse and compels the redistribution of socio-political resources toward meaningful interventions. Anxiety, in this context, becomes a necessary affective condition for political action and ethical intervention.

It is therefore no longer a question of *whether* we should feel anxious, but rather *what* we should feel anxious about. This ‘normativity of Anxiety’ has thus become a point of debate within the milieu, wherein we must actively recognize issues that would require the mobilizing power of our collective Anxiety, while simultaneously resist the marginalization of underlying crises that are easily overlooked or otherwise, deliberately suppressed.

Upon recognizing the force of Anxiety – its capacity to direct perception, catalyze discourse, and redistribute resources – we should develop an ‘*anxious-ethics*’ grounded in this very ‘*anxious-power*’. Rather than avoiding Anxiety at all costs, we must learn to grow from it – to cultivate a form of ‘conscious Anxiety’ that enables ethical responsiveness. Through the practice of this conscious and attentive Anxiety, we can mobilize our ‘anxious-power’ in ways that are both transformative and just.

The Affective Question – Toward a Conscious Anxiety

The ‘Doomsday Clock’, established in 1947 by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, serves as a symbolic measure of humanity’s proximity to self-inflicted catastrophe. Designed to reflect the escalating threat of global disaster – whether nuclear, environmental, or technological – the Clock functions as a metaphor that calls for our urgent attention. Since its inception, the Clock has been adjusted multiple times: set back eight times and moved forward eighteen. As of 2025, it stands only 89 seconds to midnight – the closest it has ever been to the said apocalypse. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2025)

In essence, the Clock can be seen as a modernized version of the classical motto “*Ultima Forsan*” – Latin for “perhaps the last [hour]” – which is a phrase that has long served as a memento for artists, philosophers, and scientists alike, reminding us not only of an impending danger, but more importantly, of an ‘*urgency in the present*’ – a very call for us to be *consciously anxious*. This ‘Clock of the last hour’ is therefore not predictive, but instead, *ethical* and *affective*. Rather than a ‘*technical device*’ that forecasts the exact timeline of an apocalypse, the Clock operates as a ‘*symbolic device*’, which provokes a sense of awareness, responsibility and moral reckoning. It essentially embodies a ‘rhetorical question’ posed to the public conscience, which serves to invite actions, feelings and responses. Here, Anxiety is no longer confined to private sentiment, but rather operates collectively and ethically, functioning as a means of disrupting public indifference.

This very ethical function of Anxiety finds resonance in the contemporary climate activism, which similarly poses its own urgent question to the society: “*How can you not feel anxious when the world is literally burning?*” Just as the Clock urges us to confront our proximity to disaster, climate activists confront the public with the affective truth of ecological collapse – not through detached argumentation, but rather visceral acts of disruption which demand attention. To truly understand the work of climate activist, one must not solely look for its ‘*rationale*’, but also conversely, its ‘*irrational*’. While many may perceive their interventions – on artworks, public infrastructure, or daily routines – as disruptive, one must grasp the underlying desperation that animates such acts, which has stemmed from a persistent lack of visibility, attention and much-needed Anxiety that has yet been *felt* by the broader public and institutional frameworks.

When reflecting on the 2005 French riots, Žižek cautioned against what he called “Hermeneutic Temptation”, which he described as “*the search for some deeper meaning or message hidden in these outbursts*”. Rather he calls for attention on the very “meaninglessness” of these riots, through which their *affective truth* is revealed:

“What is most difficult to accept is precisely the riots' meaninglessness: more than a 'form of protest, they are what Lacan called a passage à l'acte – an impulsive movement into action which can't be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration [...] the riots were simply a direct effort to gain visibility” (Žižek, 2008, pp. 76 - 77)

In this light, the often-contested tactics of climate activism should not merely be interpreted as forms of illegitimate protest, but rather as attempts to create an *affective impact* – to cultivate a ‘conscious Anxiety’ that has since been intentionally disavowed by vested interests. Their actions are therefore less about causing disorder than about restoring a lost sense of *alarm*, a call to re-sensitize the public to a crisis that has long been neutralized or ignored. Their protest is therefore not a naïve act of ‘attention-seeking’, but in truth, an urgent demand for ‘visibility’ – one that is quite literally, a matter of life and death.

The Need for Discernment and Discourse

What is not recognized cannot be protected and what is not rendered visible cannot be addressed. In this way, ‘visibility’ has become a precondition for social justice, as our ability to *see* and *discern* underlying issues directly conditions our capacity to act upon them, carrying with it very real and material consequences.

When commenting on the convoluted stream of visual information in the Digital Milieu, Hito Steyerl (1966 -) observes:

“While visual representation shifted into overdrive and was popularized through digital technologies, political representation of the people slipped into a deep crisis and was overshadowed by economic interest... On the one hand, there is a huge number of images without referents; on the other, many people without representation.” (Steyerl, 2012)

Hence, the issue that we now paradoxically face in the Digital Milieu is both a saturation of *visuality* and a deprivation of *visibility* – where countless images circulate, yet much of what is politically urgent remains *unseen*, buried beneath waves of algorithmic spectacles and noises. To ‘discern’ has therefore become an urgent practice in the Digital Milieu, where one must move beyond a gaze drawn to surface-level stimulation, and cultivate an active, critical and vigilant mode of *seeing* – one that is capable of cutting through noises, attuning to urgency, and identifying what truly warrants our collective attention within a vast informational landscape.

In this sense, the spotlighting effect of ‘Anxiety’ could in fact play a guiding role in our practice of ‘discernment’. Rather than being pathologized or suppressed, Anxiety – when consciously acknowledged and ethically cultivated – could function as a form of *vigilance*; an attuned sensitivity that sharpens our capacity to perceive what is obscurely urgent. As such, the practice of a conscious Anxiety is not merely a reaction, but a *proactive attunement* – a mode of affective orientation that could steer us toward the unseen, the marginalized, and the emergent sites of crisis in the Digital Milieu.

Yet, ‘discernment’ alone does not suffice if it does not give rise to ‘discourse’. What is seen must also be *named*, *contextualized*, and *communicated* – transformed into discourse – so that it could enter the realm of collective discussion and subsequently action, coming to be meaningfully addressed. Only through this process can a critical subject become *legible* within the public domain, gaining the visibility necessary for collective responses. In this sense, language becomes the medium through which visibility is activated – rendering what is seen not only speakable, but actionable.

In the Digital Milieu, language has been drastically amplified into a formidable force, with individuals wielding an unprecedented degree of discursive power. Yet this power should not be confined to personal expression; rather, it must be extended toward the cultivation of a collective awareness. Through this discursive agency, individuals can form communities and collectives capable of discerning socio-political crises that demand immediate attention – ensuring that the ‘Dispositif of Anxiety’ is not only dictated by the State or institutional apparatus, but remains open to contestation, negotiation, and appropriation.

By shedding light on critical issues and giving them form through discourse, our collective acts of ‘discernment’ and ‘articulation’ could mobilize attention, challenging systemic injustice while restructuring the landscape of public concern. It is this dynamic interplay between *visibility* as recognition and *discursivity* as response – that continuously materializes our social contours, incarnating the Word into all its flesh.

Navigating through the Digital Milieu

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the *operation* of Anxiety – not merely as a personal affect, but as a Dispositif that structures our affective and epistemological orientations, shaping how we feel, think, *and act* within the Digital Milieu. Anxiety has

therefore been explored through its positing and productive potential: operating, on the one hand, as an *apparatus* that disposes subjectivities and tendencies; and on the other, as a potential *tool* for cultivating public attention, vigilance, and socio-political responsiveness.

To close, I would like to revisit this very notion of the ‘milieu’, which is conceptualized in this research, not merely as a backdrop or setting, but as a dense and dynamic ensemble of power, affect, and relational flows. In the words of Foucault:

“The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it. It is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes.” (Foucault, 2009, p. 21)

A ‘milieu’ is therefore always resisting clarity and does not have neat boundaries. It is an interplay of countless causes and effects, formed by an ensemble of flights and relations – thus by nature, always turbulent and confusing.

The experience of information overload in the Digital Milieu is therefore a symptom of these underlying flights of ‘relational intensities’, which could be overwhelming and difficult to navigate. Amid this milieu that is full of confusions, a central question arises: *How should one navigate the Digital Milieu?* When everything competes for our attention, *what, or whom, should we attend to? How can we orient ourselves amid so many flights of influence?*

It is here that the practice of a ‘conscious Anxiety’ could offer its most important role. While the Digital Milieu is composed of forces and flights that pull and push us across relational trajectories, Anxiety could serve as an innate guidance for our alertness and moral attentiveness. It is therefore not merely an affective burden to be managed, but more importantly, a signal awaiting to be heeded.

In the face of ongoing global crises, many of us appear to be pathologically disavowing *Anxiety*, adopting what Alenka Zupančič has described as the logic of: *“I know very well, and this is why I can go on ignoring it.* As she remarked in a public lecture:

*“[...]it seems that we would – quite literally – rather die than let ourselves be scared to death by what is coming if we let the change and the events take their “natural course”; this is particularly striking in respect of climate change. **We are more afraid of being scared to death than of actually dying.** [...] **We fear dread more than death.**”* (Zupančič, 2022, pp. 89, 100) (Emphasis added)

Anxiety (dread) has therefore often remained the very *thing* that has returned from the *Real* – what confronts us not only symbolically, but also affectively and realistically, often more forcefully than the actual catastrophic event. The necessary practice of a conscious and attentive Anxiety is therefore a refusal of this disavowing logic – a disruption of the illusion that ‘everything is fine’. Rather than avoiding Anxiety, we must recognize its affective and ethical significance, which calls on us to feel, to care, and to respond.

To *stay with Anxiety* is therefore to let the trembling register, to confront the *Real* without looking away. While Anxiety could operate as a force that threatens stability, it could also be a much-needed current for us to ride. In a milieu where the routes are fracturing and the signs

are dispersed, Anxiety could serve as an ‘affective compass’ - a visceral register of what matters, what harms and what demands our responses.

The Alert Flock

If we are all navigating through the Digital Milieu together, then the *way* we travel matters. To travel with a ‘conscious Anxiety’ is not to panic, but to remain attentive. It is to carry a sense of ‘Achtung’ - an anxious-ethical attention that rejects indifference and apathy, walking with our eyes open, our hearts responsive, and crucially, with the Other on our minds.

In his book ‘*In the Swarm*’ (originally published in German in 2013), Byung-Chul Han describes the emergence of a new type of mass in the Digital Milieu – “the digital swarm”, which is composed of isolated individuals connected via the Net, yet lacks the soul or spirit that traditionally unifies a political crowd:

“The digital swarm does not constitute a mass because no soul – no spirit – dwells within it. The soul gathers and unites. In contrast, the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals. [...] For a crowd to emerge, a chance gathering of human beings is not enough. It takes a soul, a common spirit, to fuse people into a crowd. The digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a we. No harmony prevails – which is what welds the crowd together into an active entity. Unlike the crowd, the swarm demonstrates no internal coherence. It does not speak with a voice.”
(Han, 2013/2017, p. 10)

But instead of the “swarm” or the “crowd”, I believe we should gather as a “flock” within the Digital Milieu – a mode of togetherness that retains individual agency while moving forward with a collective alignment. The fact is, a ‘crowd’ is never just a ‘crowd’; it is never entirely unified but instead, always fractured by individual differences and ‘split ends’. A resolute and willful crowd is therefore, always already a ‘flock’ – a collective entity animated not by the isolated desires of the Self, but by the convergence of attentive and willful individuals who, despite their differences, move together toward a shared direction.

Unlike the fleeting and reactive “swarm”, the ‘flock’ is flexible. Its structural coherence is sustained not by a rigid homogeneity, but rather by the flexibility and responsiveness of the individuals. Members of a flock are therefore not subsumed into a faceless mass, nor are their identities diminished by an “overinvolvement”. Instead, they are able to retain their own names, shapes, and trajectories – each contributing to a living and dynamic whole, coming to be *affectively related* despite their inherent differences.

Although a single member of the flock may not radically change the direction of the entire formation, their active participation has nevertheless grounded the very dynamics of the flock. Each small adjustment carries the potential to ripple through the group, subtly shifting its course. It is in this sense that the agency of every individual is affirmed – not in isolation, but through a situated relation.

We should, then, strive to become part of an *alert flock*: one that is composed of individuals who remain attuned to their surroundings, who retain their critical difference within a

collectivity, and yet chooses to move together while remaining *consciously anxious* in the face of the unknown. It is this mode of collective navigation – neither as a ‘soul-less swarm’, nor an ‘idealized crowd’ – that may offer us the most ethical way forward in the Digital Milieu.

Conclusion

To conclude my thesis, let us circle back to the research questions: “How is ‘Angst’ manifesting across the Digital Milieu? and What form(s) does it take?”

Throughout this research, I have explored various manifestations of our Post-digital 'Angst'. Rather than considering Angst solely as a psychological and pathological disturbance, I have approached it as an affect that operates at multiple levels of our lives in the Digital Milieu. Across three chapters, the thesis has investigated the manifestations of Angst from various perspectives: an ‘*existential perspective*’ in chapter one, a ‘*social and intersubjective perspective*’ in chapter two, and a ‘*political and epistemological perspective*’ in chapter three.

In *Chapter One*, titled the *Direct Angst*, I have examined the Post-digital Angst through an immediate and experiential lens, focusing on how everyday digital encounters could in fact give rise to moments of existential disquiets. Adopting an autoethnographic approach, this chapter situates the analysis within my personal encounters, drawing upon thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud to contextualize some of our familiar experiences in the Digital Milieu. It has primarily focused on our anxious engagement with ‘digital information’, examining how three different types of informational experiences – that of ‘*information overload*’, ‘*information latency*’, and ‘*information recurrence*’ – could in fact give rise to different forms of Angst. The key argument proposed in this chapter is that these anxious experiences should not merely be regarded as psychological or pathological disturbances, but more importantly, as *phenomenological thresholds* capable of disclosing deeper existential insights into the nature of our Being.

In *Chapter Two*, titled the *Dynamics of Angst*, the focus has been shifted from a personal and existential framing of Angst into a relational and intersubjective one. Within this social context, Angst is no longer regarded as a mere individual experience, but rather as a ‘relational affect’ that is dynamically constituted through our irrecusable relations with the Other. Drawing on the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the chapter examines Angst with an *intersubjective* origin and manifests when the Self is disrupted, unsettled and ethically called upon by the Other. When situated in the context of the Digital Milieu, our encounters with the Other – as mediated by digital technologies such as social media and mobile devices – have intensified into a sense of ‘Post-digital Proximity’, in which the distance between the Self and the Other has become ever-more compressed, evoking a sense of “restlessness” that is hard to evade and manifesting as a form of corporeal ‘Anguish’. Subsequently, Angst is considered alongside other socially-related affects, such as ‘Shame’ and ‘Hostility’, exposing its entanglement with a broader affective ecology of the Digital Milieu. Crucially, this chapter does not only explore the nature of a dynamic and intersubjective Angst, but also analyzes how its affective circulation within the milieu could in fact catalyze a spectrum of ‘Post-digital Violence’. In this sense, Angst is considered to be *socially operative*, functioning as a ‘dynamic force’ that could transverse across oneself and

the Other, shaping the affective contours of the Digital Milieu, and thereby, underscores the imperative to develop an ‘ethics’ attuned to its intensities.

In *Chapter Three*, titled the *Dispositif of Angst*, the dynamic and intersubjective ‘force’ of Angst is further developed into a form of political ‘power’. Building upon Michel Foucault’s notion of the ‘Dispositif’ – commonly translated as the “Apparatus”, the chapter reconceptualized ‘Angst’ as a form of socio-political ‘Anxiety’, which operates not only as a dynamic affect, but also a political and epistemological ‘*Dispositif*’. This ‘*Dispositif of Anxiety*’ is capable of positing knowledge through an affective filter, in turn cultivates specific affective tendencies that could orient our perception, direct attention, and ultimately shape our actions within the Digital Milieu. The ‘Dispositif of Anxiety’ is therefore not merely an experiential condition, but crucially a strategic device that could be used to configure power and produce subjectivities. Given the powerful nature of Anxiety as a ‘Dispositif’, the chapter thus advocates the cultivation and practice of ‘conscious Anxiety’ – a consciously held and ethically mobilized form of Anxiety that functions as a mode of ethical vigilance. In this light, the ‘Dispositif of Anxiety’ is not only critiqued for its disciplinary and manipulative functions, but also reclaimed as a potentially emancipatory *power* – one that is capable of disrupting public apathy and motivating collective responsiveness. It is in this sense that *Angst* is transformed into *Achtung*, (alertness), which could serve as an affective compass for navigating the complex and saturated landscape of the Digital Milieu.

Taken together, this thesis does not offer a singular account of our ‘Post-digital Angst’, but rather traces a constellation of its interrelated manifestations: (1) as forms of existential disquiet in response to digital information; (2) as an intersubjective disturbance triggered by the ever-proximate Other; and (3) as an epistemological power capable of shaping perception, conception, and action.

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Angst is therefore never just a hurdle to be overcome, but remains *necessary*, as it serves as a *truthful* purpose within you and beyond you.

Epilogue – On Artistic Whispers

Throughout the thesis, it was always clear to me that I do not wish to directly write about my artistic practice. Its presence is only felt here through the insertion of images across varying contexts – images that blend silently with the articulated concepts, yet remain anonymous and unpronounced. They inhabit the text, but ask for no explanation.

I don't really know why I resist writing about them. It feels like an inner pull, a visceral urge for me to stay silent in their regard – as if the very naming of them would constitute a form of *blasphemy*. This 'back-pulling' force is what took hold of me throughout the process, which prohibits me from speaking, coming as an embodied refusal.

Still, I think the works nevertheless speak for themselves; they simply don't want me to speak for them. They whisper through the densely written analysis, and leak through the cracks of textual logics. They remain a '*Geheimnis*', a mystery that is close at home but always out of reach. They do not blatantly speak, but have always already *spoken* – registered as blind spots within your field of vision, an obscure periphery that nonetheless shapes your horizon.

For two whole years, almost three, I have fully dedicated myself to the writing of this thesis. For many occasions, my very personal struggle with Angst has overwhelmed me, rendering into various forms of anxieties – concerning my health in particular. It once almost killed me, when I was so anxious about my recurring gastritis that I had went for an endoscopy, which unfortunately led to a medical accident that almost bled me to death. This text about Angst is therefore very real for me, so real that I almost died writing it. In wake of this near-death experience, I found myself wanting to whisper a Self, a Self that I don't fully know.

In the introduction, I have spoken of an artistic strategy called '(De-/Re-) contextualization', which explains how the very *shaping of context* serves as my primary form of artistic practice; where 'context' itself has become a malleable material, subjected to my choice of addition and reduction. The true work that has been done in this artistic research is therefore precisely a constant play of context – both the context of my *writing* and the context of my *art*, each folding into one and other. When I am writing a dense theoretical analysis, I would respond to this obsessive logic by creating art that takes root from it. Other times, I would create art that innately calls for me, and develop my theoretical discourse based upon it. Thus, there is always a link between my artistic practice and my theoretical writing, simply not an illustrative one, but rather a reciprocal and somehow mystical one. My artistic practice has therefore shaped the context of my writing, so subtly, that it has *moved* my text simply through its presence. Likewise, my writing has conversely shaped the context of my artistic practice, so quietly, that it has *grounded* the work simply by being there.

As someone trained primarily as an image-maker, it has often come to me that my practice has never been about creating images from scratch, but rather about 'framing' and 'contextualizing'. Yet lately, I am ever-more engaged in the process of 'de-contextualizing'

and ‘deframing’, as is it through the severance of context that I can reveal the latent potential of an image or object – to suspend its assumed meaning, just so it could whisper for itself.

This very potential – this possibility, this malleability – has therefore become the core of my practice; a quiet force that could whisper its way into multiple situations, always adaptable, always on the verge of breaking free and becoming something else.

The initial break brought forth from decontextualization – *the bracketing moment* – is what has first allowed the object to refer beyond itself, opening up a space for possible connections to emerge – connections that, albeit distant and improbable, remain possible. It is precisely this *whisper*, soft and searching, that forever seeks for resonance.

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