

Mapping anxiety

[B O O K R E V I E W]

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How does one go about attempting to encapsulate something as wide-ranging, abstruse and frankly as “unsummarisable” as a year of Lacan’s teaching? It is not for nothing that synopses of Lacan’s published seminars are so rare a thing. Lacan’s tenth seminar on anxiety presents a particularly vexing challenge, even as compared to other seminars of around the same period. Although there are a series of reoccurring themes presented in the seminar – the forms of *object a*, for example, the relation between *jouissance* and anxiety, the distinction between *passage à l’acte* (the passage to the act) and acting-out - Lacan’s baroque style and enigmatic formulations make it virtually impossible to dis-entwine any one conceptual strand from all the others.

What is called for then by way of a review of this title is perhaps less critical summary or a critique, than a basic introduction, the provision of a rudimentary map highlighting key facets of how Lacan theorizes anxiety in the seminar. Doing so would prove helpful in another way also. Clinicians often struggle to bridge the gulf between Lacan’s teaching and the clinical realities they face in their psychotherapeutic work. The danger here is that the attempt to apply Lacan’s maxims (anxiety, for example, as “the lack of the lack”) comes before the clinical reality, which must then, in a reverse type of logic, be fitted into

the structures of the theory. Given the pervasiveness of anxiety in the clinic, and the proliferation of Lacan's aphorisms in the area ("anxiety as the sensation of the proximity of the Other", etc.) one appreciates how instructive an explication of Lacan's terminology might be. I aim to do just this in what follows, foregrounding in the process several of the most distinctive motifs within the Lacanian conceptualization of anxiety. In order to achieve this goal, I draw on some of the best secondary literature in the area – particularly the contributions of Margarita Palacios (2013) and Renata Salecl (2004) – as a way of introducing facets of the primary text.

One of the first moves Lacan makes in transforming a largely intra-subjective concept of anxiety into a fundamentally inter-subjective notion concerns his prioritization of the subject's relationship to the big Other. This Other stands for the trans-subjective symbolic order of society, the "treasury of the signifier". The Other cannot be reduced to a singular point of subjectivity and represents rather the locus of authority, truth, of judgement. Lacan (2014: 59) provides a dizzying variety of examples of the function of the Other in the seminar, invoking for instance the idea that it is the Other's *jouissance* that the masochist aims at, and noting apropos Pavlov's famous experiments that "the very fact that there is an array of apparatuses means that the dimension of the Other is present".

Lacan stresses that a particular form of anxiety qualifies precisely this relationship, namely that between the subject and the Other, or, differently put, between the subject and what they take their symbolic and socio-historical location to signify and, importantly, *to desire*. Speaking of the anxiety engendered by the clinic, that the analyst can utilise, Lacan notes:

"The anxiety unto which we have to bring a formula here is an anxiety that corresponds to us, an anxiety that we provoke, an anxiety with which we have a decisive relationship. In this dimension of the Other we find our place ... This dimension is by no means absent from any of the ways in which people have tried ... to circumscribe the phenomenon of anxiety" (2014: 57).

As Salecl (2004) stresses, what is entailed by such an approach to anxiety is not the presumption that the Other is a dangerous or castrating agent who threatens to take something away from the subject (although in paranoid psychosis, such ideas quite clearly do feature). We need as such a more nuanced account of the dialectic which emerges between the subject and Other, and, furthermore, a better sense of what is implied by the Lacanian notion of the subject. The psychoanalytic assumption is that the speaking being, the subject, is "empty – nothing by him or herself – that all the subject's power comes from the symbolic insignia that he or she temporarily takes on ... The subject is therefore ... powerless by himself, and only by occupying a certain place

in the symbolic order does he temporarily get some power or status” (Salecl, 2004: 22).

The subject is, in a very crucial sense then, *unknowable*, both to themselves and to others, beyond the symbolic enactments and attributes that they take on as a means of locating and identifying themselves. The prospect of being stripped of the symbolic coordinates underlying one’s most basic identifications thus provides us with perspective on what engenders anxiety. This, in itself, is perhaps a less than novel observation, yet Salecl (2004: 22) continues:

“The subject is also always bothered by the fact that the Other is inconsistent, that the Other is split, non-whole, which means that ... one cannot say what the Other’s desire is or how one appears in the desire of the Other. The only thing that can ensure meaning to the Other (and, for example, provide an answer to the question of the Other) is a signifier.”

We might “translate” these Lacanian axioms as follows: There are a great many indications from within the social field informing me as to what is of value in me, and which provide direction as to what I should aspire to be. This cluster of significations is, alas, typically less than clearly legible or consistent. Moreover, even when explicitly articulated imperatives are present, they tend to be complicated by multiple contrary imperatives. In short, this Other that seems to encapsulate the values of a given social order is less than clear-cut in its directives, particularly so given that the field of social injunctions it encompasses is governed by signifiers which are themselves open to speculation). Here then comes the Lacanian twist since such an ultimate signifier is not to be found (the signifier that would definitely pin-point the desire of the Other) the subject is left with no other option than to look to their own lack, their own emptiness, for an answer: “To the lack in the Other the subject can ... only answer with his or her own lack. And in dealing with his or her lack, as well as with the lack in the Other, the subject encounters anxiety” (Salecl, 2004: 22-23).

This concurrence of lacks in anxiety begs a further qualification. Lack itself – the subject’s inherent emptiness – is not in and of itself a source of anxiety. In Lacanian theory, lack is coterminous with desire, and desire is taken to be the animating force of human subjectivity. Anxiety is not thus fuelled by lack (or desire) but by impediments to this lack (or desire). As Salecl (2004: 23) writes: “[T]he source of anxiety for the subject is not the lack, but rather the absence of the lack, i.e. the fact that where there is supposed to be lack, some object is present”.

Hence the famous Lacanian aphorism repeated throughout the seminar: the idea that anxiety is “the lack of the lack”. How to render this idea in more straightforward terms?

Perhaps as follows: anxiety arises when the conditions supporting *the possibility of desire* are themselves lacking. Desire here, importantly, connotes not simply desirousness, but desire precisely as the desire-of-the-Other, desire as a mode of “cognitive mapping”, as a means of locating one’s place in the symbolic network, and as anchoring the social and subjective identifications that allow the subject to experience themselves, and their surrounding world, as coherent.

From a Lacanian standpoint then, what engenders anxiety in the subject is not so much an experience of deprivation – the loss, say, of some or other object – but rather a type of suffocating lack which undercuts the subjective, symbolic and/or mortal viability of the desiring subject as such. Lacan (2014: 54) is unusually clear on this point: “Anxiety isn’t about the loss of the object, but its presence”. “Don’t you know”, he asks, “that it’s not longing for the maternal breast that provokes anxiety, but its imminence?” (2014: 53). Furthermore:

“What provokes anxiety is ... not ... the rhythm of the mother’s alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and absence. The security of presence is the possibility of absence. The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely the moment when the relationship upon which he’s established himself, of the lack that turns him into desire, is disrupted, and this relationship is most disrupted when there’s no possibility of lack, when the mother is on his back all the while” (Lacan, 2014: 53-54).

Anxiety thus is not tantamount to desperation, but rather, as attention to the French and German terms *angoisse* and *angst* suggest, a type of *expectant dread*. This arises when the infant is incapacitated in its ability to modulate forms of presence and absence, or, later in life, when the subject, unable to ground themselves in either a functional horizon of values or a reliable social or subjective identification, fears that they might be somehow swallowed up, devoured.

What is sometimes left unexplained in abbreviated applications of the Lacanian dictum of anxiety as “the lack of the lack” is the role of fantasy. This is problematic, particularly given what Lacan (2014: 3) says in the opening pages of the seminar, namely that “the structure which is so essential and which is called fantasy ... [is] well and truly the same [as that of anxiety]”. We might understand fantasy here as that non-conscious schema of comprehension which orders the world for the subject and that locates them, circumscribes their position, within it. It is via fantasy that the subject attains a minimal articulation of their role and subjective value in an otherwise opaque social field of competing and overlapping desires. It is fantasy, moreover, which makes the difference between a given socio-historical situation and how the subject comes to be actively (libidinally) embedded within it.

Fantasy is, furthermore, at once the compass that orients the subject in the confusing symbolic network, and a defensive formation, a filter that screens out certain realizations and organizes meaning. In fact, returning to Salecl's (2004: 22) formulations and, more particularly, the idea that the subject "answers with his or her lack", we appreciate now that fantasy might be understood precisely as the subject's response to various lacks (impasses, impossibilities, imponderables) including the difficulty of ever really knowing what it is the Other wants.

For a crucial part of Lacan's teaching, fantasy is approached in just this way, that is, as the unconscious idea that the subject has as a way of responding to the inscrutable question of what the Other desires, and what the subject's own role is in the puzzling social reality of which they are a part. If fantasy is itself the best resort the subject has to responding to pronounced forms of lack, then we start to appreciate how incapacitating it will be for the subject to have this resource disabled. It is for this reason that Dolar (1991: 13) comments that "Anxiety is the lack of the support of the lack ... [this] 'lacking support of the lack' ... brings in the dynamics of fantasy, or the covering up of lack ... it is the fracture of the symbolic realm – a threat of a type of symbolic death – that leads to the proximity of a second death, its subjective expression in anxiety".

Lacan uses a similar choice of words early on in the seminar: "anxiety ... has to be conceived of at a duplicated level, as the failing of the support that lack provides" (2014: 53). A further qualification to be added here concerns the apparent object of anxiety. Indeed, Salecl's (2014: 23) puzzling pronouncement that "where there is supposed to be lack, some object is present", causes us to question how the "lack of the lack" is coterminous with an intruding libidinally excessive object.

The presence of such an object cannot but strike Freudians as an add amendment to Freud's theorizations of anxiety, one constant of which is that anxiety – unlike fear – has no readily identifiable object. Lacan, wanting to win on two fronts, offers a double negation as a way of bridging Freudian theorizations with his own conceptualizations: "anxiety is not without an object". Or, in a variation of the same: the subject of anxiety is "not without having it" (2014: 85). That is to say, there *is* an object in anxiety, but it is an object in a very particular sense.

Margarita Palacios (2013: 50) stresses that, for Lacan, turning phenomenology upside down, the object is not the empirical object that we experience through our senses, but is rather the *object a*

"which by 'not being there' allows the phenomenological experience to take place: desire and knowledge are possible only because of the exclusion of the 'real' ... The open space, the disjuncture of language and being, puts desire in motion; 'a' in this sense ... by not being there ... puts desire and meaning in motion ... [for Lacan] this constitutional lack is covered – and secured – by fantasy and experienced as ... desire."

Palacios probes the issue further, asking why the *object a* – a type of lack incarnated, a lack made object – should be related to the experience of anxiety? Her answer is that “anxiety signals a presence, this means that instead of the necessary lack that puts desire in motion, the subject is ‘asphyxiated’ by the proximity of the object causes of desire. Anxiety signals a failure in symbolic reality, a disappearance of the fantasy support of desire” (Palacois, 2013: 51).

Anxiety thus points to “the possibility of the void being closed, the drying up of desire, the failure of fantasy” (Lacan, 2014: 53). *Jouissance* is also a factor here, for fantasy not only arranges the subject’s world, endows their experience of psychical reality with a degree of consistency, it also acts as a barrier that differentiates desire from *jouissance*. Anxiety is at the same time then reaction and signal: it is both the result of the incapacitation of fantasy and a warning of an influx of traumatic enjoyment. So, while anxiety is indeed related to the experience of something being “too much”, a “too close” presence of the object, the crucial error to avoid is that of prioritizing the object as itself the elementary cause of anxiety. Anxiety, to recap, is the failure of a fantasy which covers up lack, which orders the subject’s world and explains their role with it and dictates what and how they desire. When fantasy seizes up, the consistency of the subject’s psychical reality is compromised, and they subsequently experience a troubling excessive (non)object, an anxious incarnation of *object a*.

Anxiety then is less about an object per se, than about a crushing experience of “out of placeness”. Given the conditions of anxiety as described above, an object of sorts will invariably be there, intruding upon the experience of the subject. Crucially however its disconcerting quality has less to do with any of its inherent properties, than with *where it occurs*, with how it disturbs the subject’s fantasmatic schematization of the world. It is this phenomenon of the object out of place that so directly links Lacan’s notion of anxiety to Freud’s conceptualization of the uncanny, to which there are no shortage of references in the seminar. Such an intruding object, furthermore, is loaded with frightening libido; it is the blot on the landscape, a stain upon the visual field which destroys the consistency of the image. It is as such less an object in the ordinary sense of the term than a kind of “object from inner space”.

This libidinal object or charge is something that cannot be integrated by the subject; anxiety is thus experienced when an element of the subject – as Seshadri-Crookes (2000) emphasizes – does not get imaged or symbolized. This is why it is true to say that one of Lacan’s objectives at the beginning of Seminar X is precisely to overlay Freud’s (1926) **Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety**, with his own theory of the mirror stage. The longstanding Freudian idea, that there is something in anxiety which cannot be adequately discharged, is here given a Lacanian articulation in the idea that there is something of the body – which is to say, *object a* and its associated libidinal charge – that cannot be captured in the mirror image. This idea appears relatively early on in the seminar, the notion, in short, that anxiety concerns a “non-specular” component which avoids the domestication of imaginary identifications.

Lacan offers a brief vignette at the beginning of the seminar which anticipates and brings together many of the constituent elements of anxiety that we have discussed above. The presence of this apologue, as he calls it, serves as a bridge between Seminar X on anxiety, and the previous (1961-2) seminar on identification, stressing thus that the role of failures in the imaginary production of identification play a crucial role in many forms of anxiety. Lacan invokes a scenario in which a dazed figure finds themselves in a sticky predicament: they can feel they are wearing a mask, although of what they don't know, and before them they see the figure of a gigantic praying mantis, whose intentions they cannot guess. The Kafkaesque quality of this "fable" should not distract us from its expository value. It represents, simultaneously: a crisis of identification in which the subject cannot gauge who they are for an Other; the overbearing presence of the desire of the Other; the subject's inability to summon up a viable self-sustaining image of themselves; and a consuming libidinal object that threatens the subject – and the subject's fantasmatic co-ordinates – with extinction.

One conclusion that we may draw from the foregoing discussion is that at least part of the difficulty of Lacan's seminar stems from his subject-matter itself. The proliferation of formulas and axiomatic assertions ("anxiety is the only affect that does not lie", etc.) arises largely from the variety of forms and underpinnings of anxiety. The multi-dimensionality of anxiety in the seminar is clear enough, simply by virtue of the fact that it is approached as: a relation (as in the proximity of the Other); an affect (accompanying the breakdown of fantasy); an extruding non-object (*object a*); and a libidinal charge that cannot be processed by the mirror-image. Lacan is not of course the first to attempt to plot the complex itinerary of the origins and forms of human anxiety. What proves fascinating, upon reflection, is that the vicissitudes of anxiety as traced by Freud in a variety of texts across his career prove no less complex, and in many instances, no less challenging, than those described by Lacan himself.

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