



# Time-Complex Anxiety<sup>1</sup>

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The following remarks are intended as philosophical comments on Gilles Deleuze's groundbreaking reflections on a control society emerging at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Deleuze 1992). Following Foucault, Deleuze's interpretations of the 'contemporary' socio-technological transformations are mostly of a *spatio*-technical nature; the aim of this article is to complement his diagnosis with a *time*-philosophical analysis. Here, the guiding question is how to best characterize the time-political dimension of the new forms of social ("apprenticeships and permanent training") and economic control, which has only further increased with the financialization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ("Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt") (1992: 6-7). Deleuze's text already contains a number of clues that are relevant in this context, for example his references to the work of the dromonihilist Paul Virilio, specifically to the "ultrarapid forms of free-floating control" (1992: 4) that the latter outlined. Behind the acceleration paradigm sketched out by Virilio, however, we recognize an explanatory model of a different temporality, that is, both a different model of explanation and a different model of time. According to our working hypothesis, complex societies or societies that, under the influence of algorithms and computer-based infrastructures, are *temporally* complex can no longer be understood from the perspective of the present. The type of economy that Deleuze subsumed under the concept of 'control society' corresponds to a logic that is no longer centered on the present or the contemporary. Rather, under the digital technological conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, control turns out to be time control and control of (as well as from) the future.

The basic thesis of the *post-contemporary* is that time is changing. Today, we not only live in an accelerated and therefore perpetually new time, but time itself – the structure and, as it increasingly seems, the direction of time – has changed. It is no longer a linear time, in the sense of a sequence of past, present, and future. Rather, one could say – but even that would (still) be too simplistic – that the future takes place 'before' the present, that time (effectively) comes from the future.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this article appeared in the reader of the Donaufestival 2018 ("Endlose Gegenwart") under the title "Wer hat Angst nach dem Zeitgenössischen?" The text has been reworked, expanded, and translated for the occasion of this special issue.



If today we often have the impression that time is out of joint, does not make sense, or is not (anymore) as it once was, then this may be due to our difficulties in getting used to a speculative temporality, to the fact that automated processes, algorithms, machine-based infrastructures, etc. shift or overcode the human temporal horizon – that is, our focus on the present and what is contemporary to us. Our temporally complex society, the current time-complex, can no longer be understood from the perspective of such a presence.

We know of the new speculative time-complex from everyday experience. Such phenomena are generally represented by terms for which the prefix ‘pre-’ indicates an orientation towards the future, such as preemptive police work, which – different from the writing of Philipp K. Dick or the film *Minority Report* (based on his eponymous short story) – is no longer science fiction. We live in a world of political or military preemptive strikes and the corresponding premediation undertaken by information technology.

We have even incorporated the principle of preemption into the structure of our personality, for example by reacting to program packages or information from commercial service providers that we have not explicitly asked for – something that will happen much more frequently in the future. The most banal, because most widespread, practices indicative of such a “mutation of capitalism” (Deleuze 1992: 6) are the algorithmic procedures of Amazon, which provide us with book recommendations based on our previous orders. It is because of such developments that sociologists speak of the formation of a *preemptive personality* (cf. Horning 2014): the algorithms ‘know’ about our desires before we become aware of them ourselves, they inform us ‘correctly’ about our (as yet unknown) needs and desires. Without wishing to simply demonize this development, what is problematic is that neither as individuals nor as a society have we learned to deal with this new temporal complexity, with this new time-complex.

The politics of preemptive strikes is also a new phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Brian Massumi and others have written about the kind of recursive truth thereby produced. Dropped bombs always find the enemy they seek (cf. Massumi 1993). This creates a situation which was originally a speculation: every bomb in the Middle East produces the terrorists that it wanted or was meant to fight. This is a recursive logic – the preemptive strike is not carried out to prevent something; it does not obey the logic of the preventive strikes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which followed the motto ‘attack is the best defense.’ Rather, what happens today is based on an actual anticipation of the future.

What is decisive here is that the (change of the) present is not necessarily determined by the past. The present is not primarily derived from the past, nor does it owe its existence to any act of decisionism; instead, it is increasingly shaped or controlled by the future. We are dealing here with an indication that the (chrono-)logic of the contemporary, with its fixation on the present (or experience), is unable to cope with the tempo-



rally complex logic of being constituted by the future. This is certainly one of the reasons for the massive critique directed against the concept of the 'contemporary' in recent years, but also for the numerous attempts to define – basically for the first time – what constitutes contemporaneity (*Zeitgenossenschaft*, literally a comradeship with time) in the first place.

The concept of contemporaneity has the advantage that it articulates – even more than a relationship to the present, past, or future – a relationship to time. And the concept of the time-complex helps to understand that contemporaneity cannot relate to one dimension of time alone, but that it has a 'complex' of various times as its object. A chronological time-image is a good expression of a contemporaneity that implies all three dimensions of time and relates them to each other in a certain form. Hence, the following applies: 'The present was future, is present, and will be past.' Here, too, the 'present that is present' has a privileged status, whereas it will have been in the future and must still arrive in the past. Nevertheless, chronology cannot do without any of the other two dimensions of time. In a chronological time-image, past and future are more complex than the present, in which the verb, adjective, and word of time seem to constitute a simple tautology ('The present is present').

In our book *Present Tense: A Poetics* (cf. Avanessian/Hennig 2015), we have pondered on whether there could be time relations that question chronology. We have identified two figurations in particular: the novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century establish a linguistic landscape that allows readers to make the past present, while the poetics of the present tense novels in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (always on the verge of grammatical failure) shapes the tenses in a way that allows readers to distance themselves from their present and place themselves in an *asynchronous* relationship to it. Critique of *contemporary art* is thus critique of a lack of distance from the present. We can well imagine how contemporaneity may unobtrusively turn into a desire, a lack of presence unexpectedly sneaks in, and one suddenly begins to run after it.

Two recent examples from the Berlin context underline this: First, a series of programs at the local *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (HKW), with the initially confusing or counterintuitive title "100 Years of Now"<sup>2</sup> – a title, however, which may perhaps be understood in terms of the first paradox of time, of which Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition* that it compels us to comprehend each present simultaneously with *its* past (cf. Deleuze 1994: 79).

This can be illustrated by the second example, a lecture series at the Freie Universität Berlin on the topic of the 1968 student protests "50 years after." Students took the

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<sup>2</sup> See <[https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2015/100\\_jahre\\_gegenwart/100\\_jahre\\_gegenwart\\_start.php](https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2015/100_jahre_gegenwart/100_jahre_gegenwart_start.php)>.



theme literally and occupied the auditorium shortly before the lecture began. Their present simultaneously included the past of the 1968 student revolt. However, the chancellor of the university could only reply, as we learn from social media, that the lecture hall was needed for a lecture series. Pointing out that the building was supposed to close at 10 p.m., she had it evacuated on the same evening. Apparently, she was of the opinion that 1968 could not to be thought of as present, which puts her on the side of the contemporaries of the past (*Vergangenheitsgenossen*, literally comrades of the past). Her concept of time revealed itself to be flawed.

This is intellectually disastrous. Her decision is indistinguishable from the unconscious cognition that Luciana Parisi calls the unconscious thinking of machine-based modernity (cf. Parisi 2017). And it is also politically disastrous, because no relation to the other is expressed here. One cannot even accuse the chancellor of bad will. She has simply made use of an instrumental reason or expressed her bureaucratic power. However, one cannot call the logic of such a university and of the thinking of its chancellor 'free' (*frei*).

Deleuze also formulates a second paradox that helps us understand what might be meant by "100 Years of Now": The present is simultaneous not only with *its* past, but with the extension of the past in its entirety (cf. Deleuze 1994: 81-82). In this sense, looking (back) at "100 Years of Now" means examining the last 100 years in order to determine which ones of their undoubtedly past phenomena are to be considered as still being present.

If "50 Years after" and "100 Years of Now" mean a contemporaneity with the present or are representative of an understanding of contemporaneity (*Zeitgenossenschaft*), then we can very well understand why the reductionist identification of contemporaneity with the present (*Gegenwartsgenossenschaft*) seems so inadequate. A time-complex that renders a contemporaneity of the future and comradeship with the future (*Zukunftsgenossenschaft*) possible, and that approaches the present only from this perspective, needs to be thought in the first place. In the attentive consumption of current mass media, what is noticeable is that these are oriented less and less towards what has already happened or what is happening at the moment, but rather towards a future described as a threat: What will happen 'now' (that is, in the future that determines the present)? *What will Trump say next?* When will the next terrorist attack take place? Where will it be decided what needs to be done? In the words of media theorist Richard Grusin: "I take up the premediation of the Iraq War, arguing that premediation furnished the media logic of the Bush-Cheney doctrine of pre-emptive warfare" (2010: 37). "The aim of the PreCrime Unit is preventive prosecution, which was to become one of the Bush Administration's leading strategies for tracking down and preventing terrorism in post-9/11 America" (40). "In the Bush-Cheney political regime of pre-emptive war, premedia-



tion became the dominant media regime" (45). "The idea of pre-emptive warfare has as its counterpart the domestic practice of 'preventive prosecution' of terrorists, which is now the official policy of the US government. Like pre-emptive warfare, preventive prosecution aims to stop acts of domestic terror before they happen" (161).

This corresponds to Brian Massumi's argument in *Politics of Everyday Fear* that an "unspecified enemy threatens to rise up at any time at any point in social or geographical space. From the welfare state to the warfare state: a permanent state of emergency against a multifarious threat as much in us as outside" (1993: 11).<sup>3</sup>

At this point, recourse to an almost classical philosophical differentiation is necessary – one that was discussed not just from Kierkegaard to Heidegger – namely the existential distinction between fear and anxiety: Are we dealing with fear (of a concrete object) or anxiety (as unspecified horror)? And how can such an ancient distinction be relevant for today's political discussions?

First of all, this distinction is important because we have an ambivalent or diffuse relationship not only with specific everyday objects, but also with the serious problems of our time in general: Global problems such as climate change, which threaten both individuals and the human species as a whole, cannot be understood as concrete objects in the here and now. Above all, their temporal dimension makes it difficult to tackle them; for after all, what they are is both a *concrete* danger due to the accumulation of past events and a vague threat coming from the future. And it is precisely this complex temporality that we have not yet understood.

Now the political implications of the question regarding fear or anxiety can be better understood. In fact, we are increasingly confronted with dangers that lie ahead of us, that have not (yet) been concretely objectified: problems, that is, that owe their existence to a speculative temporality and thus require a complex temporal approach.

Unfortunately, today we are experiencing the exact opposite, namely an increase in irrational fear in the sense of a production of 'concrete' objects of fear. This attitude is responsible for the preservation of the status quo, the permanent state of exception as a war on terror, fear of strangers, immigrants, etc. – all symptoms of a failure to cope with the temporal complexity of our global society. Apparently, this is not merely a psychological or philosophical problem, but primarily a political one, since the reluctance to face the new speculative temporality, the humiliation of living in a complex society no

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Massumi 1993: 10-11: "The enemy is no longer outside. Increasingly, the enemy is no longer even clearly identifiable as such. Ever-present dangers blend together, barely distinguishable in their sheer numbers. Or, in their proximity to pleasure and intertwining with the necessary functions of body, self, family, economy, they blur into the friendly side of life. The cold war in foreign policy has mutated into a state of generalized deterrence against an enemy without qualities."



longer dominated by humans but by algorithms, computers, machines, etc., is repressed and returns as a fear of concrete objects and subjects in the here and now. In order to transform this revealing anxiety – revealing, because it points to an awareness of its objectlessness – into fear, objects that already exist are needed as a pretext. One could even speak of a (preemptive) production of objects that makes fear and punishment possible. ‘Control’ concerns the entire complex of what we encounter here: The avoidance of an untapped knowledge implies control as a short-circuit mechanism. The production of anxiety (of the future) reinforces the desire for control. Hence, the transformation of anxiety into fear through the concrete production of objects of fear provides the material on which actual control can draw and focus. This process is circular, as we have demonstrated with regard to the principle of preemption. It creates what it seeks to prevent, virtually out of nothing – or, in other words, out of the complexity of time and our unsettled relationship with it.

Here, a third form of anxiety – paranoia – needs to be mentioned as well. It incorporates the other two forms and draws attention to the fact that anxiety is one of the most common symptoms among male neurotics. Paranoia manifests itself as a fear of objects but is not caused by them. Therefore, paranoia is always anxiety, meaning that it is objectless. Psychoanalysis, however, tells us that all objects are reified others (*objets petit a*) that are reduced to a tolerable size. In contrast to Heidegger’s philosophical metaphysics – which, since anxiety is objectless, declares it to be transcendental – psychoanalysis understands paranoia as rooted in the relationship between the fearful person and the Other. And in the neurotic phallocracy in which we are currently living, the relation of masculine-gendered subjects to the Other is defined by the threat of castration, to the effect that anxiety is more or less ubiquitous.

An illustration of our reflections on the problematic of fear, paranoia, and identity can be found in Rob Horning’s reading of digital profiles in “Sick of Myself” (cf. Horning 2017). Here, one gets an idea of both the effort and stress involved in misunderstanding oneself as a subject that would be given without recourse to the Other – something which perpetuates the philosophical myth that a consciousness of oneself creates identity. “[A]s Cheney-Lippold argues, ‘there is no fidelity to notions of our individual history and self-assessment’ in the way the black-box algorithms classify us. The way we are classified is kept classified, and shifts depending on the context and what the algorithmic system is asked to do. Who we are depends on what is going to be done with us” (Horning 2017: n.p.).

In these formulations, both can be heard: the desire for an illusion of identity and a frightening effect of data manifesting itself in corporations (as knowing Others). “Data collection is used to create identity markers about us that we don’t see or control, that



we can't evaluate or access or alter directly. Companies know more about us as consumers than we know ourselves" (Horning 2017: n.p.).

It is interesting to follow the narrative of such a narcissistic self, which tries to draw satisfaction from its own image and, with a massive expenditure of energy, develops a nostalgia for an identity projected into the past, which then seems to undergo a quasi-imaginary erosion. "But this same destabilization opens up the possibility for compensatory reassurances: the serial pleasures of checking for likes and other forms of micro-recognition made suddenly meaningful by the acute insecurity. Even as social media destabilize the lived experience of our self's continuity, they address the dissolution of identity with a dynamic system of identity capture" (Horning 2017: n.p.).

Here, the self has become so entangled in its illusionary profile that it can no longer recognize how much it has become willingly complicit in its own falsification. This is not to say that there is a true or authentic self, but that it seems vain to spend so much energy on the fabrication of a solipsistic illusion that creates a zero-value social relation.

Kept alive only by one's desire for an ideal self, a precarious dependence on one's own profile sets in. One forgets, however, that without artificial help, one can only be seen by others. The further this forgetfulness progresses, the more animistic the algorithm becomes. "The algorithm calls forth the behavior it was merely supposed to identify, becoming 'an engine, not a camera,' to borrow sociologist Donald Mackenzie's phrase." In the end, social media even 'disguise' themselves and "exacerbate ontological insecurity while masquerading as its cure" (Horning 2017: n.p.).

It is no digital miracle that a narcissistic self in need of therapy, dreaming the dream of ontological self-assurance, suffers from a more or less ubiquitous paranoia. Here, we begin to suspect that it is the self-love of the subject that grounds its anxiety and makes it a willing accomplice of its control. It is afraid, and it desires self-control.

This finally leads us back to the question of what the reductionist identification of contemporaneity (*Zeitgenossenschaft*) with the present (*Gegenwartsgenossenschaft*) means (for us). In no way do we claim that the present is not accessible to the advocates of the culture (or cult) of the *contemporary*, or that, for certain theoretically compelling reasons, they would be unable to form a self-consciousness of the present – on the contrary. Self-consciousness is already there, in the present. From a mereological perspective, self-consciousness always exists before consciousness, and consciousness only appears through the alienation from one's own unconscious. A consciousness of things, of others and their world owes itself to a process of enlightenment that requires an alienation from self-consciousness, a break-up of its circular correlationism – an externalization.



Something else seems to be missing – let’s call it a contemporaneity of and comradeship with the future (*Zukunftsgenossenschaft*), a future-cooperative. What this implies are not only the future forms of resistance that Deleuze envisaged towards the end of his reflections on the history of control,<sup>4</sup> but also a resistance, as it were, *in* and *from* the future. If we think of the future from the perspective of language philosophy as something that can be understood both temporally and modally, it comes into view as an indicative time. The future can be understood as a possible time, but also as an imperative, a task. As modal space, it is a realm of projections, of desire, where the conflict between one’s own and other presences is carried out.

### Postscript<sup>5</sup>

PREDICTION – PREVENTION – PREEMPTION. It is high time to distinguish historic forms of control (i.e. efforts to control the future) from those that we encounter in the present and from the future. The question can be rendered in grammatical terms as the alternative between understanding ‘control of the future’ as a *subjective genitive* or as an *objective genitive* phrase, that is: whether we will control the future or whether the future will control us.

From the past, we are familiar with the concept of *prediction* as prophesying what will happen, i.e. a basically neutral view from the present concerning a future that must be adapted to. *Prevention* is more clearly determinate and at the same time more negative. Here a negative assessment and the will to avert what is to come go hand in hand. If we fear bad things will happen in the future, then we must change them or not allow them to occur in the first place.

*Preemption* – which is precisely the opposite of preventive avoidance of a negative prophecy, although the two are often confused – follows yet another temporal logic. This small, largely overlooked difference can be seen with respect to the most well-known form of the preemptive, and the first to emerge into general consciousness. The *preemptive warfare* waged and first elevated to a state of ab-normality by the George W. Bush administration, contrary to the official rhetoric of prevention, has led not to peace, but rather precisely to the prophesied situation that it promised to prophylactically avoid. Or, to modify a quote from Karl Kraus on psychoanalysis: The ‘war on terror’ is the political illness for which it regards itself as a cure.

*translated from German by Simon Schleusener and Florian Cord*

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<sup>4</sup> “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.” (Deleuze 1992: 4)

<sup>5</sup> This final passage is an extract from Armen Avanessian’s book *Future Metaphysics* (2020).





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