



## THE AGE OF ANGST

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**taglicht media and Hawkeye Pictures**

### ➡ Logline

Fear is a fundamental power; it can destroy societies but also inspire people. The documentary 'The Age of Angst' (WT) gives a survey over the fears of our time and it explores where they come from. It shows what can happen when destructive fears take over - and how people all over the world manage to make friends with their fears and turn them into something constructive.



## Synopsis

Our world seems to be on the brink of destruction. Sea levels are rising, climate collapse is imminent, Corona is plunging the world into crisis. Additionally, we still are facing potential nuclear disaster, worldwide migration flows, terrorist attacks, animal diseases, wars, and natural disasters. The endless stream of negative messages on our countless devices is digging into our subconscious. And it interacts with one of our deepest feelings: fear.

Fear undermines our society as it becomes the collective underlying feeling and therefore, what is described by sociologists to be the signature of the 21st century. Politicians as Trump and Hungary's Victor Orban for instance are declaring national isolation and pursue this aim by building walls and fences. With a new nationalism and radicalism arising, the language of hatred is no longer a taboo. Preppers around the world are preparing for the apocalypse. Conspiracy theories are flourishing and anxiety disorders take over control. On the other hand, *Reichsbürger* in Germany or the *Sovereign Citizens* in the USA are planning to take power after the collapse of the state.

But obviously, we are not doing too bad. People are living safer than ever before. They live healthier lives and they are getting older than ever before. Infant mortality is in decline, while literacy is rising. Many diseases have been successfully eradicated by modern medicine. The number of people suffering from hunger has gone down by 50 percent over the last two decades and the average standard of living in the world has gone up.

So, people could feel safe. If it weren't for this paradoxical phenomenon: the stronger the security systems around us, the more anxious we get. The more we have, the more we fear loss. And the more complex and interconnected society gets, the more vulnerable it is to dangers.

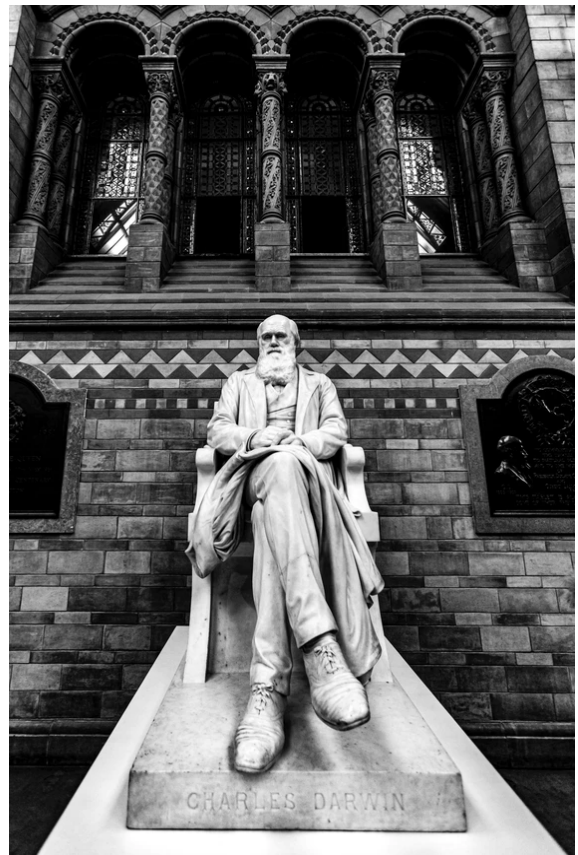
So are we really living in an era of fear that is different from previous times? And - what is fear, actually?

## Faces of Angst

Charles Darwin was convinced that fear was innate and served survival. Everybody is afraid of a snake even if it is located behind security glass. Why? Because every animal and every human being has an innate fear of certain animals. If you have to learn by being bitten you are dead.

Thus, reflexive fears go back to our very origins in early prehistoric times they are essential.

A few decades after Darwin, Freud came up with his idea that fears had a social background: the wrong upbringing, for example. His contemporary, Iwan Petrowic Pavlov studied his dog's behavior and concluded that fears were a product of learning.



Today, scientists assume that human fear is fed by two sources: genes and learning experiences. The latter can give rise to fears, but the process of learning can also erase fears.

Every human being has constructive and destructive fears: Constructive fear protects from an early death and might give you wings: This is experienced by the thrill in a ghost train or might be giving you the shivers in a horror movie. The fear to die might function as an inspiration for a requiem as much as stage fright might lead an actor up to unknown levels of performing.

But fear can also be a torture, it can make people violent or sick. It triggers psychoses and phobias and might even lead to suicide. Diffuse fears can drive people into the arms of demagogues and convince them to kill strangers. Fear is contagious. It is not only part of the individual's basic constitution but plays an important role in social dynamics. A look into the past shows that every era had its own collective fears.

## Angst and Zeitgeist

Existential fears have been the same in all societies and epochs: the fear of hunger, loneliness, illness and death. In the Middle Ages, epidemics turned out to be the greatest imaginable threat to human life. During the great plague, one third of the European population died within just two years. In the 20th century, world wars were the driving force behind rampant existential fears, as they claimed the lives of millions of people.

Next to these existential fears there have always existed fears which were specific for their times. During the Middle Ages, the Christian world was obsessed with the fear of eternal damnation: people were convinced that misbehavior on earth would lead directly to hell. When the Industrial Revolution struck, people started to complain about typical new symptoms caused by new technology: fear of failure became a common phenomenon due to the acceleration of modernity. Nervousness and all sorts of fears were caused by the loosening of sexual morals. After Freud invented his psychoanalysis, hysteria became the big new fear. During the Cold War, fear of spies was everywhere, and nuclear disasters seemed to be a realistic option in the atomic age. In 1968, older citizens were afraid of the students revolt and with the rise of food technology along came the fear of genetically modified food.

But be it existential or epoch-specific: fears have always driven us. Fear has always been instrumentalized, and it was used to make politics. The Spanish inquisition justified its crimes by exploiting the people's fear of heretics. The National Socialists profited from German employees fearing unemployment and 'foreign infiltration'. American apartheid was a consequence of collective, instrumentalized fear of 'the blacks' and the loss of privileges.

The masses are easily to be influenced and mobilized. The pyramids, the Roman Limes or the castles of Europe, the walls in China or in Berlin - they are all witnesses, carved in stone, of collective fears instrumentalized by politics.

So, we have always lived in a world of fear. Has fear reached a new dimension today?



## The new Angst

Sociologists and psychologists, insurance companies and economists have long been trying to make fear measurable. They have created anxiety barometers, stress tests, worry catalogues and anxiety studies to evaluate the psychological state of society, to calculate the risk of this illness, and to advise politics and economy or simply just to sell insurances.

But all their efforts are just attempts, because fear is a feeling. And feelings cannot be quantified. For a start, most people do not even agree on the exact meaning of the term 'fear'. And it is even more difficult to assess the fears prevailing in earlier times. Therefore, we will never really know whether we are more afraid nowadays than people in other centuries.

Why do we still have the feeling of being ruled by fear much more than ever before? There are various explanations for this:

First, there is something known as 'security paradox' meaning the more security is guaranteed by a society, the more fear prevails. Laws, health care and state protection are supposed to convey a feeling of top-level security, which causes a new fear. The fear that these instruments will fail sometime, the fear the means of protection could be destroyed again.

Second, there something which is called 'risk society': The invention of new technologies, e.g. digitalization, creates new dangers, which quickly can multiply in our global, cross-linked, and overpopulated world. An incident in a nuclear power plant might contaminate an entire region. Because of global mobility



epidemics can spread at lightning-speed. Blackouts may run entire economies into the ground, a hacker attack can topple governments, and today, a terrorist attack can kill anyone at any time.

These are very realistic dangers, but you never know if or when they will strike. This leads to a permanent state of emergency, which in the digital age is reaching a completely new dimension. Distributed through countless channels in endless repetition, crisis and disaster suddenly seem to be everywhere. The new media are perfect incubators for fear scenarios. Within fifty years, information possibilities have increased a thousand-fold. In the information wars for attention, fear is a valuable commodity. People prefer to click or read the exciting stories and they skip everything as complicated as background information.

At the same time, people are experiencing individualization (loneliness) combined with a constant pressure to perform in a world which grants millions of possibilities: The self-optimizing individual via social media is constantly confronted with the seemingly perfect lives of others. But in a society dominated by technology, it is developing into a superfluous entity.

If the external negative flood of information is combined with an inner feeling of constant overstrain, this creates a fear of life, which has become the basic tone of our existence: diffuse, constant, omnipresent.

Under the regime of fear, our societies could drift more and more into populism and hatred and in the end into capitulation. So, what is there to do? Humanity will never get rid of fear completely. Mankind will have to cope with it. But maybe it can be adjusted and even be transformed?

## Ways out of powerlessness

Some people transform fear into energy. The energy for a party foundation or the planning of an assassination might go back to fear, so might be the passing of a law or its cancellation. A poem can be inspired by fear as well as hate speech. Fear forces people to save their money or to invent new war techniques, to seek or to lose spirituality, to change one's life completely or to destroy the lives of others. But how are fears channeled into something constructive or destructive? Psychologists and biologists, political scientists and educators have a lot of different explanations: culture and education, genetic disposition and upbringing, social status or the stability of the state. There is not just *one* decisive factor for dealing constructively with fear.

However, the more individual examples you look at, the more clearly it becomes apparent that there are always similar mechanisms which empower people to live with their fears or even let inspire them: Social cohesion, commitment to society, exploring and discussing fear, belief in a higher authority, creativity and humor.

Historians or sociologists explore fear in order to explain it. They are convinced that societies which understand their fears will deal with them more rationally. By discussing their fears in therapies, millions of people may find answers or clues. But most of all they experience attention, which is often missing in their everyday life. Resilience researchers have discovered that isolation causes anxiety, whereas communication and compassion strengthen the feeling of solidarity. And this reduces the possibilities for populists to attack.

Many people are looking for spiritual answers. In doing so, they delegate their fears to a higher authority which is responsible for everything. In creating a new transcendental system, they free themselves by a displeasing feeling of powerlessness. Their fear turns into prayers and spiritual actions. Artists do something very similar - they transform their fear into concrete action, create paintings, melodies, stories. Painters and authors, composers and musicians often save themselves by their art and simultaneously inspire their fellow human beings. Political activists address rampant fears of other people in order to change social grievances.

Perhaps the strongest antagonist of fear is humor. Carnival, parody, and comedy mock what awakens fears and turn angst into grotesque. Laughter can triumph over fear, because it is as involuntary and contagious as fear. As long as a people are laughing, fear cannot destroy society.

## Dramaturgy

**Hypothesis:** At the beginning, the film dares to carry out an inventory of fear, a *Tour d'Horizon* of the most diverse fears that are ruling our society today. This is followed by our thesis: We live in an age of fear. But how does that come? To answer this question, the film will explore the following issues: What is fear, how is it defined? Has fear always existed and how has it changed over the centuries? Can fear be measured at all, and why do people in the 21st century seem to be more than ever eaten up by fear? Finally, the film shows people who reconcile themselves with fear, transforming it into constructive energy.

**Living with Angst:** The film visits people in whose lives fear or the struggle against it plays an essential role: People who are addicted to fear or who make money out of it. People who laugh against fear and those who explore it. People whose fear turns into anger and those who encounter it with spirituality. People who transform it into art or into care. Or people who instrumentalize the fears of others. All protagonists are prototypes of our contemporary society of fear and form the core of the film. They are accompanied in their everyday life, an everyday life that is determined by fear. Why are they afraid and of what? What is it doing to them and what are they doing to it? Are they afraid of it or are they looking for it? What are they dreaming of? And what would a life without fear look like? Their stories are interwoven and told throughout the film.

**Exploring Angst:** The protagonists of the film are embedded in a scientific discourse about fear. Fear researchers and geneticists, historians and sociologists, psychologists and politicians talk about what fear does to our world and humanity. They venture prognoses about the future and turn their gaze to the past.





## Possible Protagonists

All protagonists embody a specific way of dealing with fear:

**Angst and humor:** Comedian Lewis Black makes himself and his audience laugh away fears.

**Angst and art:** Monica Bonvicini, Anne Imhof or Addie Wagenknecht deal artistically with the horror and fear in society and banish their own fears into their artworks and performances. Or the artist Sarah Angst - she lives with her children on a volcano and prepares with them for the worst case scenario.

**Exploring Angst:** The psychologist Irvin Yalom, who in his books and through therapy takes away people's fear, is himself confronted with an existential fear: the fear of death.

**Angst and spirituality:** The Balinese priest Bagus Wijaya takes the dangerous path to a volcano to overcome the fear of the wrath of the gods. Or the young rabbi Ephraim Carlebach from Antwerp, who inspires the community with his very worldly parables. The French Zen priestess Kankyo Tannier teaches people in the monastery and via the Internet how to meditate and takes away their fears.

**Angst and social cohesion:** Socially committed people who fight against isolation and the fears it causes, such as Amy Perrin, who fights against rampant loneliness with her trust, supported by the British Ministry of Loneliness.

**Angst and politics:** The young political activists Amelia Blair Smith and Kristen Cervero, Chair of the Young Democratic Socialists of America. They want to allay the fears of the people in the state, because they are convinced that privatisation and liberalisation make people fearful and thus receptive to populists.

**Looking for Angst:** Fred Stockton, former Hell's Angel member, is a prepper and is preparing meticulously for the apocalypse. He could survive two years in his bunker - and he can hardly wait.

**Angst as business:** One of the most successful insurance brokers in the world is Englishman Peter Rosengard. He has done big business with the fear of others and is even in the Guinness Book of Records since he sold the world's most expensive life insurance policy, worth 100 million dollars. Editors-in-chief like Andrea Baillie (Toronto Star), Nicole Carroll (USA Today) and Muriel Playnet (LeParisien) have to decide daily between sensation and information, take their journalistic mission seriously and at the same time consider: Angst sells

**Fear makers and their "victims":** Götz Kubitschek, Lana Lokteff, Lauren Southern or Naomi Seibt are educated, eloquent and dangerous men and women who reach and stir up the masses with their nationalist, right-wing slogans. Their grateful audiences are very different people, who feel unrepresented by politics and are overwhelmed by their fear of life, looking for simple answers and solutions.

## Possible Interviewees

### *About Angst and the individual*

- Borwin Bandelow, psychiatrist and neurologist, Göttingen University. The well-known anxiety researcher investigates whether fear is the underlying feeling of our time.
- Willibald Ruch, psychologist, humor researcher, University of Zurich. He has been researching cheerfulness for 40 years and is convinced that joy is the most powerful antagonist of fear.
- Katarina Domschke, psychiatrist, University of Freiburg. Author of the textbook *Angst in der Kunst, Ikonografie einer Grundemotion* .
- Ulrike Scheuermann, psychologist in Germany. The bestselling author coined the term postmodern fear milieu .
- Arne Öhmann, neuroscientist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, is one of the leading anxiety researchers.
- Klaus Lieb, psychiatrist, Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research in Mainz. He heads large-scale studies on why some people are more susceptible to crises than others.
- Peter Walschburger, biopsychologist, FU Berlin. He teaches and researches about humans as natural and cultural beings and believes that both genes and life experience control our fears.
- Stefan Hilscher, the psychologist has been working for Doctors without Borders in Asia and Africa for several decades.
- Adam Phillips, renowned psychoanalyst, University of York and author of the book *Going sane*”
- Steven Pinker, psychologist, Harvard University. Pinker is one of the world's leading cognitive scientists.
- Holly Dunsworth, University of Rhode Island. Anthropologist and author of the book *Human Origins* 101.
- Gretta Vosper is theologian, ordained Minister of the United Church of Canada - and self-proclaimed atheist.
- Simon Critchley is a philosopher who is primarily concerned with Freud, Heidegger and the nature of humor, University of Essex.
- Owen Flanagan, philosopher and neuroscientist, known for his book *Self-Expressions: Mind, Morals and the Meaning of Life* . Duke University.
- Gregg Caruso teaches as a philosopher at SUNY Corning in the USA and deals with free will and morals.
- Seema Yasmin is a physician, a multi-award-winning multimedia journalist and director of the Stanford Health Communication Initiative at Stanford University.
- Bestselling authors Margaret Atwood, Stephen King and William Gibson are so well versed in the mechanisms of fear that they teach millions of people to fear.

### *About Angst and the collective*

- Heinz Bude, sociologist and author of *Gesellschaft der Angst* , Berlin.
- Valérie de Courville Nicol, sociologist at the Université Concordia Montréal and author of the book *Social Economies of Fear and Desire* , Canada.
- Walter Wüllenweber, journalist and author of the bestseller *Frohe Botschaft - Es steht nicht gut um die Menschheit, aber besser als je zuvor* , Germany.
- Andreas Reckwitz, sociologist, Humboldt University Berlin. Germany's leading sociologist describes the individualization of society.
- Barry Glassner, sociologist and author of the book *The Culture of Fear* , USA.
- Robin Corey, political scientist at the City University of New York and author of the book *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* .
- David Frum, political journalist and author of the book *Trumpocalypse* , Canada.
- Christine Lagarde, lawyer and President of the European Central Bank. France.
- Elizabeth Warren, lawyer, politician and author of 'The Vanishing Middle Class'. Massachusetts, USA.
- David Suzuki, award-winning environmental activist and geneticist, Canada.
- Naomi Klein, political activist and globalization critic, Canada.
- Lawrence Krauss, theoretical physicist and bestselling author of *The greatest story ever told so far: why are we here?* , USA.

### *About Angst and the history*

- Bettina Hitzer, historian, focus of her research is the history of emotions, MPI Berlin.
- Frank Biess, historian and author of the book *Republik der Angst* . UC San Diego.
- Joanna Bourke, historian and author of the book *Fear- a Cultural History* . University London.
- Martina Padberg, art historian and co-author of the book *Angst in der Kunst* , Bonn.
- Patrick Boucheron, medievalist at the Collège de France and author of the book *Conjurer la Peur* , Paris.
- Yuval Noah Harari, historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of the book *Homo Deus, a history of tomorrow* , Jerusalem.

## Picture

The protagonists are accompanied by an observing, restrained camera. They have time and space to live and explain their everyday life. On the one hand, this creates an immediate proximity that does not expose them, on the other hand, the camera can capture small, quiet moments that later turn out to be key scenes.

The interviews with experts are elaborately staged. The scientists are interviewed in their immediate professional environment. This could be universities or libraries, laboratories or offices. Captured with several permanently installed cameras, they comment on and classify the actions and thoughts of the protagonists - from a psychological, sociological or historical perspective.

Historical digressions are illustrated with archive material: The architecture of fear with European castles, the Chinese or the Berlin Wall. The iconography of fear with inserts of depictions of hell, fairy tale illustrations or paintings like Munch's 'The Scream', as well as with film footage of Hiroshima or the burning towers of 9/11.

Current footage (e.g. news material) captures the fears and zeitgeist of the 21st century. Images like: AfD demonstrations against 'islamization', Trump's press conferences against the press, corona demonstrations with conspiracy theorists, Sovereign Citizens and Reichsbürger who rebel against 'foreign rule', environmental activists, on melting ice floes in the Arctic or chained to trees announcing the near climate collapse, empty beaches, museums and streets with scattered people wearing masks telling of the fear of corona, tanks in the streets of Brussels and Berlin announcing the rampant fear of terror.







## Auf einen Blick

Feature doc

1x90'

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