

ENG/GERMAN 590S

## THE MELANCHOLY OF ART

Theodor Adorno at various points in his oeuvre remarked that the illusory and ephemeral world spun in art, literary or otherwise, often tends to engulf the reader/audience in sadness. Because all art “is bound up with semblance, [it] is endowed with sadness; art grieves all the more, the more completely it suggests meaning.” As it responds to a welter of inchoate and antagonistic forces that comprise our empirical existence, art and the artistic temperament knows that it can only ever bring all these conflicting perceptions, desires, fears, etc. into fleeting (symbolic) alignment. Profoundly cognizant of its own transience as a merely symbolic world, art is bound up with melancholy. Or, as Adorno puts it, “melancholy is the shadow of what in all form is heterogeneous, which its form strives to banish: mere existence. ... In the utopia of its form, art bends under the burdensome weight of the empirical world from which, as art, it steps away.”

The focus of this seminar is not melancholy as a “theme” in art but, rather, the inherently melancholic disposition of art and representation. It is no accident that the nexus of art and melancholy becomes pronounced just as the idea of aesthetic autonomy begins to take shape – that is, of art beginning to detach itself from metaphysical and cosmological frameworks and certitudes at the threshold of the sixteenth century. – Thus, following some exploratory theological readings that frame melancholy as a sin (acedia) – John Cassian, Gregory the Great, Aquinas – we will consider some artworks, such as Albrecht Dürer’s “Melancholia I” (1514) and Lorenzo Lotto, which offer a secular echo of the Pietà motif. We will then move on to selections from Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), a work that both explores and embodies its eponymous condition in strangely digressive and shapeless prose. The discussion will be complemented by W. G. Sebald’s self-conscious tribute to early-seventeenth-century melancholia in *The Rings of Saturn* (1997). – The majority of the seminar will be taken up with constellations of melancholy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative: Joseph Roth, *Radetzkymarch* (1932); Sandor Marai, *Embers* (1942), and Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (1958). The pièce de resistance will be Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947), which perhaps more than any other European novel throws into relief the melancholy intrinsic to artistic creation, while also placing the catastrophe of European fascism in intricate dialogue with the post-Schismatic, early-modern Europe of Dürer and Luther. – In addition, we will screen two films: Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Lights* (1963) and Theo Angelopoulos’ modernist cinematic reimagining of Homer: *Ulysses’ Gaze* (1995).

Readings and class discussions in English.

Pfau. M 06:15 PM-08:45 PM.

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