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A Diptych of Spiritual Maladies in Cinema: From *Nostalgia* (Andrei Tarkovsky) to *Melancholy* (Lars von Trier)

Abstract: This essay aims to assemble (palimpsestically) the visions of several art creators on melancholia and nostalgia. It also undertakes a brief foray into the history of art and film by reference to several influential names: Andrei Rublev, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Albrecht Dürer, John Everett Millais, Andrei Tarkovsky and Lars von Trier. Moreover, it examines one of Andrei Rublev's prominent works, *The Holy Trinity*, and Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), a remarkable engraving from a visual and intellectual point of view. In cinema, the option for the visions of two directors (despite their differences of style, ideas and generations) is linked to the core representation of nostalgia and melancholia in Tarkovsky's film, *Nostalgia* (1983), adjacent also to *The Sacrifice* (1986), and in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011). The analysis proposed in this essay resorts to the ancient philosophical conception on melancholy, as well as to the interpretations on this theme provided by modern scholars, such as Sigmund Freud, Fritz Saxl, Erwin Panofsky, and Raymond Klibansky. The same goes for nostalgia, even though this a pre-modern concept.

Keywords: nostalgia, melancholia, Andrei Rublev, Albrecht Dürer, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, John Everett Millais, René Magritte, Andrei Tarkovsky, Lars von Trier, history of art and cinema, history of ideas.

Introduction

This essay outlines an overview of the concepts and ideas of nostalgia (in Greek, *nostos* means a return home, while *algos* means pain) and melancholy (in Greek, *melaina* means black, and *hole* means humour), as they are represented in the films *Nostalgia* by Andrei Tarkovsky (1983) and *Melancholia* by Lars von

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Trier (2011). Although melancholy is a mental and spiritual state theorized profusely since Antiquity (with ample nuances added in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as in Modernity), and nostalgia is a state detected and theorized only at the end of the eighteenth century (in 1788, the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer was the first to use the term, referring to a disease related to the mercenary soldiers' longing to return home), links and cross-fertilisation between the two (medical) states and concepts began to be detected especially in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, with the amplification and ramification of spiritual maladies afflicting modern and postmodern man. In this sense, the two film directors this essay looks at and their symptomatic works can be seen as diagnoses of the spiritual diseases noticeable at millennial ends and beginnings: they embark on a *tour de force* and engage in a directorial vision of the close-reading type, performing a ritualistic, even essayistic demonstration, to some extent, of these concepts, through the ideational (and not just visual) force that is inherent in the films *Nostalgia* and *Melancholia*. Lars von Trier is a self-avowed admirer of Tarkovsky's art, and his film, beyond its autobiographical (depressive) side, is by default a sequel to Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (an equally autobiographical film), a reply and a tribute to it.

From the vast history of the term melancholy, we will select only the nuances that interest us in this applied analysis on the two above-mentioned films. Classified as either natural or non-natural, i.e. pathological, melancholy has been ascribed especially to philosophers (the recurrent minds of Antiquity), considered to possess outstanding intellectual prowess, but it has also been diagnosed as a "negative privilege" and a fatal danger for the "exceptionally endowed man" (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 71). Saint Hildegard von Bingen introduced a theological nuance in the diagnosis of melancholy, considering that its pathological form was dependent on the fall of man from paradise (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 106-107). This religious perspective discerned an anthropological dimension in the primordial sinner (and his descendants) or even suggested a psychohistorical intention (*avant la lettre*, of course) to justify a mental (or spiritual) illness. The monk Gaspar Offuys considered, also in a theological sense, that melancholy, as an intellectual disease, was a punishment for spiritual pride (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 108-109). Many other descendants of these hermeneuts have focused, in their investigations of melancholy, on a defective spiritual concentration, on the idea of the disruption of ideas and on the impairment of imagination, reason and memory (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 118). Still, melancholy is not exclusively negatively connoted, but is also associated with an epiphanic function. Although he does not exclude the harmful dimension of melancholy as a humour, Marsilio Ficino (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 322-324) sees melancholy as a tool of the exceptionally gifted intellect, of the one who contemplates and speculates intensely, of an exquisite and profound spirit that can even get into contact with the divine.

Although this essay does not rely on a psychoanalytical vision, it cannot ignore the ideas that the founder of psychoanalysis applied to melancholy in his essay

"Mourning and Melancholia" because, in our opinion, Freud actually makes a parallel between nostalgia (mourning, wailing) and melancholy (even though he does not use the term nostalgia). Mourning or wailing is ascribed by Freud to the definitive loss of something external (a beloved person or a country or a state of freedom); this type of bereavement has nothing of a pathological nature, even though it can be extremely painful. By contrast, the definition of melancholia is much harsher (it can be fatal, actually): "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (Freud, 244). Mourning or wailing involves a labour of healing in time, since the object that is mourned is clearly identified, and the loss (of the loved person or of the country or of freedom) is rationally filtered through consciousness. On the other hand, melancholy is centred on an unclear loss, stuck somewhere in the unconscious; melancholy is a confused grieving for something obscure as it is focused on "unknown loss" (Freud, 245). The relation mourning-melancholy is contingent on the relation the world and oneself: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." (Freud, 246). Therefore, melancholy is a mourning of the self, a self-dirge, a lament for oneself, which has unconscious, subjective causes (and not objective causes, as in the case of grief for a loved one or for the loss of one's country or freedom).

Across the centuries and millennia, the basic matter of mental and spiritual melancholy has been related to sadness, depression, even outrage (sometimes raging madness), burning suffering (or, on the contrary, passive sorrow), or obscurity; but melancholy lies in something else, as well, namely: in contemplation (the inward gaze) which, for the romantics, for instance, becomes intellectual energy and poetic force. At the end and at the beginning of millennia (on the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), melancholy gets quantified, in fact, as a quest, as a search (through wandering and itinerance) for oneself, as a form of acute and gradual self-knowledge, the emblem of which is both cognitive and ontological. It even allows a form of revelation.

On an artistic, pictorial, and graphic level, melancholy has received a panoply of aesthetically valid materializations, but the one that prevails and that has influenced (as a *forma mentis*) the reflection of melancholy in the visual field is the engraving of Albrecht Dürer entitled *Melencolia I*, conceived and achieved at the beginning of the sixteenth century (1514, according to most scholars). For many hermeneuts, Dürer's engraving represents Geometry "that abandons itself to Melancholy or Melancholy that abandons itself to Geometry" (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 390), Melancholy and Geometry exchanging spiritual substance within the framework of a Saturnian being. Hermeneuts have deciphered in the famous engraving also an emblematic synthesis between Acedia and Geometry (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 390). The German thinker,

alchemist and astrologer Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim proposed an elaborate and sophisticated hierarchy in the decryption of the engraving, as follows: "Thus, Durer's *Melencolia I*, as portraying a 'melancholia imaginativa', would really represent the first stage in an ascent via *Melencolia II* ('melancholia rationalis') to *Melencolia III* ('melancholia mentalis')" (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 435). Ambivalence and polysemantism are included, as is the coincidence of opposites, so Dürer's engraving has the ability to synthesize multiple interpretations and trends, be they even opposite ones: it is a "Melancholy that is creative, yet steeped in depression, prophetic, yet confined within its own limits" (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 453). Nostalgia does not have such a defining and impactful visual representation as Dürer's engraving. Although there are numerous paintings depicting nostalgia, there is no such visual archetype as the one concretized by Dürer, which has decisively influenced subsequent pictorial art.

Albrecht Dürer – *Melencolia I*

Nostalgia is openly linked to temporality, spaciousness and irreversibility, yet it is not as clearly distinct from melancholy as hermeneuts suggest. Diagnosed late (in the eighteenth century, as already mentioned), nostalgia could only be (formally) contained in the folds of melancholy in modernity and, before that, in romanticism (and in all the reiterated culture of ruins). The inner look back, the return of Odysseus (regardless who Odysseus is and how many types of Odysseus there may be), languor-regret-longing for something in the (spatio-temporal) past, all these have outlined

a bittersweet sense of nostalgia, whether its effect was a harsh one (including a suicidal one), or a tamed, or even suave one. The therapeutics applied to nostalgia is, however, always the same: the return home (with the mention that this term, *home*, contains a polysemantism that is impossible to quantify). Transplanted in a foreign (outer or inner) territory, the nostalgic individual has at his disposal only one visible or tangible form of healing: forging a surrogate (or several) for the idea of *home* or actually returning *home* (in the most fortunate case), even though the *new at-homeness* would not be the same as the *old at-homeness*. But does the nostalgic wish to heal? Does he seek, at any cost, a healing recipe or is he addicted to nostalgia, his life becoming a continuous endeavour to (re)negotiate the idea of *home*?

Vladimir Jankélévitch relies not on emotionality, but on rationality in defining the nostalgic effect and trajectory: "Nostalgia is a human melancholy that consciousness makes possible, which is the consciousness of something different, the consciousness of an elsewhere, of a contrast between the past and the present, between the present and the future. This anxious subjectivity is the anxiety of the nostalgic. The nostalgic individual is at the same time here and there, neither here nor there, present and absent /.../." (Jankélévitch, 252-253)

This in-between state, of here-and-there, of presence-absence, often leads the nostalgic to have a clearly spectral identity; his alienation is determined by his status as an other, as one who is undergoing ceaseless transition, whose becoming is never complete, who is always between something and something else. Spectral-diurnal or diurnal-somnambulist, the nostalgic human is infectious, contagious, never static. The battle he wages, cerebrally or emotionally, is with space and time that have become something else, somewhere else, sometime else. One might think that especially space is at stake (see the recurring theme of returning home), but in the background the battle is actually with what is irreversible, with time: "The real object of nostalgia is not absence, in opposition to presence, but the past in relation to the present; the real cure for nostalgia is not the return back into space, but relegation to the past, a return in time." (Jankélévitch, 269)

Nostalgia is a form of lament for lost outer or inner worlds. It involves a mourning for the world that can only be cured (if it can be cured) through a voyage back (although this is no longer possible, spatially, except very rarely, and is definitely impossible temporally) or through the generous construct (in principle) that imagination (artistic, at least) provides. The (ontological) image of *home* the nostalgic gazes at longingly is blurred, erased, obliterated, but the gaze of the nostalgic being yearns for it, and this actually leads to the creation of a palimpsest made up of what *home* was once and what the gaze reimagines, by the very act of looking at the image of *home*. If our times are now almost posthuman, then has what we used to understand through *home* become, forcing the note a little, a sort of *post-home*? Does the nostalgic gaze fit into this new convention?

Like Jankélévitch, Svetlana Boym believes that it is not space and topography that are the acute wounds of nostalgia, but temporality:

“At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.” (Boym, 16)

Boym does not necessarily perceive the nostalgic individual in his elegiac dimension, but in that of confronting the vulnerability of the human condition. The mortality that renders the human condition fragile from the beginning is introjected by the nostalgic man, who engineers a survival manoeuvre through this introjection. Thus, although extremely fragile, the nostalgic man does not commit suicide, but finds precisely the way (solution, trajectory) of nostalgia by which to cope with the crisis and live on. It is mortality itself that determines the nostalgic individual to continue to be alive, but also to allow himself to be consumed by nostalgia.

The nostalgic man's self-mourning or self-lament is catalysed by a symptomatic temporal breakdown (projected even to a cosmic level) that he cannot cope with: the lost world is all the more strongly fantasised about and invested with mythical significance as it can no longer be retrieved exactly as it was once, intact and identical: “Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted word with clear borders and values.” (Boym, 33)

Unlike Jankélévitch, who detected a partially shared existential backdrop for nostalgia and melancholy, Boym separates them in individual vs. collective terms (though she admits that there are plenty of similarities at the level of the symptoms). The split between melancholy and nostalgia is clarified thus: “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.” (Boym, 17)

The melancholy man is solitary and individualized, particularized, in other words (although he may represent, for example, a whole category of intellectuals – thinkers, philosophers), while the nostalgic man is representative of communities that have been transplanted, of groups which have been moved, relocated, exiled. The melancholic man suffers individually, while the nostalgic man is emblematic for an uprooted community, lost in (physical or spiritual) exile. Individuality or collectivity does not make one more fragile or more important or abysmal than the other; this is just a contextual delineation from the vantage point of the study of mentalities or a possibly psychohistorical differentiation.

The ideas that I have synthesized and nuanced in this introduction can be found in the two masterpieces that I will analyse next. Both Tarkovsky and von Trier are directors who produce a cinema with many cultural footnotes, often immersing themselves in an almost alchemical process.

Tarkovsky's nostalgias

The story of the Russian writer Andrei Gorchakov, who searches for the traces of a nineteenth-century Russian composer (Paul Sosnovski) who went Italy (and then, having returned to Russia, could not readjust and committed suicide), is an overt allegory for Andrei Tarkovsky himself, who is looking for explanatory doubles and substitutes in the western exile that he opted for after making the film *Nostalgia* (1983). Tarkovsky's confessions related to his movie are revealing not only in existential, but also in cultural, or even national terms, the film being originally designed as a patriotic gesture that morphed (due to the director's subsequent exile) into a subversive reaction:

"I wanted to make a film about Russian nostalgia – about that state of mind peculiar to our nation which affects Russians who are far from their native land. I saw this almost as a patriotic duty in my understanding of the concept. I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends, an attachment which they can carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may find them. /.../ How could I have imagined as I was making *Nostalgia* that the stifling sense of longing that fills the screen space of that film was to become my lot for the rest of my life; that from now until the end of my days I would bear the painful malady within myself?" (Tarkovsky, 2005, 202)

The camera is entwined with Tarkovsky's inner mood while shooting *Nostalgia*, which is why the film emerges almost instinctively, as a form of the spiritual numinous and as a means of resistance to alienation, as an inherent medical diagnosis, which also has therapeutic propensities. The camera becomes a tool of translation and psychic storage; it assumes a revealing (spiritual) mental content, in keeping with the director's biographical state (as a future exile):

"I was at once astounded and delighted, because what had been imprinted on the film, and was now revealed to me for the first time in the darkness of the cinema, proved that my reflections about how the art of the screen is able, and even called, to become a matrix of the individual soul, to convey unique human experience, were not just the fruit of idle speculations but a reality, which here was unrolling incontrovertibly before my eyes..." (Tarkovsky, 2005, p. 204)

The nostalgia Tarkovsky experiences while working on his film is a form of addiction, of psychic dependency, in which mental (or emotional) pain is triggered by the “absent presence” on that Jankélévitch detects as an incurable wound in the nostalgic individual. And this wound is individual, but also collective. It is or becomes an emblem for the very idea of exile. Exile depends on the vulnerable relationship between the present and the past rather than on the relationship between two opposite or different territories. The consciousness of exile and the consciousness of longing for the past coalesce in nostalgia: “To this inexorable, insidious awareness of your own dependence on your past, like an illness that grows ever harder to bear, I gave the name ‘Nostalgia’.” (Tarkovsky 2005, 206)

Through the double and triple male characters from his film (the Russians Andrei Gorchakov and Pavel Sosnovski, to whom is added the enlightened madman Domenico, an Italian who nonetheless belongs to the spiritual family of the Russians), Tarkovsky resumes the triptych from the famous icon of Andrei Rublev, the masterpiece of the Russian icon-maker located at the centre of the film *Andrei Rublev* (1966), as well as the numinous triptych from the film *Stalker* (1979), composed of the Guide-Writer-Teacher. *The Sacrifice* (1986), Tarkovsky’s last film, which came right after *Nostalgia*, is still fixed on the idea of a triptych (three meditative, but different men, in a house isolated from the world; three women with different styles and lives, located in the same territory). But the film that synthesizes Tarkovsky’s cinema (in terms of themes and obsessions, fantasies and solutions) is *Nostalgia*. Here, Tarkovsky “sculpts in time” the nostalgia catalysed by the loss of Russia, which amounts to a loss of divine meaning. The film has metaphysical connotations that are not just allusive (this a constant feature, by the way, of the Tarkovskan cinema). On the other hand, the idea of the Russian soul can be preserved in other geographical areas than those of Russia, too, in the landscape of Tuscany, for instance, as long as the Italian landscape can contain the Russian landscape of childhood or the inner Russian landscape of maturity. This is why male characters double and triple, all the men having the structure of chosen ones, of alienated or enlightened fools. And this is also why mirroring and re-mirroring, as well as the melting of boundaries between different creatures, becomes a recurring theme. $1 + 1 = 1$ is carved on the wall of the ruined house in which Domenico lives like a hermit (considered to be mentally ill or, conversely, to be an enlightened saint). The figures 2 and 3 are part of the ontological equation that Tarkovsky assumes for his characters. The female characters are, in their turn, circumscribed to the figure 3: the film is dominated symbolically, in the beginning, by the fresco of Piero della Francesca (1416-1492) called the *Madonna del Parto* (*The Virgin with Child*, 1460), and the two women who are part of Andrei Gorchakov’s emotional matrix are different incarnations of the Madonna by Piero della Francesca: one who is dark haired (Maria, the wife of Andrei, the Russian woman left at home), another that is fair-haired (Eugenia, Gorchakov’s Italian companion through Tuscany); although opposed, they make up, together, an

archetype, that of the Madonna. This is a cinematic lesson that Tarkovsky developed in other films, too, and that is also found in the films of one of his masters and friends, Ingmar Bergman (the most acute analyst of the female psyche).

The character Andrei Gorchakov, as a typically nostalgic man, is an equivalent of Odysseus, for he embodies an inner odyssey, in which the temptations, the languishings, the phantasmatic projections related to *here* and *there* are recurrent. It is not space that is necessarily his wound (the end of the movie settles this matter in a hybrid manner), but time and the vacillation between *here* and *there*, *now* and *someday*. Space can be re-gestated (or renegotiated) if necessary, but time cannot, for it is irreversible. It is worth noting that Tarkovsky unites the act of objective mourning (nostalgia) with a form of melancholy, for nostalgia in his case becomes a self-mourning, which is precisely how Freud defined melancholy.

At the end of the film, Tarkovsky builds (sculpts/ paints) a special syncretism: the ruins of the Italian cathedral (San Galgano, a thirteenth-century monument) swallows in an accolade (or in a marsupial) the Russian house of Andrei Gorchakov, containing it by virtue of a natural spiritual melting: in front of the Russian house and inside the Cistercian ruins is the Russian writer with his psychopompous dog (Russian and Italian, at the same time, belonging to the Russian house, but also to the ruined Tuscan house of Domenico), framed. Thus, nostalgia is resolved in death or after death, and Paradise is restored through a hybrid dimension. In her book on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym classifies two types: restorative and the reflective. The end of Tarkovsky's film materializes a restorative nostalgia, for it consists in "a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 19), in keeping with the way in which this type of memory is assumed to work.

Andrei Tarkovsky – *Nostalgia*

Andrei Rublev – *Holy Trinity*

Tarkovsky was obsessed in various stages of his life with Andrei Rublev's (1360-1430) icon of the Holy Trinity, completed in 1410, so he tried, after the film he directed in 1966, to resume this icon in several of his subsequent films. First, in a form of metaphysical science fiction, in *Stalker*, then, decisively, in *Nostalgia*. At the end of *Nostalgia*, Andrei Gorchakov (about to die or even already dead) finds himself placed in a hybrid icon: Eastern-Western, Orthodox-Catholic, a syncretic icon. It is the manner in which Tarkovsky reinterprets and updates Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity. He does this atypically, but at the same time geometrically and iconically. The ruins of San Galgano Monastery (projected in the film as the ruins of Christianity in general) embrace the Russian house and what is left of Christ in the contemporary world (an atheistic or excessively pragmatic and consumerist world) – the soul after death. Tarkovsky addresses thus both the issue of nostalgia and that of faith. Nostalgia, so dependent on longing (especially for time but also for space) is solved by this kind of spiritual repatriation, in which the house of God (which no longer needs a vault or a dome, since it can also work without a roof) contains the country house of the family abandoned in Russia, and the Russian and Tuscan landscapes merge and overlap. In the end, there remains a single, hybridized space of faith and the spirit, shaping a new syncretic icon. Nostalgia is cured by syncretism and, of course, by extinction and implicitly by the faith that the soul can be saved after death. Many scholars have noticed the dispute between Slavophilia and Westernization in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*, the polemic between the classical, traditional values and the fallen and destroyed ones (Johnson, Petrie, 163) which can trigger nostalgia as a spiritual malady and deception, but none of them has noticed the hybrid icon which the Russian film

director builds skilfully at the end of the film, reconciling the two culturally opposite areas. The function of water in Tarkovskian films has also been sufficiently explored by hermeneuts (Johnson, Petrie, 208-209). *Nostalgia* is Tarkovsky's most aquatic film, including for a culturally reconciliatory reason: this is a transitional water (in its various nuances), a spiritualized/ spiritualizing water that suggests a new baptism, the second. In the iconic, syncretic ending of the film (which I have already talked about), water is present because it is instrumental for a redeeming baptism after death, especially when death has been sacrificial.

Alexander, the central character of the film *The Sacrifice* (1986), will carry even further the part of Andrei Gorchakov, being created as an originally ataraxic melancholic man who, then undergoes a crisis and becomes anxious; he represents another level of existential malady than Andrei Gorchakov, whose nostalgia was ritualistic and who was incompatible with the world (with the exception of the enlightened madman Domenico, his double, and the composer Paul Sosnovski, another double). Alexander partly resumes Domenico from *nostalgia*: his melancholy will eventually coalesce into a folly deemed to be pathological, and Alexander's new home will be the lunatic asylum.

Von Trier's melancholies

In *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier, looking into the sky at a contagious planet that has something unknown and insidious becomes a matrix-gaze. It is a starry sky, without God and without moral law. The human face of Justine (the main character who is sick with melancholy) enigmatically obscures itself and becomes the receptacle for an oppressive, punitive dimension in a mysterious, ambiguous, unknown way. This is not a simple human being, but a bride, that is, a woman undergoing a rite of passage. Her melancholy becomes a state of paralysis, of blockage, of "crawling" (as she confesses). A sick bride, whose catatonic face, stuck in a nonfigurative abyss (for now) worries the spectator: she is a melancholic and her illness anguishes others and exhausts them psychically. She is a woman whose sex appeal has turned into silent devastation. Lars von Trier visually focuses on this face of Justine, which becomes a devastating territory, a psychologically infested country, a parcelled-out disease. And the devastation is not revealed squarely at first, but is indirectly figured as a paralysis. Melancholy is not initially demonstrated violently, but by way of a contorted blockage, a volitional absence. The character has, however, sharp fits of violence: Ahmed Elbeshlawy has carried out a captivating case study about the way in which Justine assaults her horse, Abraham; Elbeshlawy analyses her neurotic cruelty, but also her responsiveness to the "Abrahamic" dimension of the world (the name of the horse is chosen deliberately by von Trier), to faith in the divine and sacrifice in the family (Elbeshlawy, 3217-3314). After undergoing a real initiation into melancholy, towards the end, Justine merges in ecstasy with her own illness that now emanates

at planetary level: to stand naked, under the light of the planet Melancholia, suggests a new origin and matrix, a new cosmic womb, a new gestation, which is why Justine is fulfilled in her nakedness when she allows herself to be shrouded, enveloped and touched in quasi-erotic fashion (as most of those who have commented on von Trier's film have noticed) by the nocturnalia of the new planet (even if this will bring about the extinction of Earth). Planet M can be perceived as a beneficial maternal body that replaces the malevolent maternal body of Gaby, the mother of Justine and Claire, who overtly repudiates her daughters and subjects them constantly to traumatic expulsion (Elsaesser, 320).

As the exterminating impact of Planet M takes place, Justine and Claire, the two sisters, suffer a mutation: Justine gets better in a peculiar way, accepting in ecstasy (or trance) her merging with the strange and fatal planet that has become her emotional, psychic, spiritual matrix; thus, Justine returns, symbolically and metaphorically speaking, to the planet to which she belongs, even if this repatriation actually means extinction; and Claire catches the disease of melancholy and, subsequently, that of despair. It is an idealistic and acting game that Lars von Trier learned from the films of Ingmar Bergman, specialized on transfer or bonding relations between two women (sisters or strangers).

The amplest role, content wise, belongs to Justine. For melancholy, as I explained at the beginning of this essay, becomes a search for oneself, an initiation rite, with an ontological and cognitive function. Justine finds out, feels, knows only through melancholy who she really is and, thus, she has a *revelation*. Under the unearthly light of Planet M, nude, she is transfigured. She is experiencing ecstasy, and her ecstasy is reminiscent of the famous sculpture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) – *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (a work created between 1647-1652), located in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, in Rome. The transfiguration of Justine is quasi-mystical under the light of the new planet that will abolish Earth and whose energy is both destructive and epiphanic at the same time. It is her ecstasy of cosmic knowledge and microcosmic self-knowledge; it is the very epiphany of Planet M. The faces of Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and of Justine are related through their non-earthly or supra-earthly knowledge, having the same effect of trance and ecstasy, of revealing joy, of adoration (even if their bodies are opposed: the one of Saint Teresa is enveloped and concealed from head to toe in an utterly sophisticated robe, while Justine is naked). Just like Saint Teresa belongs to her mystical, divine fiancé, Justine is also a creature of the strange planet that will destroy Earth, she is an unearthly creature. In both the holy woman and in the former sinful bride (an advertising professional) there is this gift for perceiving the sublime, for contemplating and especially for recognizing it. The union with God (in the case of Saint Theresa of Avila) and Justine's orgasmic exposure, like that of a newborn, to the light of the strange planet are entwined reactions of the two women. This is a profound

recognition, in the sense of *anagnorisis*, since each of the two women belongs to an extra-human dimension.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini – *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*

Lars von Trier – *Melancholia* (Justine nude)

The landscape of the film participates in a falsely peaceful way in these contortions: although Justine tensely leafs through albums with paintings by Pieter Breugel the Elder, Kazimir Malevich, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio or John Everett Millais, the faint glow of light in the dark, the bluish discolorations or the dreamlike greening of the images are evocative of the enigmatic paintings of René Magritte (1898-1967). None of these superb oneiric images (of liquefaction, dissolution, destruction) equals the non-strident, but scary (because of paralysis and blockage) face of Justine. Even Planet M (which, incidentally, is nicknamed, like Earth, the blue planet) looms in daylight like a growing artificial ball, similar to the enigmatic geometrical bodies in the paintings of Magritte (or, partially, in the unsettling paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, 1888-1978); or, at night, it resembles a lunar, transhuman scene. There is also a strong gothic-romantic nuance in the landscape (and not only) of von Trier's film, rightly described as such by some hermeneuts (Corrêa, 180-187). Of special importance could be the visual reference to the pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais (1829-1896) and his masterpiece, *Ophelia* (1851-1852). There is a flash in *Melancholia* that depicts Justine as Ophelia floating on the river just like in Everett Millais's painting. Justine is an aborted bride from the normal human world who turns into a bride of melancholy and depression. Everett Millais's *Ophelia* is a drowned woman who is overtly floral (perhaps too floral) and seems to have become a deity of vegetation by drowning, which makes her more alive and fecund than she has ever been, even though she is dead. Justine is dead and alive at the same time and this is the point of interference with the famous pre-Raphaelite painting; dead, because she is unfit to be a traditional woman, as demanded by customs (daughter, sister, sister-in-law, wife), but alive, as she discovers her true origin and her quasi-mystical (ecstatic) engagement with Planet M. Psychically dead at the beginning and suffocating in depression, Justine becomes alive and even frantic at the end, for melancholy has revealed her true origin and enveloped her in a mysterious form of the numinous, through even the extinction of Earth.

John Everett Millais
– *Ophelia*

Lars von Trier – *Melancholia* (Justine as Ophelia)

Although the name of Saturn is not mentioned in Lars von Trier's film, it subsists in the background of the micro and macrocosmic history we are witnessing. The planet Saturn has drawn through the ages multiple cultural-literary-philosophical approaches, triggering a broad array of connotations and nuances: harmlessness, gloomy atmosphere, violence, solitude, mystery, but also glory, pride, sensitivity (even if vulnerable), supreme intellect. Saturn is also the planet marked by an unsettling, problematic, speculative metaphysical dimension that concentrates an entire philosophy on death and time. All this is assumed by von Trier's thinking and vision. *Melancholia* is a planet that duplicates both Earth and Saturn, in a unique blend. The epiphanic azure of the planet that will trigger an anti-human cosmic catastrophe is iridescent and contaminating. Earth is subsumed to Saturn, in an allegorical and hybrid manner, even if it is an Earth that Justine repudiates, considering it marred. Justine does not mourn the destruction of Earth, for Earth is a planet infested with sin and evil. The destruction of Earth is, in fact, a form of salvation, a beneficent solution, as the character perceives it. Justine's melancholy is a cognitive one, too: she knows (in a supreme way, through enlightenment) that the human race will disappear with the abolition of Earth due to its collision with *Melancholia*. She has the foreknowledge that the destruction of Earth will implicitly destroy the origin of humans, their birth, and that there is no other possibility for the human race to reappear, to be born again. That is why Justine is not surprised that the new Blue Planet devours the Old Blue Planet, and even sees this planetary cannibalism as something natural and logical. Justine knows that the planet is her cosmic double, an entwined entity: "she has discovered in *Melancholia* a correlate to her own self-destructive desire: the only thing that can possibly gratify her is the annihilation of the earth itself." (Matts, Tynan, 2012) If in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* objective mourning for the world became a mourning for the self (I already explained this when I discussed the distinction made by Freud in the essay

"Mourning and Melancholia"), in von Trier's *Melancholia* self-mourning is transformed gradually into a mourning for the world. Pathological melancholy becomes at the end a cosmic feeling, "priestess" Justine sensing and heralding the extinction of Earth.

There is, however, another hypothesis of interpretation: since it resembles Earth so strikingly (the sick planet, poisoned by sin and evil), could the destructive planet be a new Earth, pure, unsoiled yet, Adamic, hence the natural disappearance of Earth (hence also Justine's trenchant lucidity not to mourn the destruction of Earth)? In mirroring the two blue planets and in representing the destruction of one (impure) by the other (pure), it is possible that Lars von Trier was making reference to two cult films: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Stanley Kubrick and *Solaris* (1972) by Tarkovsky, both pertaining to the metaphysical SF genre. Besides, anyone who wants to look for cinematic quotations and lines in *Melancholia* has plenty to find (Steppling, 2012).

Although there are no direct references to the engraving *Melencolia I* by Dürer, in my opinion Lars von Trier inserts a subtle footnote to the famous engraving, a footnote that takes a captivating turn. There are several nuanced aspects that I have in mind and that I will explain in what follows. Obviously, I am not the only spectator who has noticed the cultural reference to Dürer's engraving (Nicolini, 2012).

Saturnian creatures are recognizable, according to the philosophical tradition, through their dark countenances, their sombre skin, black being a specific colour of the Saturnian psyche (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 357), as demonstrated by the protagonist of Dürer's engraving. All these chromatic features are reversed in the character represented by Justine in the film *Melancholia*, after the crisis is overcome. Her face, aged from depression or levelled by mental and spiritual paralysis, gradually becomes one marked by the revelation of the numinous. It turns into a face that is almost phosphorescent, bleached by the epiphany of destruction and catastrophe. The skin of the woman is not dark, but exactly the opposite: it is, bright, and her body opens in ecstasy, entirely, under the hypnotizing light of Planet M. The darkness of the female character (a highly-meditative and concentrated angelic woman) in Dürer's engraving is contained and, at the same time, countered by a depressive phosphorescence or a white depression in the case of Justine, which eventually becomes epiphanic and perhaps even therapeutic. Justine is a tormented Saturnian who discovers a form of sacredness during her ecstatic trance in front of the planet that has sickened her and will kill her (simultaneously with Earth, in effect). She intuitively perceives a revealing contamination in this collision and catastrophe. It is a state and a stance akin to the ancient ceremonies in which people were sacrificed to the gods or in which people sacrificed themselves to the gods, so as to symbolically become one with those deities, through (deadly) union. Lars von Trier senses and suggests this relation of mystical union between a human being and a planet (validated in an almost divine sense), through a terrifying cosmic catastrophe. Justine is at first sick with the Saturnian disease, but she gradually becomes a "priestess" of Planet M, which, in the end, she adores and offers herself to (Justine calls off her wedding, gives up her work and her public life and dedicates herself to planet

M, unconsciously at first and then lucidly, driven by the sense of a mission). In *De Occulta Philosophia*, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, analysing the theme of melancholy madness, spoke about the *furor melancholicus* (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 451), about the frenzy or enthusiasm that the Saturnian creature reaches, which can also be diagnosed in the trance-like or ecstatic behaviour of Justine, after she overcomes the primary crisis. Although the “priesthood” of Justine is obvious, I would avoid interpreting von Trier’s film, as Bonnie Honig does, as an adapted screenplay of Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae*, Planet M being perceived as having a very bleak colour under the sign of Dionysus (Honig, 357, 371).

We should, of course, also study the role of Richard Wagner’s music (*Tristan and Isolde*) accompanying Lars von Trier’s filmic demonstration of melancholy, but the space of this essay does not allow us such an analysis, which cannot be succinct. We recommend, in this regard, the comprehensive and illuminating essay of David Larkin, “Indulging in Romance with Wagner: Tristan in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*” (Larkin, 38-58), which contains both a thorough analysis and an elevated synthesis on the film discussed here.

Also related to melancholy, but giving a different dimension to this disease, is the part played by the character John, the husband of Claire, Justine’s sister. John is a castellan with the concerns of a scientist; he is an astrologer, astronomer, astrophysicist or self-taught cosmographer. His character contains, in part, the attributes of Geometry that Dürer’s enciphered engraving includes. He represents lucid intellect, while Justine (and eventually Claire, contaminated by her “priestess” sister) represents Saturnian corporeality, infested by depression (although Claire is built, more than on corporeality, on melancholy emotion). The geometric tools spread out in Dürer’s engraving are condensed in John’s telescope, perfected in such a way as to capture the movements of the harmful planet and all its nuances. Subtly, Lars von Trier has worked out both the spiritual (scientific) side of melancholy (through John who, in the end, kills himself, unable to cope with the idea of catastrophe) and its instinctual, humorous side (through Justine). John’s intellect collapses when the character understands the imminence of the collision and catastrophe; the arrogance of having denied at the outset the possibility of catastrophe, his hubris, in other words, determines him to take his own life, so as not to witness the extinction of Earth and especially the extinction of his family. Intellect collapses (John), while instinct becomes an apt platform for revelation and ecstasy (Justine). John could be, ultimately, a correlative of the character Domenico in *Nostalgia*, the mathematician who is treated as a madman, because he gave up science when he realized that the world was on a self-destructive, anti-human path. After trying (but failing) to save his family, Domenico endeavours to save the world (and fails again), then kills himself. John’s suicide is similar to Domenico’s.

The ending of von Trier’s *Melancholia* is emblematic: the two sisters (Justine and Claire) as well as Leo, Claire’s baby (and, symbolically, the child of Justine, the aunt who adopted him spiritually), live in an improvised tent made of thin stems (a “magic

cave", as Justine fabulates to trick Leo) and wait for the collision of the planets. These are the "children of Saturn", placed in a final and already eschatological capsule, adapted to the circumstances of the cataclysm that is about to occur, in which the polyhedral structure in Dürer's engraving becomes here the conical tent, sketched in geometric and naturalistic fashion. And Leo, Claire's son (and John's) is, here, the equivalent of that *putto* (suspended angel) in Dürer's engraving. In the engraving, the child-*putto* is the opposite of the woman who represents Melancholy (Geometry, Acedia, etc.); in von Trier's film he is a *putto* who must be protected from the insidious poison of melancholy and who, in the end, is in an ataraxic state of relative play (in the magic cave proposed by Justine), unable to understand the approaching catastrophe. In Dürer's work, the angel-child is neither intellect nor instinctual depression; the same holds true for von Trier's filmic construct. In the engraving, the child-angel has the engraving needle in his hand; in von Trier's film, Leo is a fan of the telescope, which, however, he abandons at the end and becomes ataraxic, while playing in the "magic cave", when the collision is imminent.

The ending of *Melancholia* is often interpreted as an apocalypse or a dance of death at the cosmic level or between the cosmos and human beings (Bolea, 2012). Through melancholy, the human crisis becomes a cosmic crisis; in other words, the human crisis foretells the cosmic crisis and announces it. Some scholars believe that the film's ending makes a transition from melancholy to hysteria, through the terrified hypostasis of Claire's character who, unlike Justine's ontic and cognitive calm and unlike Leo's ataraxia, is in a convulsive, turmoiled state (Elbeshlawy, 2011).

In Tarkovsky's footsteps, however, the ending of von Trier's film evokes, in fact, once again, eulogistically but also polemically, the ending of Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* (1986). The semi-nocturnal and desertified landscapes of *The Sacrifice* (and the theme of cosmic catastrophe) herald the Magrittian landscapes of von Trier's *Melancholia*. The face of Alexander, the protagonist of *The Sacrifice* – an enlightened intellectual, who is isolated from civilization and has a revelation that he can save the world and temporarily halt a nuclear catastrophe if he resorts to intense prayer and sacrifice – remains impassive until the end, when his melancholy turns into despair and madness. But there is another character with a messianic function: the Little Man (as he is nicknamed), the son of Alexander. At the end of the film, he is the one who rediscovers human language and raises the possibility of a renewal of the world and of life. He's a heralding *putto*, a herald of rebirth. Von Trier, by contrast, prohibits or denies the possibility of resurrection in *Melancholia*, for Leo, Claire's son, heralds nothing, awaiting extinction in an ineffable state of oblivion and playfulness. Everything that could be saved in Tarkovsky's film (albeit in a Dostoyevskyan sense, through prayer and sacrifice) is demolished with grace in the film of von Trier; all that remains from the world and people, in the last snapshot, is the ecstasy of disappearance, the anguish of death or the ataraxia of playfulness.

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