

# Melancholia

'Is the concept of 'melancholia' helpful for understanding postcoloniality?'

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## Introduction

All subject formation is created in exchange with an 'other', contrasted with one's own 'ego'. Otherwise a consciousness would be 'floating in free space', and apart from whether that is possible or not, in human life there simply is no possible scenario in which a 'self' exists outside of any context.

Melancholia is the word used to describe the mental process of longing for such an 'other' and therefore can help explain any form of subject formation, including the thinking within postcoloniality.

## A Brief History of 'Melancholia'

It is worth to take a quick look at the history of the term 'melancholia', as the diverse use of the word in medicine, art, religion, psychiatry, but also in sociology, gender and postcolonial studies, could be a source of confusion.

The term was first coined by Hippocrates to describe a disease apparently caused by black bile in the body (from Ancient Greek *μέλας* = "black" and *χολή* = "bile"). Its symptoms corresponded more or less to those of what today's psychiatry calls 'depression' and although the connection to any colouring of the bile is obviously non-sense by today's medical standards, the term is still sometimes used in psychiatry to describe those symptoms.

Corresponding to the powers of Saturn, genius (creation) and craziness (war), it was associated with that god/planet.

In medieval times it was also known as 'acedia', the monk's disease, which arised from the loneliness of the monks' lives, dedicated to solitude and prayer.

Albrecht Dürer's engraving 'Melencolia I' (1514) is probably the most famous representation of that mood of melancholia and it was made during a time of renewed interest in that particular state of mind.

For the newly emerging Protestants it was a temptation by the devil, which had to be overcome, and the overcoming of it would in turn be confirmation of one's true faith, as it was achieved through an inner struggle and not blind following like the Catholics - who in turn portrayed it as despair typical to Protestants who 'gave up on the true faith'.

In this version one can already sense a certain aspect of the shaping of consciousness related to it, although still framed by a religious context.

In 1621 Robert Burton published the 'Anatomy of Melancholia', a medical and literary text trying to cover all aspects of the 'disease' melancholia and trying to frame most aspects of the psychic life from that perspective.

The fascination of European elite thought with that idea of longing and remained and found blossoming expression in the literature and art of the Romantics – crucially also the time in European history of the development of the 'national character'. The 'Volkgeist' of Herder that permeates each national culture is always based on an inner longing for a glorified past. And for the first time, the artists are not paid by kings or nobles, but the nascent state institutions and competitions – creating a motivation to display that 'national character', which gives them their individuality. The prevalent images are of ruins and landscapes, past and everlasting beauty.

It was only in 1917 that Sigmund Freud in 'Trauer und Melancholie' made the distinction between mourning (Trauer) and melancholia. While in both cases something is lost, only in mourning is the loss accepted as having taken place and in melancholia the loss is disavowed.

Already from its inception Freud admitted the possibility for this to be valid for both collective, as well as personal subject formation- if there is a difference at all. But more to that later.

This is how term *melancholia* has been used, for a collective or singular, ever since in psychoanalysis, sociology, postcolonial studies - While in the arts and for some psychiatrists it retained the aspects of personal depression, sadness, *melancholy*.

### *Melancholia in Sociology*

#### Mitscherlich's Melancholia of Germany

In 'The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behaviour' Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich used the concept to analyse the mental state of Germany after World War II.

As the loss of admiration for Hitler and Nazi Germany could not be grieved in the sense of open mourning, this created a disjunction in the memory of young Germans. An entire part of their human experience, collective and personal, had to be disavowed, as all guilt was projected onto Hitler and his entourage of Nazis and the previous feelings of reverence oppressed.

But without grief and mourning, the loss can not be emotionally compensated and the longing remains internalised, creating a *melancholia* for the lost Germanic ideals, that constitutes German consciousness up to the present. They explain social patterns of behaviour based on that longing, ranging from the vastly collective political, such as attitudes towards migration, to the inherently personal, such as the friendliness in the interaction of Germans.

It is basically a narcissistic process of self-identification which, oppressed by the inability to mourn, to openly formulate original ideals or race and gender, turns into a melancholia for that loss. As long as the lost ideals can not be mourned, spelled out, and hence replaced by new ones, these *originals* continue to define *German national character*, with its accompanying race and gender ideals, in the collective imagination.

#### Gilroy's Melancholia of Post-Colonial Britain

Paul Gilroy takes the analysis of the Mitscherlich's as an analogy to what is taking place in post-colonial Britain. Having lost its Empire, Britain is at a loss.. But as this Empire is associated with atrocities, it cannot be openly mourned, just as the loss of Hitler and Nazi Germany cannot be mourned, as evil cannot be admitted to being a loss.

This creates an internalised longing for the greatness perceived in the past of the colonial empire, that gets played out in a number of ways:

The longing can be acted out in various aspects of national culture, as for example in varying human ciphers for the Empire: Churchill – Raleigh – Rhodes – Hawkins – Nelson; Diana, Queen Mum, Beckham and Blair...

Or rather, in opposition to the Imperial 'self' that comes into being when contrasted to that post-colonial Other, the immigrant. That is the way it is presented in representations of official multiculturalism, such as state information and advertising, where the 'whiteness' of the white British English can be highlighted by placing it alongside the black, Indian, Asian, 'other'.

While superficially it seems a celebration of the achievements of multiculturalism, it embodies in inherent reification of the image of the immigrant other as outsider, even though inside the island.

#### Butler's Melancholia of Freud

The way in which Judith Butler reads Freud's notion of melancholia, it is central to all subject formation: “considered closely, however, Freud's essay makes clear that there can be no ego without melancholia, that the ego's loss is constitutive.”

Only with having another self, the es, or the Id, to long for, the ego can see itself in opposition to it.

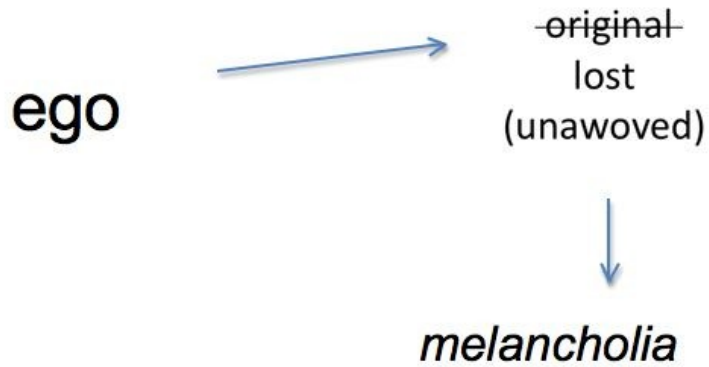


This original is gone, or has never existed. It is lost to the ego in that it is not real, but it is unavowed as long as there is no ritual, or admission of what is lost.

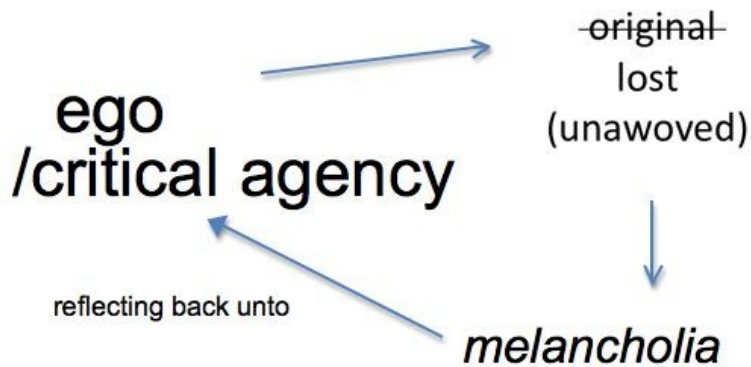
If it could be avowed, admitted to what is lost, it would be *mourning*, and with it the acceptance that it is unchangeably lost, but that would equal death of said object.

In order to process any part of our reality, it seems, the ego has to arrive to a melancholic state, as in the sense of a reflection between the differences of an ideal lost and the reality at hand. An imagining without an ideal for reflection would be stuck unto itself and have no 'other' form which to see itself.

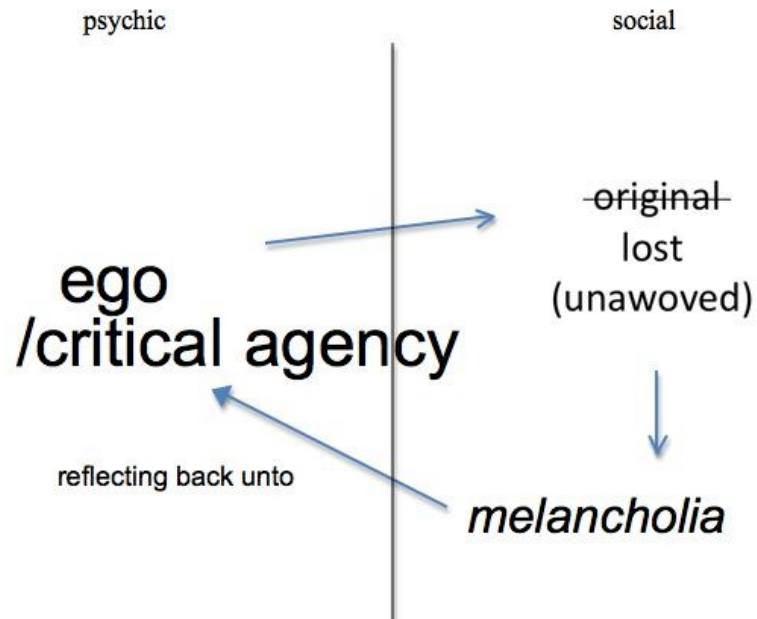
So the resulting melancholia of oppressed loss is at the heart of self-reflection and subject formation.



It is only in this cycle of self-reflection and resulting melancholia, that an exchange with the id can take place. As it is only by reflecting back unto itself, that a critical agency in the consciousness of the ego is established.



It is only once we have established this critical agency, the look unto our *selves*, that we can see ourselves in interaction with the social, which is only seen as removed from the self when framed as a *lost original*.



The social comes into being first as a projection of the self, as an ideal to aspire to. Once this social is seen as lost, melancholia reflects back unto the *self*, creating the critical agency, through this reflection back, in the difference between the ego and the imagined other/self, the divide between the psychic and the social is established.

As there can be no reflection unto the self without a (disappointing) social from which to refer back to one's self, there also exists no self without a social.

I will try to explain this using some examples of its application in postcoloniality, in analysing diasporic community identity construction in Switzerland, as well as German national identity construction in mass-media.

### *Melancholic Postcoloniality*

Taking Butler's reading of Freud, all postcolonial identities are based on a melancholic longing for a lost - but unavowedly so – imagined, colonial *original*, which is usually raced and gendered.

Whether that is the former colonisers, or the former colonised, both perform their identity in respect to an original, that does not exist. Examples of this would not only be Germany after WWII or post-imperial Britain, but any national identity construct, as well as all diasporic identities and gender roles.

### **Bengali Hindus in Berne**

An example of such a diasporic identity construction would be the Bengali-Hindu community of Berne, Switzerland convening for saraswati puja.

As the original other - in this case: India – Bengal – Calcutta - Bangladesh – Hinduism – Saraswati- can not be admitted to being lost, as the mental 'home' is considered *there*, in the social, while the reality of the psychic presence is a *here* in Switzerland, with its difference in location and as such in the process of the entirety of the ritual.

A saraswati (goddess of wisdom, education, arts and music) puja (celebration) is held once a year around the month of February a group of upper-middle class Hindus from Bengal in the Swiss city of Berne. Most of the men of this group are university educated and came as highly-skilled workers to Switzerland in the 70s and 80s with the nascent IT industry, often via Germany and now live and work in Switzerland ever since.

According to oral tradition, the puja can only take place in a temple or in the house of a Brahmin, and has to be conducted by another Brahmin. So according to local tradition, the ritual is held in the living room of the apartment of the family C., and the ritual is lead by Mr. B. - my father - with the help especially of Ms C.

For the puja a small statue of the goddess imported from India is taken out of storage and erected within a quadratic square delineated by four sticks stuck in earth from the banks of the river Ganges connected with a string. This sanctified zone, or altar, is then further decorated with flowers and garlands, and surrounded with books and media whose content the devotees wish to worship (schoolbooks, work projects etc.).

After opening prayers by the Brahmin, the devotees are asked to stand up and to repeat three times certain words – in Sanskrit, which most of them do not understand - and throw flower petals at the saraswati.

Then the ritual is closed with final prayers and followed by a social dinner of Bengali food on plastic plates and soft drinks.





Saraswati Puja. Private Apartment, Berne, Switzerland. Photography by the author.

As all participants are living and in Berne, Switzerland, restrictions as to the size and therefore personnel are necessary and so compromises as to the 'purity' of the Brahmin have to be made: As only a few Bengali Brahmins live in the city and the ceremony can not be executed by the host, the acting Brahmin happens not to follow all the 'rules' of traditional Brahmanism, depending on how strictly one interprets the oral tradition.

Being 'Westernised'/colonised, like most of the other Hindu Bengalis in Bern, he drinks Scottish whisky, smokes cigarettes (for a long time the British Philip-Morris, now Parisienne, a uniquely Swiss brand) and occasionally eats cow-meat, and he also happens not to have been married via a family arrangement. In consequence he propagates a different, 'Western', individualistic family and lifestyle model, instead of the 'lost' original Indian custom, that may inhabit the minds of the other fellow Bengali Hindus in Berne. But as he is an impersonation of the correct (imagined) social model, they are supposed to follow his lead and not enforce stricter values than those lived by him, the Brahmin.

So far the process described is irrelevant as to any self-reflection, the projection only happens from the selves unto the imagined other (the Brahmin). But by being broken, i.e. lost because of not matching the reality of the ideal (Hinduism/Bengal/India etc), the self reflects unto itself, in a melancholic state, and tries to match the disappointed lost with the actual self.

This is the moment when critical agency develops, when they can see that the ideal race images and gender roles do not match exactly the reality of them. And in that space in-between, of negotiation amongst the imagined ideal and the real self, is when the post-colonial identity (Bengali Hindu in Berne) is developed. It can be a new subject, creating for the purpose of celebrating saraswati puja in Berne, outside of its original 'cultural location', even if imagined, in Bengal/India. Thus new ideals as

to the identity of the new ego can be re-negotiated (smoking, drinking, eating cow-meat) in that melancholic ritual of longing for the lost ideals.

It seems symptomatic of such a space, that it is usually filled with a variety of other ideals, i.e. also Bengali Muslim and Catholic friends and neighbours taking part in the sociality of the event and the resulting hybridity shapes the reality of the convivial moment across much more than just one cultural line.

## Germany's Next Topmodel by Heidi Klum

“Germany's Next Topmodel by Heidi Klum” is a perfect example of the projection of raced and gendered ideals within the infotainment telesector for the collective melancholic rendering on a mass scale, in this case a tv-audience. But as the non-existence of the perfect female original cannot be accepted, each contestant is thrown into the battle of *self*-fulfilment by trying to match her *ego*, even if it is an artificial one, with the unacceptable lost ideal of Germanic Top-Model quality, i.e. modern, German beauty.

It is a TV-programme in which a number of female contestants try their best at 'being a Topmodel' and a jury then eliminates one after the other 'finalist' from the show, until the last remaining girl is selected 'Germany's Next Topmodel' for a year.<sup>1</sup>

The show is hosted by Heidi Klum, a *Supermodel*, as the audience is constantly reminded, who also happens to host the U.S.-version of the show, 'America's Next Topmodel by Heidi Klum', a fact to which is more rarely alluded in the programme, probably to retain some exclusivity as to use of the persona 'Heidi Klum'.



Heidi Klum (host and judge), Karolina Kurkova (guest judge)

The contestants often have to repeat photo-shootings of the *Super*-(literally: *über*-)Model Heidi Klum and complete challenges posed by her, and Heidi herself with two other permanent and one changing

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<sup>1</sup> Tresor TV Produktions AG / ProSieben (2006 - \*)  
Reality / Coaching / Familie

"Germany's Next Topmodel" - die Vierte: im Frühjahr 2009 startet die neue Staffel auf ProSieben!

Zwölf junge Schönheiten wollen nur das eine: Deutschlands neues Topmodel werden! In anstrengenden Wochen voller Fotoshootings, aufregenden Challenges und tränenreichen Entscheidungen müssen die Bewerberinnen beweisen, was in ihnen steckt. Supermodel Heidi Klum und ihre Jury wählen am Ende der Staffel ein Mädchen aus: "Germany's Next Topmodel". Der hübschen Siegerin winken ein lukrativer Vertrag mit einer Modelagentur und ein Cover-Shooting für eine Modezeitschrift. "Germany's Next Topmodel" war für den Deutschen Fernsehpreis 2007 & 2008 nominiert.

Moderation: Heidi Klum

“Germany's Next Topmodel” - the fourth: in spring 2009 starts the new season on ProSieben!  
Twelve young beauties want one thing only: To become Germany's new Topmodel! In demanding weeks full of photo-shoots, exciting challenges and tearful decisions, the contestants prove what's in them. Supermodel Heidi Klum and her jury choose at the end of the season one girl: “Germany's Next Topmodel”. The pretty winner can look forward to a lucrative contract with a modelling agency and a cover-shoot for a fashion magazine. "Germany's Next Topmodel" was nominated for the German Television-award 2007 & 2008. Hosted by: Heidi Klum (Translation by the author)

guest-judge (usually a *Topmodel* too) makes the decision as to which of the competing girls can stay and which has to leave the show.

While the über-force of the tall, blonde Aryan beauty is always present in the embodiment of the *Supermodel Heidi Klum* as *the one to follow*, 'whiteness' as the general common denominator of Germanism remains. This obviously has to be done unwittingly, as otherwise here would already be a 'critical agency' at work, even if a fascist one. So the definition of who (or rather: what) is Germany's Next Topmodel can not be made unto itself, by displaying it directly (although it is alluded too in the host Heidi Klum).

Instead, it is attested by its *difference*, i.e. what it is not. For that the body of the sole 'black' and most recognizably 'foreign' contestant, Sara, is used to mark what German beauty nowadays could be, semantically, politically, consciously. And by that the inherent, internalised melancholia of Germans for (A) the essential, original other and (B) the essential, original self can both be rendered in the semi-fictitious realm of infotainment.

This is done throughout the series, and she (un?)consciously represents the immigrant biopower within post-colonial and World War II Germany.



Staffel (Season) 4, Episode 20 'Finalists'. Sara: 5<sup>th</sup> from left.

What is only implied in the TV-entertainment format that is the show “Germany's Next Topmodel” itself, is more explicitly played out in the follow-up programme “Red - Stars, Lifestyle & More”. The episode of 23 April 2009 starts with the news of Heidi Klum's fourth pregnancy, announced by her husband Seal, an 'African-American', 'black', musician at a concert. This is followed by the report: “Heidi Klum – Supermodel, Supermama und Superehefrau” (Heidi Klum - Supermodel, Supermum, Superwife), which includes the following statement by the “Germany's Next Topmodel”-judge Rolf, in a (fake?) French accent: (At: 1 min 39 sec)

Rolf: “The child can but only be absolutely super! And maybe... the next topmodel, eh? Like Naomi Le Noir, a little bit mix of German, a little bit of American, a little of bit African, of black and white – Wow!”<sup>2</sup> (Translation by the author)

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<sup>2</sup> Rolf: “Das Kind kann doch nur absolut super sein! Und vielleicht... das nächste Topmodell, eh? So wie Naomie Le Noir, so ein bisschen Mix von Deutsch, ein bisschen von Amerikanisch, ein bisschen von Afrikanisch, von schwarz und weiss – Wow!”

He pronounces the original ideals German/American/African with admiration, but at the same time, in what could be called a *melancholic turn*, he goes on to admire the mix of these ideals, as even more of an ideal, i.e. a renewed critical agency of the self – which in turn immediately creates a new original ideal, that of the fetishised mixed-race child.

In that he mentions 'Naomi Le Noir', a cipher for Naomi Campbell, one of the only black Supermodels, shows how such racing is always gendered, even for the unborn child. If it is to be black, even half, female, and a supermodel, it will be like that icon of black, female supermodel, Naomi Le Noir. And it's beauty will come from the perfect mix of pure race and gender, embodied in the 'white' woman Heidi Klum and the 'black' man Seal.

As a whole, “Germany's Next Topmodel by Heidi Klum” and “Red - Stars, Lifestyle & More” work together for a collective projection of raced and gendered ideals of (mostly female) originals German/White/Black/Mixed-Race unto the prospective Topmodels and from them back unto the selves of the TV-audience. The ritual can never become a form of mourning, as that would mean giving up on the search for a Next Topmodel. But the element of elimination, as a slow melancholic process of re-modelling, accentuates the loss that is constantly taking place in mapping the ideal (Topmodel) unto the real (the contestants). And though that a 'new' Topmodel, based on the internalised oppressed ideals, can be selected every year.

Conclusion:

Varying uses of Melancholia – *Melancholia everywhere?*

In this text alone, one can see some of the varying uses of the term melancholia, and how it is applied differently even within the field of sociology.

From its view as a national *pathology* in the analysis of Germany by Mitscherlich's or *neurosis* in Gilroy's Britain, or as inner-subjective in Butler's Freud, is broad. In my interpretation of it, exemplified on Swiss diasporic rituals and German consumer culture, melancholia can be understood as underlying almost any process of subject formations.

While it may well be called neurotic or pathological, it has hard to imagine a society in which identities are not based on some sort of collective shared image. Without some image to reference to and reflect back, there is no consciousness possible to develop. We may well expand our frames of conviviality, but without any frame of reference, connection points into a shared narrative, there is no identification. Of course all such identification can be seen as narcissistic, but what is narcissism other than the reflection on of the self back unto the self, i.e. self-reflection.

The example of how the Hindu ritual of saraswati puja is rendered by a 'Westernised' Brahmin, shows

narratives within a traditional framework, made flexible by its oral process and liberal interpretation. The goddess saraswati can further be worshiped, the identification with a 'lost' original Bengali Hindu culture creates a melancholic moment of self-reflection and the ritual, reconstituted in a new locus, melancholic as it is, be an innocuous constituent of identity.

Far from being oppressive, it might even constitute a form of *mourning*, once the total discrepancy of the old (lost) gets accepted as such and as replaced with the new ideals – which tough, ends up creating a new, parallel melancholia for the new ideal 'West', also lost.

This is not to undermine efforts to question and uncover racist and sexist structures within common narratives. Germany's Next Topmodel is such a case where race and gender play together to perpetuate the internalised melancholia of an entire nation.

But it is impossible to imagine any post-colonial identity construction that is not in some way melancholic in that is based on a rendering of previously internalised, inherited ideals of a lost original.

Robin Bhattacharya, April 2009

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