



Good morning melancholia

Description

Set mood to melancholy. Scase glanced out at the morning sky, which was the sombre colour of a television tuned to a dead channel heâ??d read about in a novel. His new hand-held *emot* machine sat inert on the window ledge. â??I said melancholy â?? or just sad if you canâ??t manage that.â? It blinked. â??Give me grief then.â? With that the new device auto vaporised leaving a faint audio trail before it vanished entirely. â??You canâ??t always get what you want,â? it seemed to whimper under fading breath.



Mourning and melancholia

Sigmund Freud identified two responses to losing someone or something dear to you. Itâ??s usual to mourn the loss, to go through a painful process that eventually leads to recovering a sense of perspective, or â??reality.â? Through this process the grieving person is always aware with certainty of what they have lost.

On the other hand there is the response to loss he labels as *melancholia*. In the case of melancholia, you donâ??t actually recognise what it is youâ??ve lost. The real loss is not actually accessible to consciousness. You may know youâ??ve lost the job, the loved one, the precious object, but there may be some other hidden loss you donâ??t quite recognise. It requires a psychoanalytic procedure, therapy or consciousness raising to uncover that aspect of the loss.

Symptoms of melancholia include self-reproach, i.e. blaming yourself for the loss. The melancholic may actually be angry with the loved one whoâ??s left, with whom theyâ??ve broken off the relationship, or

whoâ??s died: â??everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone elseâ?• (247). The melancholic may also give the appearance of being extremely truthful and honest. People who are so self critical often purvey an aura of intellectual trustworthiness.

According to Freudâ??s account, melancholics donâ??t necessarily keep their anxieties to themselves: â??On the contrary, they make the greatest nuisance of themselves, and always seem as though they felt slighted and had been treated with great injusticeâ?• (247). We might mistake their well-rehearsed erudition on their own position for a profound sense of justice in general.

Iâ??m not sure I can go much further with Freud than this identification. Before long you start to think of the limitations of his psychological labels and are glad of contemporary wisdom about sensitivity to mental health and social responsibility. I prefer to think of melancholy as a profoundly interesting cultural condition beyond its uses as a diagnostic or clinical category. So letâ??s turn to Å½iÅ¼ek.

You can always get what you want

Slavoj Å½iÅ¼ek further develops Freudâ??s ideas of melancholy and loss: â??Melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed in itâ?• (662).

Å½iÅ¼ekâ??s essay *Melancholy and the act* drifts from the theme of melancholy but returns with a proposition about rape. An imaginative daydreamer who entertains her or himself with fantasies of being violated and abused will suffer greater trauma when it actually happens than someone who hasnâ??t catered to such thoughts. This is an example of the familiar trope â??be careful what you wish for.â?• (There are lots of examples from literature and film at tvtropes.org.)

Å½iÅ¼ek offers a psychoanalytic explanation of what happens when the victim receives what they wished for. Itâ??s called *aphanasis*. Itâ??s where the personâ??s self identity (subjectivity) disintegrates and fades away. The victim suffers violence to the important distinction between fantasy and reality, or in Å½iÅ¼ekâ??s words:

There is a gap that forever separates the fantasmatic kernel of the subjectâ??s being from the more superficial modes of his or her symbolic and/or imaginary identifications. It is never possible for me to fully assume (in the sense of symbolic integration) the fantasmatic kernel of my being; when I approach it too much, when I come too close to it, what occurs is the aphanasis of the subject, in which the subject loses his or her symbolic consistency and disintegrates. And, perhaps, the forced actualization in social reality itself of the fantasmatic kernel of my being is the worst, most humiliating kind of violence, a violence that undermines the very basis of my identity (of my â??self-imageâ?) by exposing me to an unbearable shame (681).

Earlier in the essay he asserts that â??the melancholic mourns what he has not yet lostâ?• (661). He or she may indulge in â??a faked spectacle of the excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lostâ?• (661).

Melancholy gadgets

So thereâ??s something melancholic about desiring the latest gadget (e.g. a smartphone or other putative mood modifier), and eventually acquiring it. The melancholic (or any of us in melancholic

mood) may

- lose the object or have it taken away
- find it doesn't live up to expectations
- discover it wreaks havoc on our lives (addiction, constant connectivity, invasion of privacy)
- feel its loss even when in full possession (I don't deserve this, I may lose it, etc)
- discover that in order to deliver what we really want, the object charged with fulfilling the desire has to destroy itself.

That's melancholy!

References

- Freud, Sigmund. 1917. Mourning and melancholia. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*: 237-258.
- Noys, Benjamin. 2010. The horror of the real: Å½iÅ¾ek's modern gothic. *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, (4) 4.
- Å½iÅ¾ek, Slavoj. 2000. Melancholy and the act. *Critical Inquiry*, (26) 4, 657-681.

Notes

- Also see blog post explaining melancholy as a meta-mood: [The melancholy medium](#). See blogs tagged *melancholy* at <http://richardcoyne.com/tag/melancholy/>
- On the subject of the melancholic's apparent self criticism, Freud doesn't say this as far as I can tell, but perhaps that's why melancholics are often thought to be intelligent and creative â Aristotle's presumption that all outstanding philosophers, poets and artists are melancholic.
- Å½iÅ¾ek also asserts that âmelancholy is not simply the attachment to the lost object but the attachment to the very original gesture of its lossâ (660).
- âYou can't always get what you wantâ is a song by *The Rolling Stones*. The lead singer Mick Jagger is a Londoner whose affectation of an American accent ambiguates âcanâ and âcan'tâ. Either way, it's melancholic.
- William Gibson's melancholic scifi novel *Neuromancer* begins with the evocative sentence: âThe sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.â I wish I could be that sparing with the indefinite article.
- Today is All Saints Day. The image below is of a costumed barista taken yesterday at the local caff obliging with a zombie pose. Benjamin Noys makes the interesting observation that Å½iÅ¾ek not only uses examples from horror fiction in his philosophising, but gothic horror permeates his arguments and style. Apparently Å½iÅ¾ek spoke last night in Portland, Oregon. See â[Let's Hear Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ek speak on Halloween?!!](#)â I don't know if he did.



Category

1. Culture

Tags

1. desire
2. melancholy
3. mood

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