The Morbidity of Culture
Melancholy, Trauma, Illness and Dying in Literature and Film
Reflections on the Culture(s) of Morbidity and/or the Morbidity of Culture

In his most recent film *Melancholia* (2011), Danish film director Lars von Trier stages the nemesis of our world as a panoramic life-in-death experience: a deathly scenario envisioned as a moment of orgiastic sexual encounter. A blue meteorite devours mother earth to the music of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (1859) and intones the last moments as an ecstatic neo-romantic *Liebestod*. The extinction of man could hardly be any more vital, or beautiful. Von Trier’s film not only externalizes the pathologies of Western culture but is deeply invested in the history and (cultural) image repertoire of hysteria and melancholy. *Melancholia* exemplifies in how far art *uses and abuses* a vocabulary and imagery of melancholy and is furthermore involved in its discursive production. Particularly interesting with regard to the topic of this essay collection on the “culture(s) of morbidity”, the film illuminates the pathognostic function of art, which similarly calls attention to the “close alliance” of morbidity and productivity. Before I will display in more detail the value of this intricate connection for a discussion of culture and cultural representations, it is indispensable to explore the semantic field in which the dialectics of this relationship unfold.

The morbid is here understood to be an *expression of transience*, which not only spotlights the decay of life but moreover authors and authorizes the drive of renewal and the celebration of the instantaneousness of being in the face of death. Nietzsche cherished the value of transience and argued that subjectivity is an act of self-creation which experiences its productivity in its transience. If everything flows, permanence and imperishability are “fictions”, which *nolens volens* establish transience as a quality of truth. Equally Sigmund Freud conceives the frailness of beauty as an increase in value and bestows up-

1. The scene epitomizes Heidegger’s dictum that death lurks from the moment we come into being (279-311).
2. The terms melancholia and depression are in my understanding not interchangeable, but have been used synonymously, especially since the twentieth century and with the development of psychoanalysis. In this paper I rely on both terms since Lars von Trier himself does not draw a clear line between melancholia and depression. The semantics and symbolism of melancholia and depression then often overlap see i.e. dark moods, lethargy, blackness, images of incorporation, planet Saturn, images of regression into the inner life.
3. Within the ontological and the phenomenological approach of the *Daseins*-analysis decay is inherent to being-in-the-world, it constitutes the continual movement of the *Dasein* (Heidegger 279-311).
on the object a certain preciousness and uniqueness—an argument he elaborates on in his little-known essay “On Transience”:

Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. As regards the beauty of nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal. The beauty of the human form and face vanish forever in the course of our own lives, but their evanescence only lends them a fresh charm. A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely. Nor can I understand any better why the beauty and perfection of a work of art or of an intellectual achievement should lose its worth because of its temporal limitation. A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire today will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon the earth ceases; but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration. (my emphasis, Freud 305)

Within this approach of “relationality” the morbid is not a fixed category; it has no end or determination in itself, but has to be seen as a significance ascribed to the liminal state between the two normative markers of life and death. It is only perceivable in a temporal interval of past, present and future and is thus an immanent feature of worldly time. What Freud stresses at the end of the paragraph is furthermore the signification we give to the unavoidable presence of death in our lives, which refers to nothing less than the aesthetic. The morbid then delineates an aesthetic expression that attaches meaning to the physical, but also mental (and moral) decay.

Morbid themes served as warnings of the human hubris in ancient Rome and expressed a critique on worldly immersions in the Vulgate of the Middle Ages. Memento mori motifs or the personification of death in the danse macabre represented the universality of death and the vanity of earthly glories, just as vanitas symbols like the skull, rotten fruit, or hourglasses reminded man of the brevity of life. Later on in the seventeenth century, the baroque still lives and genre paintings displayed an interesting paradox in the representations of decay and mortality. The morbidezza (fleshliness) of the objects presented emphasized their sensuality and subtly reinforced the power of life. The sensual depictions and sometimes almost lusty exuberance, contradicted the didactic approach of installing a sense of humility in the beholder. The attempt of painters to capture the rottenness or decomposition of an object here point to a paradox encapsulated in the morbid expressions: in passing lies a certain accumulation of life. The morbid not only signifies what is life but first and foremost indicates the presence of the living, although intentionally the morbid prefigures death. Accordingly, it is a poetic principle that enfolds an analogous liminal space between the speech of life and the silence of death, between
presence and absence, and exposes the paradoxical nature of art to be the reservoir of life and witness to its extinction.

The morbid then not only marks a state of decay but is simultaneously a sign of life and a catalyst of cultural processes. Morbid images—the figures and motifs of morbidity in literature and the visual arts—revitalize culture, as Margot Northey argues for nineteenth and twentieth century Gothic fiction: “[M]orbid expression probes beneath the surface of life, and helps to engender a fresh frame of meaning. Perhaps its strange and disturbing configurations of experience contribute to the reordering of our perceptions which, many would argue, is at the base of cultural revitalization” (110). Furthermore Northey observes:

The very energy of much gothic and grotesque fiction supports a connection with cultural vitality as much as with cultural mortality. This being the case, those works which appear so death-ridden and frequently disintegrative may indeed be considered catalysts of regeneration. With good reason we may suppose that in culture, as in the natural world, death and decay are compost for new growth. (110)

What here refers to Gothic fiction could be expanded to fictional and autobiographical narratives of melancholy, trauma, illness and dying. As moments of crystallizations they engage with questions of “cultural vitality” and “cultural mortality”, which also includes ethical questions of how to pursue a good life and how to deal with an often painful past and threatening present/future. As borderline situations, in which time is displayed in its existential drama, they equally bundle up suppressed desires and emotions produced by the frictions of what Habermas called “lifeworld” (common understandings, values) and “system” (the media of rationalization such as money and power) (1984: 87). The “pathologies” discussed here constitute points of departure to grasp the morbid as an attribute or quality ascribed to living organisms (animals, plants or persons), but also to objects, ideas, and concepts such as cultures and feelings.\footnote{Morbid, [ad. L. Morbid-us, f. Morb-us disease, f. Root of morī to die. Cf. F. Morbide, It., Pg. Morbido, Sp. Mórbido] 1. Of the nature of or indicative of disease; also, productive of disease, morbific; b. Of persons or animals, their parts, etc.: Affected by disease, diseases, unhealthy; c. Morbid anatomy: the anatomy of diseased organs or structures; 2. Of mental conditions, ideas, etc.: Unwholesome; sickly; chiefly applied to unreasonable feelings of gloom, apprehension, or suspicion. Hence of persons: Addicted to morbid feelings or fancies; 3. Painting. Of flesh-tints: Painted with morbidezza (referring to the life-like quality of flesh-tints); Morbidity: 1. the quality or condition of being morbid; a morbid state or symptom; pl. Morbid characteristics or ideas; 2. Med. Prevalence of disease; the extent or degree of prevalence in a district—Morbility (The Oxford English Dictionary 657, col. 1).}

Along these lines the morbid themes taken up in this collection are divided into three sections: 1. Transnational Melancholy, 2. Narratives of Illness—Illness Narratives, and 3. Aesthetics of Death. The articles explore individual and collective significations of social pathologies and collective dispositions, but also
strategies of Othering concerning cultures, ideas or persons, and possibilities of self-empowerment vis-à-vis violent, conflicting and deathly encounters. The collection wants to give an impulse for cultural studies to consider the morbid as a productive category that could be further explored as an affix adhered to certain groups of people, cultures, or feelings in order to gain further insights from the ways foreignness is imagined. Besides being an attribute of distinction, the philosophical definition of the morbid as the presence of death in life calls up an array of discourses of vitality and conviviality in literature and the visual arts which need further examination.

For the purpose of clarity and in order to further elaborate these thoughts, I want to turn to the beginning of this introduction and provide, however abridged, a short analysis of the film Melancholia on the grounds of some of the aspects introduced so far. I argue that the film diagnoses and epitomizes the conditions of melancholy and furthermore generates conceptions of life and conviviality through its imagery of morbidity. More precisely, Melancholia employs a certain “morbid language” in order to expose, understand and communicate modern dispositions of melancholy and concomitantly positions the work of art and the artist within a tradition of modern “morbid eccentricity”.

The film magnifies the internal conflicts of a group of people at a wedding party and the time after when the main protagonist, Justine, falls deeper into depression and is taken care of by her sister Claire in a castle in the countryside. While the first part of the film is focusing on Justine’s condition, the second part stays close to Claire’s anxiety and narrates the arrival of the blue/black planet which moves at 60,000 miles an hour towards earth. The film focuses on the development of beautiful Justine, who is caught up in the internal conflict of conformity and desire. At her wedding party she realizes that she had never wanted to marry Michael, a nice, uncomplicated and attractive young man and that an indefinable and noncommunicable fear leaves her paralyzed amidst her dancing and celebrating guests. The community at display, Justine’s family and friends, serves as a microcosm to expose the dysfunctionality of modern societies—their decadent and narcissistic character. Justine’s father is a hedonistic man, who leaves the scene at a moment when Justine needs his advice and her cynical mother despises the marriage (one might say any human relationship) as an illusion and false hope and tells Justine “to wake up”. Both parents have nothing to give in terms of emotional support.

Although it might be tempting to speculate about a story of betrayal, of loss and bitter disappointment, von Trier allows only a brief glimpse into the abyss of their relationship and denies simple explanations for Justine’s illness. Rather, the revulsion Justine feels for this world, the individual crisis, serves as a mirror for the social pathology of the time, and equally fuels the idea of melancholy as an anthropological constant precisely through allusions to literature, popular discourses and the visual arts, and is thus reviving an antagonistic perception of melancholy most prominently presented in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.
(1603) and Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The film takes up early modern conceptions of melancholy as Justine is drawn to the black planet resembling Saturn, which was believed to affect the intellectual’s mind, and held responsible for melancholic moods in the fifteenth century. Correspondingly, Justine is portrayed as brilliant and thoughtful, moreover she seems to possess almost psychic powers since during a conversation with her sister she admits that she “knows things”. Her ability to feel more profoundly than anyone else underlines an assumption that can be traced back to Pseudo-Aristotle and his famous statement that all great men are melancholics, a view that was revivified in the Neoplatonic tradition and Italian Humanism. Marsilio Ficino’s book *Three Books on Life* (*De Vita Libri Tres*, 1480-1489) contained an influential passage on the causes and methods of treatment for melancholy and was likewise a narrative of his own condition. Accordingly, Julia Kristeva has emphasized in her study *Black Sun: Melancholy and Depression* (1989) that “[f]or those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia” (3). Here Lars von Trier positions himself within the tradition of works on melancholy which were diagnostic and therapeutically at the same time, and which ultimately served as narratives of self-empowerment.

Von Trier’s *Melancholia* also seems to nurture a morbid eccentricity flaunted by authors of the *fin de siècle* like Charles Baudelaire or modernists of the early twentieth century, such as Thomas Mann. He shares their religious empathy for decay, the obsession with morbidity and death, the satiation with the “ordinary language” and the consequent connection of pathos and pathology. There is a moment when Justine lies naked on the rocks of the riverbank, illuminated by the light of the blue planet and awaiting the embracement of death, which calls into mind the last poem of Baudelaire’s *Fleur du Mal* (1857), “Le Voyage”, where the narrating voice imagines his own death and calls out to the captain, the allegorical death: “It’s time, Old Captain, lift anchor, sink! / The land rots; we shall sail into the night; / if now the sky and sea are black as ink / our hearts, as you must know, are filled with light. […]— heaven or hell, who cares?” (my emphasis, Baudelaire 185).

Likewise, the film does not display fantasies of salvation, since Justine stresses that we are all alone and discards all chances of a new beginning somewhere else in the universe. Trier emphasizes the *in-betweeness* that generates images of transcendence. The apocalyptic end becomes a frame narrative to think and negotiate the way we behave facing the end of our lives. Here the

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5 At the wedding party the wedding planner invites the guests to estimate how many beans have been filled into a jar. No one could guess the exact number except for Justine.

6 See here the parallels to the black plague in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1349-53), where ten young people flee from the plague in Florence and take shelter in a villa in the hills of Fiesole. The pestilence literally and metaphorically provides the frame narrative to