

Rok Benčin*

Melancholy, or the Metaphysics of Fictional Sadness

Following Alain Badiou's recent proposal for a metaphysics of happiness, in which "real happiness" gains a metaphysical dimension by being conceptualised as an affect related to infinity, subjectivity, and truth procedures, this essay raises the question of whether there could also be a "real" sadness that would merit its own metaphysical treatise. If there is a kind of sadness that is not merely confined to the despair of a finite individual, but has been related in the course of the history of western thought to metaphysical aspirations, it goes by the name of melancholy. In order to show that a metaphysics of melancholy is indeed possible and that it could even be considered as complementary to the mentioned metaphysics of happiness, two major characteristics of the melancholic condition need to be thoroughly re-examined, namely alienation from the world and the loss of the object.

Towards the metaphysics of affect

To suggest an introductory indication of what connects metaphysics and melancholy, we can consider the classical work on melancholy by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, at the centre of which is an interpretation of Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melencholia I* (1514). According to these authors, Dürer achieves "the merging of two different worlds of thought and feeling" by combining two historical types of figures, namely the allegory of geometry as an exemplary science of this era and a portrait of melancholy as a wretched state of mind of the slothful. By combining the two figures, Dürer transforms the meaning of both: "He was bold enough to bring down the timeless knowledge and method of a liberal art into the sphere of human striving and failure, bold enough, too, to raise the animal heaviness of a 'sad, earthy' temperament to the height of a struggle with intellectual problems."¹ While ge-

101

¹ Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Kraus-Thomson, Nendeln 1979, p. 317.

* Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

ometry's tools for mapping the order of the cosmos now slip into "a chaos of unused things," melancholy intellectually struggles with "not being able either to grasp or to release an imaginary something."²

This merging of thought and feeling provides us with a set of problems common to both metaphysics and melancholy. If both have always been alienated from reality, although for different reasons, the former due to its search of the transcendent order of the cosmos and the latter due to the predisposition to sadness and idleness, their alienation now coincides. There is a glitch in the order of the cosmos, which makes the metaphysical effort harder but also more necessary than ever. According to Theodor W. Adorno, the "absurdly rational" metaphysical systems of the 17th century "served a compensatory purpose. The *ratio* which in accordance with bourgeois class interests had smashed the feudal order and scholastic ontology, the form of the intellectual reflection of that order – this same *ratio* no sooner faced the ruins, its own handiwork, than it would be struck by fear of chaos."³ Under the threat of disintegration into chaos, the world is no longer the evident totality, but a problem to be resolved with an ingenious philosophical apparatus. The same problem inspires the nascent feeling of baroque *vanitas*, which implies a new kind of object, the ungraspable "imaginary something" that affects the melancholic with a sadness without a cause.

The essay will thus explore the world "out of joint" and the undetermined object within the void of the absent cause of sadness as the two problems of a supposed metaphysics of melancholy. The latter is only possible, however, under the condition that the melancholic object not only testifies to a loss of the world, but also supports a specific kind of subjective relation to the world. What must be found among the ruins of the well-ordered world, is, to use Adorno's phrase, the possibility of a metaphysical experience.

102

An indication that such an endeavour makes sense today, after a century or more of the abandonment of metaphysics from all sides of the philosophical spectrum, can be found in the actual attempts at developing a metaphysics of affects. For an exemplary metaphysics of affect in these post-metaphysical times,

² *Ibid.*, pp. 317, 319.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York 1990, p. 21.

we will turn to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. Among the most recent examples, we will discuss Badiou's *Métaphysique du bonheur réel*, from which the title of this essay is derived by means of paraphrase. For reasons that will soon become clear, I will pose the question of whether the metaphysics of real happiness can be opposed or supplemented by a metaphysics of melancholy as fictional sadness. Additionally, a metaphysics of melancholy was recently proposed by Ilit Ferber in *Philosophy and Melancholy*, her reading of Walter Benjamin's early writings on the baroque *Trauerspiel* via Martin Heidegger's notion of *stimmung* and the Leibnizian concept of the monad.

In order to start exploring the metaphysics of melancholy, however, we must first turn to the two main references for thinking melancholy within contemporary philosophy, namely Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin. The loss of reality or the lack of libidinal investment in the outside world is a key symptomatological starting-point for psychoanalysis, while the melancholic specifically struggles with an indeterminate lost object. Around the same time, Benjamin developed his own thoughts on baroque melancholy as contemplation of the fragmented ruins of a world that has lost its meaning. Both authors thus seem to confirm our hypothesis on the dual problem of world and object as the crux of the metaphysics of melancholy.

Objects without a world

From his early metapsychological writings onwards, Freud recognised alienation from reality as the fundamental fact of both neurosis and psychosis.⁴ The distinction between the two is further elaborated in "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis", where Freud brings into consideration "the question not only of a *loss of reality* but also of a *substitute for reality*."⁵ While the neurotic constructs "a *world of phantasy*," parallel to reality, the psychotic goes a step

103

⁴ "We have long observed that every neurosis has as its result, and probably therefore as its purpose, a forcing of the patient out of real life, an alienating of him from reality." Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII*, trans. by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press 1958, p. 218.

⁵ Freud, "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis", in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX*, trans. by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1961, p. 187.

further with “the creation of a new reality,” which acts as a surrogate world that completely replaces the real one.⁶ While the neurotic can be considered as a proto-artist – an artist able to “mould his phantasies into truths of a new kind,”⁷ the psychotic is a proto-metaphysic, as exemplified by “the characteristic tendency of paranoics to construct speculative systems.”⁸

For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, however, the pair of the neurotic and the psychotic becomes insufficient for Freud at a certain point. He thus introduces a new pair, namely the melancholic and the fetishist. From our current point of view, the difference between the two pairs primarily concerns the shift of focus from the world to the object. While the psychotic requires a completely new reality, the fetishist, for example, is driven by a substitute object (a fetish in place of the mother’s absent phallus). The fetishist can remain indifferent to the real world, as long as his or her subjective structure is supported by the exceptional object.

In the case of the melancholic, the ontological status of the surrogate object is more peculiar. As is well known, Freud introduced melancholy as a pathological double of the normal process of mourning. The features of both states, such as the inhibition of activity and the loss of interest in the outside world, as well as the ability to love, are very similar. While both are reactions to a lost object, the difference is primarily in the nature of loss itself. While mourning is fully conscious and attached to a definable lost object (even if this object is an abstraction or an ideal), melancholy is “related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness.” Nevertheless, “even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia,” meaning that the mental state is linked to the same starting point as in mourning, i.e. the conscious loss of an identifiable object, there remains a surplus of loss that is not reducible to the mourning for a lost object. Even if the patient “knows *whom* he has lost,” he does not know “*what* he has lost in him.”⁹ The crucial difference between

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 185.

⁷ Freud, “Formulations on the Two principles of Mental Functioning”, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁸ Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, trans. by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1957, p. 96.

⁹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV, op. cit.*, p. 245.

mourning and melancholy, revealed at the point of their greatest proximity, is a redoubling of the lost object that takes place in the latter. The actual lost object is not what the melancholic truly loses.

It seems that the melancholic too, like the fetishist, generates a substitute object to make up for the loss. However, while the function of the fetish is to merge with the loss to the point of its disavowal, the melancholic object emerges as distinct from any defined and identifiable object that might have been lost in order for the melancholic to be able to cling to the loss itself. In distinction from the lost object, the loss itself functions as an object, the object of loss. This is the object the melancholic identifies with, causing the specific mental features of melancholy that Freud goes on to discuss in detail. While the first pair, the neurotic and the psychotic, produce substitute worlds without grounding in objectivity (worlds without objects), the second pair, the fetishist and the melancholic, generate surrogate objects separated from the meaningful whole (objects without a world).

The other major source of the philosophical comprehension of melancholy (several aspects of which were a crucial influence on Adorno, for example) is Benjamin's book on the German baroque drama, the *Trauerspiel*. As Adorno after him, Benjamin turned to Leibniz to present his view on the philosophical method. A study on a largely forgotten literary phenomenon can be philosophical, because every idea (the idea derived from the *Trauerspiel* included) is a monad, containing all other monads and therefore an image of the world.¹⁰

In Benjamin too, we can find a problematised idea of the world together with the notion of a fragmentary object. Crucial for the former is the idea of natural history. The world of the baroque era is a world dominated by religion but deprived of eschatology. The historical succession therefore freezes "into a figurative spatial simultaneity."¹¹ History is absorbed back into nature and becomes a part of the landscape, a setting, which, in its passivity, intrudes into dramatic action.¹² Lutheranism breaks the link between good deeds and redemption, thereby di-

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne, Verso, London, New York 1998, pp. 47–48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 91–93.

vesting human activity of its eschatological meaning. Benjamin saw Dürer's engraving as a document of the resulting aversion to practical activity. All this results in an empty, alienated world in which a ruin becomes the paradigm of objectivity. Once the objects are no longer a part of the meaningful whole of the world, "the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us."¹³

Deprived of the world, objects appear as dead objects subjectable to contemplation that invests them with new, arbitrary meanings. Ruins thus become a source of invention: "That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation."¹⁴ The fragmentary object without a world appears as such to the melancholic, who expresses its new meanings in the language of allegory:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say, it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontological sense.¹⁵

Benjamin's ruins are therefore melancholic objects without a world. Eric L. Santner claims that Benjamin's melancholy provides a glimpse into the realm of "creaturely life" beyond the matrix of representations that constitutes the world. The melancholic objects testify that "life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality."¹⁶ Melancholy is therefore a "condition of radical designification."¹⁷ Ferber argues that these "objects become eternal reminders of the emptiness remaining after all meaning and hope for salvation have disappeared," although they also demonstrate a

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–184.

¹⁶ Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 2006, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

“capacity to be recharged, to acquire new signification.”¹⁸ The objects without a world nevertheless find their expression in allegories that ascribe to them a different kind of meaning.

The crucial question that will define the possibility of the metaphysics of melancholy lies here: are we only dealing with the loss of the world and with fragmentary objects that testify to this loss, or do the indeterminacy of the melancholic object (Freud) and its potential for another kind of signification (Benjamin) enable a different kind of subjective relation to the world?

The object as monad

The problematised notion of world and the undetermined object that at the same time is and is not a part of this world are also at the core of Adorno’s affective (post-)metaphysics. *Negative Dialectics* opens with a famous claim that philosophy is still possible because it has failed to find its proper end. Philosophy’s hopes were embedded in the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of the world (instead of its mere theoretical interpretation), which would realise philosophy by ending it. However, as the post-war society testifies, according to Adorno, the moment of praxis was missed.¹⁹ One could say that philosophy thus resembles Juliet accepting her own (temporary) death in expectancy to be reawakened into a love fulfilled, only to find Romeo well and truly dead beside her. After the non-event of the transformation of the world, philosophy reluctantly resumes its task of interpretation, which it can only fulfil by means of the ruthless dagger of self-critique.

Philosophy thus continues as a fidelity to the lost object of its own end, thereby displaying a properly melancholic structure. There are several consequences of this melancholic reawakening of philosophy, most notably that the notion of truth is now tied to an affect: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.”²⁰ To remain true to this affected notion of truth, philosophy must renounce its pretended systematic grasp of the whole. The lost object of its end

¹⁸ Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin’s Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2013, Kindle edition, pp. 38–39.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

entails the loss of the whole – the very subject matter of philosophical thought. This does not mean, however, that the whole does not exist. Philosophy must identify it as the system external to it, namely the repressive system of society. The systematic domination that causes suffering in the world is reproduced within philosophy by the principle of identity: “The principle of domination, which antagonistically rends human society, is the same principle which, spiritualized, causes the difference between the concept and its subject matter.”²¹ Negative dialectics must therefore conceptually think what eludes the identity of the concept – the non-identical. The non-identical supports the resistance of thought to the world as it is and therefore maintains a critical perspective on the unchanged world from the point of view of utopian change.²²

Having renounced its grasp of the whole, philosophy can only think in fragments. However, such fragmentary thinking is not a sign of the limitation and finitude of philosophical thought, but rather presents its infinitisation. The closed system is now shattered and expanded into an infinite fragmentary philosophy, although each fragment is a means of accessing the lost whole: “What makes philosophy risk the strain of its own infinity is the unwarranted expectation that each individual and particular puzzle it solves will be like Leibniz’s monad, the ever-elusive entirety in itself – although, of course, in line with a pre-established disharmony rather than a pre-established harmony.”²³ Faced with the lost object of its own end, which also entails a renouncement of its subject matter, the whole, philosophy gains a new object, the non-identical, and a new subject matter, an infinity of monadic fragments in which to read the disharmony of the world.

Following Adorno, the possibility of merging the different characteristics of Freud’s and Benjamin’s descriptions of the melancholic object is implied. The object of loss, i.e. the undetermined object that emerges in surplus to the actual lost object, functions as a monadic residue, with windows closed from the world, in which the truth of the world, its very disharmony, can nevertheless be

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²² “Accompanying irreconcilable thoughts is the hope for reconciliation, because the resistance of thought to mere things in being, the commanding freedom of the subject, intends in the object even that of which the object was deprived by objectification.” *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

read. The significance of the melancholic monad thus provokes a change in the subjective relation to the world.

Real affects and fictional objects

There is an Adornian trait in Badiou's own metaphysics of affect, even though the general frame is obviously very different, since the affect, related to truth, is not suffering but rather happiness. For Badiou, any philosophy worthy of its name is a metaphysics of happiness.²⁴ Real happiness, however, does not originate in the satisfaction of needs, it is an affect of scientific, political, artistic, and amorous subjects of truth. It can be observed that affect is not, as in Adorno, the condition of truth, but rather its effect. Nevertheless, for Badiou as well as for Adorno, the desire of philosophy stems from a reaction to "the miserable state of the world."²⁵ Happiness is as rare as the events that give rise to the subjects of truth procedures. Subjects form as a response to the contingent encounter with an appearance of something that is a part of the world, but is at the same time excluded from it, like the Adornian non-identical: "Happiness is the affect of the Subject as an immanent exception."²⁶

For Adorno, real happiness is only possible as a Stendhalian *promesse*, which can still be kept by philosophy or art only as a strict demonstration of its unrealisability. Badiou, on the other hand, calls precisely for *finir avec la fin*, for the end to come to an end. Philosophy has spent the last century declaring the end of the metaphysics of truth, but now it is time to re-establish philosophy under the condition of subjective procedures of universal truths, which are only measured by their realised consequences, not their promises.

Badiou admits, however, that "a certain measure of despair is the condition of real happiness."²⁷ As testified by Kierkegaard's "anti-philosophy", this despair comes from an individual's encounter with the impossible appearance that imposes a decision upon him or her, a decision to either accept the event and become a subject or to remain enclosed within the imaginary individual identity.

²⁴ Alain Badiou, *Métaphysique du bonheur réel*, PUF, Paris 2015, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 88.

Nevertheless, his or her despair is transitory, while the true affect of the subject remains happiness. For Badiou, there is no affectual *stimmung* of being-in-the-world, a *stimmung*, such as the Heideggerian anxiety that delivers the *Dasein* to its finitude. Real happiness comes from a rupture in the world and the necessary despair is only the affect of the uprooting of the individual from its disoriented existence in the world as it is. Badiou rejects the possibility that a revelation of Being or a return of the Gods could lead to real happiness. According to him, the Heideggerian “Return” is a hopeless nostalgia, an always already defeated cause. Despair or defeat can give rise to poetry or an anti-philosophy in the style of Kierkegaard, but there cannot be a philosophy of despair: “though there exists a poetics of the defeat, there is no philosophy of defeat. Philosophy, in its very essence, elaborates the means of saying ‘Yes!’ to the previously unknown thoughts that hesitate to become the truths that they are.”²⁸

Following Badiou, therefore, there can be no metaphysics of melancholy, since despair is the affect of individuals confined to their finitude and not a real subjective affect of an infinite truth. The aim of this essay is not to reverse Badiou’s re-appraisal of infinity and truth, but to show how a metaphysics of melancholy is nevertheless possible. In order to do that, it has to be shown how there is something real about its fictitious nature and how it can be thought of beyond the limitations of individual finitude. If it can be shown that melancholy is, in a certain sense, a subjective affect of infinity, then the metaphysics of melancholy can supplement the metaphysics of happiness.

The first question, then, would be if melancholy, the sadness without a cause, can in any way be considered as real. Giorgio Agamben has emphasised the close relation to phantasm in the historical development of thinking melancholy. According to Agamben the melancholic loss of reality is a part of the strategy aimed at transferring the reality principle from the world to the phantasm. Reality is lost in order for the phantasm to become real: “The lost object is but the appearance that desire creates for its own courting of the phantasm, and the introjection of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is

110

²⁸ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. by Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London, New York 2009, p. 3.

real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real.”²⁹ The achievement of the melancholic is of the same kind as the achievement of the artist compared to a regular neurotic according to Freud: the ability to mould phantasies into truths. The appearance that the melancholic creates is not merely imaginary; it is rather a properly subjective fiction.

In contrast to the standard interpretation which understands the loss of the ability to desire as a fundamental characteristic of the melancholic condition, Agamben claims that the lost object is an imaginary invention of desire by way of which the melancholic establishes a paradoxical relation to the unobtainable object of desire: “From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost.”³⁰ The melancholic does not actually lose anything, he or she invents a loss which allows him or her to establish a form of existence of what can never be possessed. What is created by the fiction of a loss is loss as an object, the object of loss, which makes the desire “capable of reversing privation as possession.”³¹ The melancholic thus carries out a Pauline turn: what was real becomes unreal, what was unreal becomes real. Melancholy is thereby real by being fictional.

The monadic object and possible worlds

From the outset, we have been investigating the dual problem of object and world as a hypothetical primary concern of the metaphysics of melancholy. Following the presented readings of Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, and Agamben regarding insights pertinent to the metaphysics of the (melancholic) affect, some conclusions on the character of the melancholic object can first be derived; conclusions that cannot, however, be fully ascribed to any of the mentioned authors.

First, the emphasis shifts from a factual lost object to an indeterminate object produced in the process of loss. The melancholic affect is not related to the loss

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1993, p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

of an object, but rather to the production of a surplus, indeterminate, and fragmentary object that seems alien to the world.

Second, subverting the false dilemma of its belonging either to the realm of reality or the realm of illusion, the melancholic object can be described as fictitious: it has the artistic character of converting imagination to new realities.

Third, the melancholic object has a monadic structure. Not only is it a fictional reality, it also touches on something real. Its windows being closed to the world, there is a truth about the world that is nevertheless inscribed in its interiority, as if a Leibnizian monad would roll out of the broken clockwork mechanism of the world.

Finally, the monadic object can be invested with meaning. In other words, the inscriptions of the world within the monad can be read. Melancholy is therefore not an epitome of numb passivity; there is a specific melancholic desire or activity, related to developing the potential fictions inscribed within its monadic structure.

The question remains, however: What are the consequences of this fictional object for the world? Is the world irreversibly lost or even simply irrelevant to the melancholic, obsessed with the worldless object? The melancholic inclination towards the phantasmatic, emphasised by Agamben (not without reference to Benjamin, as well as Freud), implies that the affect may not only concern the objects without a world but also “worlds without objects”, i.e. unrealised, imaginary worlds. The melancholic’s perceived passivity is a consequence of the desire for something unobtainable in this world. However, melancholy is also a strategy for inverting the reality principle and presenting the unreal as real.

112

At this point we can once again return to Leibniz. His philosophical system is an excellent example of what Adorno described as the “absurdly rational” attempts of 17th century philosophy to compensate for the loss of the orderly world and to keep the threatening chaos at bay. In contemporary philosophy, the glitch in the order of the cosmos becomes manifest and is often explained precisely through a return to Leibniz. Adorno, for example, used his concept of monad as a model for the modern artwork (and I have used it here as a model of the melancholic object in a similar manner): closed from the world (artwork no longer simply

represents the world), it presents its essential disharmony. The disharmony of the world entails that not only is it no longer possible to show how, like it still was for Leibniz, if rationalist criteria are applied, we have to admit that despite empirical evidence to the contrary, we live in the best of possible worlds, but that we can no longer say that we live in a world at all – at least not as in a unified, orderly whole.

There are, however, two slightly distinct versions of articulating this problem. On the one hand, we could say that the world is lost, while on the other we could claim that the world has become fragmented or multiplied. These two options seem to co-exist in the writings of a host of contemporary philosophers. Badiou claims that today we no longer live in a world, not exactly because there is no unifying principle, but rather because the world lacks recognisable political struggles that would allow for subjective orientation.³² On the other hand, Badiou has developed a new, objective phenomenology of worlds, which claims that a human being can simultaneously exist in a “virtually unlimited number of worlds.”³³ The impossibility of orientation is also diagnosed by Jean-Luc Nancy, who has claimed that we are witnessing the end of the unifying world of sense, which nevertheless opens up “*the praxis of the sense of the world*” in its plurality.³⁴

The same duality can be found in Gilles Deleuze, who famously argued that the belief in our world is lost and the “link between man and the world is broken.”³⁵ However, Deleuze also turned to the Leibnizian idea of a multitude of possible worlds. Similarly as Adorno, he claimed that baroque philosophy was a desperate attempt to hold the chaotic divergences at bay. Leibniz thus divided “impossible” divergences between different possible worlds, only one of which was chosen for actual creation.³⁶ Today, on the contrary, we live in an

³² Badiou, “The Caesura of Nihilism”, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels, Verso, London, New York 2012, pp. 53–66.

³³ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. by Jeffrey S. Librett, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1997, pp. 4, 9.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 171–172.

³⁶ Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. by Tom Conley, The Athlone Press, London 1993, pp. 81–82.

age of the “neo-baroque”, in which the multitude of worlds is no longer merely possible, but actually exists: “nothing prevents us from affirming that impossibles belong to the same world, that impossible worlds belong to the same universe.”³⁷ Like the other two philosophers mentioned, Deleuze seemed to hesitate between the “melancholic” image of loss and a “schizophrenic” image of a multiplication of worlds.

Last but not least, we turn to Agamben, where a certain notion of loss of the world can also be found, for example in his thesis on the destruction of experience.³⁸ What is more interesting in this context, though, is his own reaffirmation of the Leibnizian multiplicity of worlds. In contrast to Deleuze, he preserves the potentiality of worlds. We must listen to “the lamentation that [...] arises from everything that could have been but was not, from everything that could have been otherwise but had to be sacrificed for the present world to be as it is.”³⁹ The existing world was created at the expense of all the other possible ones. The task of the new Messiah is not to redeem our world, but to save all the inexistent ones.

How can we intervene in these discussions on the notion of world in contemporary philosophy from the perspective of the metaphysics of melancholy we have been developing? I would like to argue that the notion of the melancholic object developed above implies a shift of emphasis from the loss of the world to its multiplication and potentialisation. It seems that the properly melancholic loss of the world entails a desire for other worlds, which, however, remain unrealised. The fictional object, generated in the loss, is the object of this melancholic desire. Due to its indeterminate and readable monadic character, the object evokes a multiplicity of worlds in their potentiality.

Between real happiness and fictional sadness

The crucial question that still needs to be answered at this point is what kind of potentiality is at stake here? The Agambenian answer would see the monadic object as the monument and guardian of all the uncreated worlds in their

³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁸ Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron, Verso, London, New York 1993.

³⁹ Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, in: *Potentialities*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990, p. 266.

very potentiality. Another solution is offered by Ferber in her metaphysics of melancholy. She understands melancholy in the Heideggerian manner as a mood, which is not a particular way of seeing the world but a manner in which the world discloses and reveals itself to us.⁴⁰ She suggests, however, that the principle mood of philosophy is melancholy, rather than anxiety.⁴¹ Following Benjamin, she claims that melancholy, as such a mood, combines extreme closure from the world with a radical expression of the world.⁴² It is precisely the Leibnizian monad that provides Benjamin with the means to conceptualise this duality. While the monad is in no relation to the rest of the world, it nevertheless contains all other monads within itself and thereby to a certain extent expresses the world as a whole: “the world is not an object for the monad but is part of it. [...] Secured in its utter closure, the monad not only expresses the world: it includes it by means of expression.”⁴³ The harmonious monadic expression thus achieved relies on the “pure language” of “mere potentiality,” the mute language of nature beyond communication and referentiality, which Benjamin describes in his early writings.⁴⁴

I would like to propose a third answer that would provide the missing link between melancholy and the idea of a metaphysics of affect proposed by Badiou in relation to happiness. If there is indeed to be a metaphysics of melancholy in this sense, the potentiality evoked by the affect must transcend individual finitude and form a certain subjective infinity. In order to find this missing link, I will once again turn to Benjamin and Adorno, specifically to their readings of Marcel Proust. It seems that Proust himself associated melancholy with potentiality. Brassai comments on Proust’s frequent paraphrases of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s famous verses “*Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; / I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell,*” which were written as a dedication on a photograph given to him by his friend Edgard Aubert.⁴⁵ In one of the texts col-

⁴⁰ “In that sense, mood is necessary for the disclosure and appearance of the world in its entirety as hopeful, boring or anxious. The world, in other words, is not ‘colored’ or veiled by a certain mood; on the contrary, the world is constituted of, and made intelligible by, mood.” Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 170.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴⁵ Brassai, *Marcel Proust sous l'emprise de la photographie*, Gallimard, Paris 1997, pp. 38–41.

lected in *Essais et articles*, for example, Proust wrote about memories filling him with melancholy due to all the unrealised possibilities, everything that might have happened but was never to be.⁴⁶

In this vein, Benjamin explained Proust's *memoire involontaire* through a twist in which we can recognise the melancholic invention of a surrogate that takes the place of the lost object. Similarly to how Agamben will describe melancholy, Benjamin described Proust's strategy as a will to forget the real events in order to relive and rewrite them through memory: "For an experienced event is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it."⁴⁷ Time is not simply (a) lost (object), there is an intention to forget in order to produce a surrogate memory, a substitute object of loss that could be expanded to a work of art. Benjamin emphasises the infinity of the remembered event by recalling that Proust never stopped adding new paragraphs to his manuscripts.

When discussing the further possibility of a metaphysical experience in the conclusion of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno referred to the promise of happiness that is found by the Proustian narrator as a child in the names of distant villages to which he would one day like to travel. Actually traveling there later, the narrator finds these places to be nothing like he imagined: "One thinks that going there would bring fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet, one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason."⁴⁸ It can be observed that in such a metaphysical experience, happiness and melancholy coincide beyond the opposition between fulfilment and disappointment. Such experience aims at what in objects is not identical to them: "Happiness, the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing, gives us

⁴⁶ "Chaque fois que, afin de l'évoquer, je regarde au fond tremblant et terni de ma mémoire un de ces fêtes, aujourd'hui mélancolique d'avoir été délicieuse de possibilités depuis irréalisées, il me semble d'entendre qui me dit avec le poète : 'Prends mon visage, essaie si tu le peux de le regarder en face ; je m'appelle ... ce qui aurait pu être et qui n'a pas été.'" Marcel Proust, *Essais et articles*, Gallimard, Paris 1994, p. 158.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust", in: *Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1 (1927-1930)*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone et al., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 2005, p. 238.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics, op. cit.*, p. 373.

the inside of objects as something removed from the objects.”⁴⁹ Happiness as a metaphysical affect may exist as an unfulfillable promise, and yet this negativity has another side, a certain “positive” negativity: it offers an experience of the non-identical. Proust’s “reconstruction of experience,” Adorno concludes, resists the world that makes the promise of happiness unfulfillable.⁵⁰

These remarks on Proust can give us some final clues to what kind of potentiality is at play in melancholy. Melancholy only evokes the multiplicity of worlds in their potentiality by way of this multiplicity being inscribed in the worldless indeterminate object. And yet, the monadic character of this object invites a reading, the development of a fictional world from the potentiality opened up by the invented surrogate object. From this perspective, potentiality is simply a retroactive assumption of the work of fiction. By taking Benjamin’s remembered event as a model, we can see how the monadic object is infinite by being “merely a key”, a break that triggers narrative development. Melancholy is “artistic” in the Freudian sense: it transcribes phantasy into something real – a fiction.

Inducing neither passivity nor activity, melancholy marks the point where the loss of reality is staged as a refusal, clearing the way for the worldless object as an immanent exception, a rupture that opens the possibility of other worlds by triggering the work of fiction. This is the point where melancholy is, in Adorno’s words, “more than impotent longing.” Coinciding with the promise of happiness, melancholy acquires a metaphysical dimension. From the Badiouian perspective, it thus transcends the despair of an individual, confined to his or her finitude. Melancholy implies a subjective stance of refusal of reality, producing a passage of infinity within its monadic object, ready to be developed in a different world. Melancholy can thus be seen as the “necessary measure of despair” that paves the way to “real happiness”.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*