6AAEC061 Melancholia and its modern afterlife (updated 14.1.15)

Level/semester taught  Final year module Semester 2
Convenor  Patrick Wright
Credit value  15 credits
Teaching arrangements  One 1-hour weekly lecture
One 1-hour weekly seminar
Assessment  One 3,000 word essay (85% of final mark);
One 1,000 word critical commentary (15%)

Module Outline:

Until recently the concept of ‘Melancholia’ was still being employed in psychiatric diagnosis. ‘Involutional Melancholia’ was a severe form of depression, particularly associated with the elderly. By the mid-nineteen nineties, however, even this surviving version had been dropped from the World Health Organisation’s internationally accepted classification of diseases. No longer useful to medical science, Melancholia was finally abandoned to the cultural imagination - which is, perhaps, where this enigmatic ‘humour of the night’ has always belonged.

Taking Albrecht Dürer’s much reinterpreted engraving Melencolia I (1514) as its primary image, this course will review the transformation of Melancholia from an archaic Humour associated with Saturn and bile, to a characteristically modern mode of thought connected not just to religious or psychological depression, but to a habit of ‘philosophical’ disengagement much used in literature, art and film. We will pursue this theme through literary, historical and theoretical texts in which the idea of melancholy is associated with political dissent as well as with ideas of creativity, genius, and romantic individuality. In the later sessions, we will consider how melancholia comes to express modern forms of memory and nostalgia: both in the sense of historical discontinuity famously evoked in Walter Benjamin’s figure of a backward-looking “angel of history”, and in visions of the more morbid kind recently identified as ‘post-colonial melancholia.’

NB: The key primary texts will be supplemented by secondary material provided online.

Seminar Programme:

Week 1: Albrecht Dürer’s Melencolia I and its modern reinterpretation.
Week 2: “In Darknesse Let Me Dwell”: John Dowland, Shakespeare (Jaques and Hamlet), and other examples of Elizabethan melancholy.
Week 3: Romantic dejection and post-revolutionary tristesse: Coleridge, Shelley.
Week 4: Baudelaire – “Paris Spleen” and the Urban Flaneur
Week 5: Underground Man: Dostoyevsky, Notes from the Underground (1864)

Reading Week (16-20 Feb 2015)

Week 6: Freud’s version: Transience, Mourning, Melancholia
Week 7: Walter Benjamin's “Angel of History”: war, ruin, and the discontinuous past
Week 8: Existentialism: Sartre's Nausea (1938)
Week 9: Exile: W.G. Sebald, Rings of Saturn

Bibliography:

Primary Texts (* marking those students are expected to obtain for themselves):

Günter Grass, final chapter of From the Diary of a Snail (1972), London: Minerva, 1974
William Shakespeare, Hamlet & As You Like It.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Dejection: an Ode”, “Frost at Midnight” and “France: an Ode”.
Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples”.
Algernon Charles Swinburne, “A Year's Burden – 1870”.
Charles Baudelaire, Paris Spleen (New Directions) and “The Swan” and other poems from Flowers of Evil (tr. James MKcGowan, Oxford World Classics, 1993).
*F. Dostoyevsky, Notes from the Underground (1864), Oxford World’s Classics, 2008.

Secondary reading:

Marshall Berman, All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity, London: Verso, 1983 [Esp. the chapters on St. Petersburg in Dostoyevsky's time].
Marie-Claire Blais, Dürer's Angel, Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976. [a novel recounting the experience of teenage girls at their end of their time in a Montreal convent school]


Sarah Kember, Virtual Anxiety, Manchester University Press, 1998 [Ch. 5 “Life, Undeath and a Satanic View of Technology”].


Jennifer Radden (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva*, Oxford University Press, 2000. [This is a useful compendium of writings about Melancholy from antiquity to Kristeva and others].


