

Melancholia and the Radical Particular: Against Archer's Realism

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*The successful refutation of post-modern conceptions of subjectivity does not automatically give one the right to posit an acting subject. What is missing in any such positing is a value-judgement. How much is such a subjectivity worth? Why is such an attempt even being made? This paper argues that it is precisely these questions which go unasked in Margaret Archer's work, and as such her human being is hollow. This is not because it is purely linguistic, but because if conditions of generalised exchange are taken as a normative ground for subjectivity then it can only exist as a bourgeois capitalist. To posit agency within these boundaries is to affirm them. To gain a different view of subjectivity one must forego the liberal need to rescue the 'soul' of the human and investigate the subject in its unfreedom and in its non-actuality. This position is, paradoxically, one which remains far more true to the idea of meaningful subjectivity than one which believes that the wrong life may be lived rightly. This paper begins by manifesting a contradiction in Archer's work and goes on to read her development of human agency through the work of Georg Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno. Following this I read Lars Von Trier's (2011) film *Melancholia* through Sigmund Freud and Adorno and claim that in times of crisis a negative conception of subjectivity may allow for an experience of emancipation precisely due to the tangential relation between the subject and the social world. I conclude with a brief consideration of the ontology of capitalist crisis and maintain that a melancholic and essentially negative structure is essential for understanding agency as it exists outside of demarcated social roles.*

Key words: Margaret Archer, Adorno, Von Trier, Futurity, Melancholia, Negativity

PART I

'They speak and hear,
and are cast into the deep.'
Dante, *The Inferno*.

Contradiction

Margaret Archer is a realist social theorist dedicated to reinvigorating a working conception of human agen-

cy in the face of post-modernism and other trends that she claims seek to impoverish the concept of the human in favour of a view of subjectivity that is entirely socialised and a human being that is merely a gift of society. This project takes place over the course of several books including *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995),

Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory (1996) and *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000). The first part of this paper will focus primarily on the latter of these works, as well as Archer's more recent text *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (2007).

I mean to argue that there is an inherent contradiction in Archer's work because, while she successfully argues that a human subject must exist, she does not provide an adequate criticism of the objective circumstances in which that subject moves. This results in her overestimating the potential for subjective autonomy. To see this contradiction one need only consider the closing passages of *Making Our Way Through the World*. Here Archer describes a personal experience of a recent holiday she spent in the company of family and relative strangers in a Swiss Châteaux. The youngest of these individuals are described as 'opting out' of a system of corporate interest and free-competition:

These young professionals were rejecting the organisational contexts in which they were occupationally expected to exercise their skills and were crafting small, new outlets for themselves in the social order....We seemed to be celebrating not only the New Year, but also the freedom to pursue one's where one would - following the situational logic of opportunity in order to give priority to

what one cares about most (Archer 2007, 325).

This notion of opting out is contentious, and it displays a prejudice in Archer's thinking that can be illustrated with a brief consideration of a more recent event. In the UK last year, in the early hours of the morning of 19th October 2011, around eighty-three families were made homeless in the violent eviction of Dale Farm, a long standing Traveller site in Essex, southern England. Reports of police beatings and the use of tasers were common. Spokesmen for the residents at the site explained their refusal to leave before the eviction with the simple statement that they had nowhere else to go. ¹ At that point, and in countless others, it became clear that involvement in the social world is not something which one may opt in or out of. Or rather, to 'opt out' one must already be in some degree 'opting in.' As Theodor W. Adorno writes, 'The form of the total system [society] requires everyone to respect the law of exchange unless he wants to be destroyed and regardless of whether profit is his motive or not' (Adorno 1970, 147). I maintain, along with Mattias Benzar (2011), that many of the problems that pre-occupied Adorno in sociology have yet to be solved, or rather, are insoluble. As such, I believe his work to be of the highest importance when considering any social theory, especially one that claims to deal with an authentic subjectivity.

The affirmation of subjective freedom in Archer's model sits comfortably alongside objective entrapment. The question then presents itself as to how does a theory attempting to describe agency complement exactly a situation of unfreedom? I attempt to answer this by first of all sketching the development of selfhood and agency as it appears in *Being – Human*, and counterposing it to Adorno's conception of reified subjectivity. I mean to argue that if subjectivity is affirmed positively within the social world then it is a subjectivity that must be reified, and as such, the affirmation of a positive futurity is deeply conservative. After this I will present a reading of the structure of melancholia as presented in Lars Von Trier's 2011 film of the same name and attempt to point towards a notion of subjective singularity that emerges precisely from a radical incommensurability with the temporality of the status-quo.

Archer's Subject

As I stated above, my interest is not in whether Archer successfully counters the arguments of post-modern thinkers and manages to give the self a necessary constitution, but how and why such a subjectivity complements objective conditions of unfreedom. As such, I will not consider at length the first sections of *Being Human* that are dedicated to a refutation of Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida; rather, I will begin

at the end. Archer's human being is defined by its positive relation to the future and its integration into a social totality. This positive futurity is maintained via the existence of subjective concerns and commitments that each individual seeks to actualise within their own life-world (Archer 2007, 97). Such a standpoint can be easily questioned. To begin with one may consider the following passage from Adorno's 'Minima Moralia':

A mankind which no longer knows want may begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a large scale...Being nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment, might take the place of process, act, satisfaction....(Adorno 2005, 157).

If this passage were making a positive claim about the future of subjectivity then it would be open to the criticism of gross utopianism. However, it is essentially negative in nature. What it succeeds in doing is connecting a positive relation to the future, a relation of 'process, act, satisfaction,' within the context of historically specific relations of production and prevailing conditions of want amongst the human population. Neither of these things are essential components of human social life, although they are historically prevalent.

One may consider Adorno's state-

ment that 'there is nothing under the sun, which in being mediated... through the human intelligence... and thinking, is not socially mediated (Adorno 2002, 15-16; Adorno in: Benzar. 2011, 47). One sees a presupposed ontological ground imprinted upon any social theory. Indeed, it is the task of a sociological interpretation to allow the sedimented history in social phenomenon to come to light (Adorno 2002, 145). This is not to return to an argument of socialisation but, rather, it is to say that no theory escapes its own historical context. It is with regard to the existence of this imprint that I will consider the formation of Archer's subject.

In *Being Human* subjectivity is developed through a series of stages which culminate in the social 'actor' who is possessed of both a 'social' and a 'personal' identity. The latter comes about through a series of reflections known as 'internal conversations' by which a subject considers their previous experience in terms of their future plans and attempts to live their life accordingly. This reflection revolves around a collection of concerns which are described as 'emotional states...not commodities which can be costed...' (Archer 2000, 63). As we read in *Making Our Way Through the World:*

The goal of defining and ordering our concerns, through what is effectively a life-long internal conversation, is to arrive at a satisfying and sustainable *modus vi-*

vendi. Through *prioritisation* conducted by inner dialogue...The subject constitutes her identity as the being-with this constellation of concerns (Archer 2007, 97).

These 'concerns' emerge through a subject's interaction with three stratified layers of the real: the natural, the practical and the social. It is the ability to reflect on them in each of these arenas that guarantees some kind of autonomy for the subject.

The natural order is the primary stage of self-development. Here Archer makes use of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of an 'embodied practice,' a conception of the subject as necessarily orientated and corporeal. As an infant a subject forms relations with her immanent exterior surroundings and repeated interactions with them lead to the emergence of the self as a 'relational property, whose realisation comes about through the necessary relations between embodied practice and the non-discursive environment' (Archer 2000, 123). This environment remains non-discursive because the relation to it is conducted on the level of sensual immediacy, not through the 'disembodied Cartesian cogito' (Archer 2000, 128). At this point the subject experiences her 'inherent attunement to things which is the nature of our being-in-the-world' (Archer 2000, 132). This attunement would be impossible without a minimal sense of memory.

The 'self' is precisely this repository. As such, Archer's self emerges 'monologically' as a pure individual in its surroundings. It is important to note that it has been rightly suggested that this attitude over-individualises the self to the extent that the input of carers and minimal linguistic influence is ignored. This is not to suggest a re-socialisation of the self, but rather to suggest that Archer maintains a bias towards absolute individuality when one is not necessary for her argument (Luckett 2008, 303).

Once the practical order has been entered then a sense of personal identity begins to be formed, and the 'internal conversation' comes into play. This, Archer maintains, is present in every normally functioning human being and represents the major PEP (Personal Emergent Property) that contributes to the irreducible nature of the human being. The conversation initially functions by mediating emotional commentary on the subject's relations with the practical order of reality. Archer insists that emotions are primarily to be seen as 'anthropocentric commentaries on the situations in which we find ourselves...' (Archer 2000, 207). As such the internal conversation explains the continuation or cessation of action according to the pleasure or lack of it that is expected to be received from different activities. For example, people decide to pursue or not pursue sports based on their aptitude for or enjoyment of them,

and musicians dedicate themselves from an early age to many hours of practice because they experience the activity as fulfilling, or expect that it will yield such fulfilment in the future. Personal identity forms itself around what activities are decided to be the most profitable for a subject, and through this process the practical order provides the ultimate ontological ground for the formation of social identity (Archer 2000, 213).

This dialogue is described as a 'dialectic between our human concerns and our emotional commentaries on them' (Archer 2000, 231). It is maintained that the potential for agency emerges through the fact that, in appropriating the world we have 'taken responsibility for these concerns, and have made them our own' (Archer 2000, 173). At this stage, it is clear that social integration is crucial to agency. Just as in John Elster's 'Adaptive Preference Formation', a theory which Archer derides (Archer 2000, 63), the normative ground for a healthy subjectivity is its ability to adapt to the current social world.² I would argue that the existence of this normative ground is already an affirmation of that status-quo's rationality.

Once a personal identity has been adequately formed, one begins to become aware of one's own social objectivity, and to be represented as an agent, or rather as one of a group of agents who share a similar stock in cultural (and, presumably, real) capital. Agents may manifest their

singularity as an 'actor' by taking on a pre-existing social role. Archer is insistent that there is no contradiction involved in this process. Rather, each actor, typified by some kind of involvement in wage-labour, whilst not free to choose their role, is free to 'activate or personify it in a particularistic way' (Archer 2000, 284). Archer insists that through the use of reflexivity the actor is able to secure a human status rather than a merely objective one (Archer 2000, 288). The adult internal conversation grows as social roles are occupied. It is through juggling these social roles with personal ones that human agency again comes to the fore. The subject is effectively split between social roles and concerns which are animated by a personal identity (Archer 2000, 293).

Archer's argument for the positive relation between personal and social identity relies on the conception that roles may be performed, as it were, in an unscripted way, that, although occupying a certain role means being restricted, the subjects are their own 'script writers' as 'even the smallest print which spells out formal obligations cannot tell us how to greet our partners, breakfast the children, let the dog out or acknowledge God' (Archer 2000, 303). As a result changes in roles and in societies' normative ground may occur through 'a continuous stream of unscripted performances, which also over time can cumulatively alter role expectations (Archer 2000,

296). The human agent is ultimately neither the gift of, nor the king, of society but is involved in a continuous morphogenetic relationship with it which changes both the normative structure and the subjects defined by it.

Archer's Conservatism

Archer acknowledges that her work is largely commensurable with phenomenology (Archer 2000, 127). She maintains that this is because both schools of thought give primacy to action in the practical field. However, they are also commensurable on another point; a pre-occupation with the irreducible freedom of the human being. Archer effectively adopts Jean Paul Sartre's dictum that 'freedom...is the being of man' (Sartre 2003, 441). However much this may be true, the descriptions of freedom that Archer uses all manifest themselves within the normatively sanctioned realm and are minuscule in their reality such as taking the dog for a walk, giving children breakfast etc. One may argue that the prisoner in solitary confinement maintains a similar degree of freedom because they are free to walk around their cell as and when they choose. I would argue that one may say the same thing of Archer's conception of freedom as Adorno says of existentialism; that it is, to some extent, 'allergic to objectivity' (Adorno 2000, 50). The logic of 'no matter how small the small-print' (see above) is a logic whereby the

tighter objective circumstances become, the more a subject manifests its freedom.

The subjective ground of freedom exists at the expense of a critique of a subject's objective conditions and, ultimately, acts as an apologist for them. This is apparent in the conception that the internal conversation is a universal linguistic experience. No consideration is given to the fact that individuals may have different linguistic abilities based on background and cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the habitus, for example, describes a situation in which 'schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them [social subjects] to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification of and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react' (Bourdieu 2000, 138). Thembi Kate Lockett maintains that the dialectical relation between thought and language is underestimated in Archer's work: 'The more abstract one's thoughts are, the more they depend on access to repertoire of discourses which enables higher order thinking' (Lockett 2008, 139).

There is in Archer's thinking something deeply conservative which points towards the thought that, regardless of a person's upbringing, all they have to do is to go out in the world and prioritise their concerns appropriately, and they may exist as a fulfilled agent. This

is present again in the conception of 'taking responsibility' for social concerns and models. As Judith Butler (1990) observed, on the back of Franz Kafka, conceptions of subjective autonomy are primarily useful in a courtroom situation (Butler 1990, 157) and I would argue that a prejudice towards legalistic schemas of freedom of choice heavily influences Archer's model of subjective growth. One does not necessarily choose to take responsibility for the social world; rather one may equally well be forced to do so in order to survive. Money is required in order to live and getting a job is generally required to get money, and this comes with a series of normatively sanctioned social responsibilities. The primary movement, however, could just as equally be seen as one of forced adaptation rather than a voluntary assumption of responsibility. The citizens of a particular state do not choose to be born under its laws, although they are assumed to be responsible for not breaking them.

This point can be elaborated if one considers the term 'reification.' Literally meaning to make a thing of something, it enters the lexicon of critical theory via Georg Lukács's (1975) *History and Class Consciousness*, and draws on the a specific section in *Capital* Vol.1 in which Marx remarks that it is a peculiar characteristic of commodity production and exchange that relations between men take on the character-

istic of relationships between things (Marx 1990, 164). Key to this idea is the conception of abstract labour. Stemming from the same chapter of Marx, this refers to the process through which the individual labour time that goes into making a commodity, be it an item of clothing or a pot of stew, is necessary homogenised into an abstracted form of value which then allows for the exchange of otherwise incommensurable items. The object produced emerges as both a use-value and an exchange-value, a dual structure of materiality and abstraction. Lukács writes that 'this fragmentation of the object of production necessarily necessitates the fragmentation of the subject...Neither objectively, nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of this process. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient....and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not' (Lukács 1975, 91). The subject that emerges from this process encounters a situation in which 'the relations between man that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relations...have faded to the point where they can be neither recognised nor perceived' (Lukács 1975: 93).

For Adorno, the entire social world itself exists as a reified set of relations between individuals, one predicated entirely on the existence of exchange relations and commensurability. Adorno defines a reified consciousness as that be-

ing which has effectively 'adapted itself to objects' (Adorno 2005, 193). I would argue that Archer's subject represents almost a case in point of subjective reification. The language of accumulation and exchange permeate her work. To quote another passage regarding the formation of social identity: 'What new employees have to do is to evaluate the up-side against the down-side and come with a *positive balance* if they are going to find a cause to invest something of themselves in that role' (Archer 2000, 191. my emphasis). This is the reasoning of finance capital, not the language of an emancipated human subject. The abstraction between personal and social identity mimics almost exactly the abstraction between the individual person and their socially abstracted labour. According to Archer the further one goes in terms of subjective reification, in terms of an internalised division of labour amongst one's concerns, the closer one comes towards singularity. The successful subject is 'everyone who has managed to achieve both personal and social identity' (Archer 2000, 296) This is not to say that Archer's theory is not an accurate description of current human behaviour, but that it mistakes historical contingency for a transcendental human nature.

Rather than attempting to ground the subject in the social, Adorno remarks, quite simply, that the objective nature of society only becomes

present when it 'hurts' (Adorno 2002, 36). The normative ground of social integration must be shifted on to the individual suffering for this to come clear. Benzar notes that 'to job seekers who must do what they do not want to do, the coercion to adapt to the almighty exchange principle and to *sell* themselves is immediately evident' (Benzar 2011, 59). This thought cannot be integrated into a system of positive futurity, in which an individual subject locates itself comfortably within the social, because it locates the two at a point where they are radically incommensurable. One could argue that if Archer's subject feels no pain, does not understand the nauseating experience of selling themselves in order to gain work, it is because they have successfully adapted themselves to a reified objectivity. For Adorno, this road ends in Auschwitz in which 'even in his formal freedom the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidator's boots' (Adorno 2000, 362). It is this dialectic between fungibility and 'formal freedom' which characterises many people's experience of the social world. To affirm freedom within it is to fail to see that this autonomy can only exist along lines which do not belong to the subject and which can always be denied to it.

Finally, on a macro level, I would argue that Archer's work forms a parallel with what Walter Benjamin identifies as a narrativising tendency

within discourse orientated towards ideas of progress. In Benjamin's 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' one reads of the necessity for a 'messianic *cessation* of happening' (Benjamin 2007, 263, my emphasis) within the continuum of historical progress; a continuum that necessarily passes over the individual suffering of those who 'lie prostrate' before it (Benjamin 2007, 256). The idea of a normatively sanctioned subject moving towards the future manifests this same characteristic on an individual level. Those singular moments of suffering which society passes over in a violent silence are re-appropriated into that subject's narrative as necessary preconditions of the attainment of a precarious social identity. In this way they are retrospectively justified according to the same logic which inflicts them. I would argue that the wound in both the subject and the social which occurs when the individual stands against their systems of mutual appropriation must be kept open.

Archer's work demonstrates that positing a positive subjective agency within the currently existing social world must end with the objective reification of that subject. This is simply because in order to survive one must engage in some form of continued process of exchange. Such a conclusion demands a re-focusing on the ontological constitution of the subject as it exists in its unfreedom. Archer states that

a primary sense of self-hood is a condition of possibility for 'experience.' Likewise, she insists, via the quotation of Piaget's work on child development, that it is only through an awareness of the permanence of the object that the self can be founded (Archer 2000, 147). This bears a striking resemblance to the following passage from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

'The original and necessary consciousness of oneself is at the same time a consciousness of the original and necessary synthesis of all appearances in accordance with concepts...for the mind could not possibly think of the identity of itself in the manifold of its representations...if it did not have before its eyes the identity of its action which submits all synthesis of apprehension (which is empirical) to a transcendental unity (Kant 1999, 231-232).

The subject predicates itself upon the objectivity of its surroundings, upon the schema of cause and effect that it sees within the world, and the ability to infer permanent existence upon a series of temporal encounters with the 'same' object. This maintains itself throughout the subject's life time, as a necessary pre-condition of 'making our way through the world.' However, what follows from the Kantian thought is that object is itself mediated already through the subject in order to achieve its objective sta-

tus. Categories of understanding serve to reflect back to the subject only what it is capable of knowing about the object in the first place. What appears to be natural is already domesticated by the subject into its own perceptual schema. For Adorno this represents a mimesis of the capitalist exchange:

This tautology [between subject and object] is nothing other than the expression of captivity: as knowing subjects we are never able to get outside of ourselves... The world in which we are captive is in fact a self-made world: it is the world of exchange, of commodities, the world of reified human relations that confront us, presenting us with a façade of objectivity...a second nature' (Adorno 2001, 137).

It is through this dialectic of domination, subsumption and abstraction that the world is experienced as reified.

On this model, there is no escaping the positive unfreedom of the subject by further enmeshing it in the social. Rather, Adorno inherits from Hegel the conception of the inherent negativity of the subject. One reads in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that 'the genuinely *positive* exposition of the beginning is...also, conversely a *negative* attitude towards it' (Hegel 1977, 13) Active thought anchors itself via the negation of what is. Within the original Hegelian dialectic this movement of negation

resolves itself into a positive resolution and the structure of determinate negation is ultimately the restoration of the positive. However, to maintain the conception of positive negation is to maintain the possibility of a reconciliation between subject and object; a reconciliation impossible in the world of the reified social. Rather, the fidelity to be maintained is to the inherently negative act. As we read in *Negative Dialectics*: 'The seriousness of unswerving negation lies in its refusal to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are. To negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; rather it proves that the negative was not negative enough' (Adorno 2000, 159-160). The original negative action is that which maintains the space for the new by existing against time, against the narrative appropriation of the positive future.

In the following section I will attempt to ground a negative conception of time and subjectivity within the experience of melancholy; a state of being-in-the-world which a focus on positive futures necessarily renders pathological. By reading Von Trier (2011) through Freud and Adorno, I will aim to show how subject – object relations can be unsettled in the event of objective crisis, and how this provides a negative framework for conceiving of action in the world and comportment towards objects, and, by extension, subjects, which is not modelled around the principal of equivalency and exchange. I will

begin by considering the melancholic subject's relation to time.

PART II

'For only what does not fit into this world is true.'

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Melancholia and the Social

Melancholia is inherently anachronistic. By this I mean that, in its most literal sense, it is a condition which acts against time. Freud describes the condition in relation to mourning, a process that involves a similar removal from world affairs, but is not treated as pathological because 'we rely on it being overcome within a period of time' (Freud 2005, 202). The latter occurs due to the identifiable loss of a loved object. In melancholy, however, the lost object cannot be replaced and as such is internalised into the unconscious resulting in a paradoxically narcissistic incessant series of self-abasements (Freud 2005). Julia Kristeva discusses the effect succinctly: 'It is impossible to change partners or plans, for the object that has caused me pain is not only hated but also loved and thus identified with me' (Kristeva 2000, 47). In essence, the impossibility of replacing the lost object makes it impossible for a person to 'get on with their life' because their very personhood is predicated on loss.

This status becomes more complicated as Freud later concludes that the normally functioning ego

is founded on the loss of a beloved object, and on the acceptance of a socially sanctioned number of replacements. David L. Eng (2000) has suggested that the melancholic structure of subjectivity becomes a manifestation of the inability for public language to address unsanctioned objects, allowing clinical depression to take an overtly 'political' meaning (Eng 2000, 8). In this sense it becomes an index for that which must be passed over in silence within the social world. As Butler (1997) writes, 'the character of the ego appears to be the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder...of unresolved grief' (Butler 1997, 133). These griefs themselves catalogue heteronormative prohibitions and gender demarcations. It is this powerfully anachronistic relation to the status-quo that connects Adorno's negativity with the melancholic structure of subjects. It is also at this point that Archer stands most obviously opposed to this conception of subjectivity. The narrative assumption of 'social roles' necessarily pushes the subject into demarcations which cannot allow for the restoration of the lost object. The world actively promises fulfilment and works at the same time to deny it.

If one continues the discourse of second-nature and reification then what are missing from the social world are not only specific objects of desire, but equally a meaningful objectivity as such. This double

bind manifests itself in Adorno's statement that 'thought awaits to be wakened one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching' (Adorno 2000, 81). This restoration would provide the ultimate justification for social philosophy. Its mission is 'to show objects in their truly alienated, deformed state 'as they would appear in the messianic light' (Adorno 2000, 247). The presentation of the messianic here is negative. It is through the light of the a-historical objective, that objectivity that cannot be conceived within the world of the falsely objective, that aspects of the social world can be shown in their true state. Such discourse relies on the view point of the melancholic; the one who refuses to maintain themselves within a progressive narrative. It is therefore through the action of negation and loss, those essential constituents of the subject, that the potential for a redeemed relation between subject and object indexes itself.

It is within this ontological nexus of false and unrealised objectivity that I will consider Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia*. Released in the autumn of 2011, by the Danish studio Zentropa, a company started and part-owned by Von Trier, it is the Danish director's most recent work. I will argue that the structure of melancholy appears here as having two faculties. The first of these is its anachronistic nature, the second is an emphasis on particularity and

a potential for an experience of an object which is paradoxically negative. Kristeva writes that the artistic drive avoids succumbing to melancholy by investing a subject's drives into individual objects; by 'sexualizing words, colours and sounds' (Kristeva 2000, 60). This may appear impotent whilst the world functions normally around the subject, however I will argue that this structure, as it appears in *Von Trier*, contains a reflection of a relationship to objectivity not based around utility and exchange.

This emerges if one considers the opening sequence of the film in which, against the musical backdrop of Wagner's prelude to 'Tristan und Isolde,' one sees a series of brilliantly composed high resolution, slow moving photographs, in which objects and people exist radiant in their particularity. These images include a bride attempting to walk away from roots in which she is entangled, a horse falling in slow motion against a sky spotted with stars and three figures; two women, whom we later find out to be the film's central characters, and a child, standing in a perfect composition against the back drop of a large country home. Intercut between these is the image of Earth being destroyed in a collision with another, much larger, and clearly dead, planet. What I would note about these images is that they appear to be aesthetic before they are narrative. They appear as metaphor not documentary. One may be

tempted to see them as examples of the aestheticising power of the melancholic consciousness, as discussed above. However, I would argue that equally what are presented are particulars as particulars. They are not entirely removed from a universal, such a thing would be impossible to comprehend, however they are not *subsumed* by the subject. They exist outside of an exchange relation. It is at this point that the negative and the anachronistic aspects of melancholia already converge. It is the dialectic between them, and its relation to the social world which I will argue manifests an ontological ground for a negative subjectivity.

Once the opening sequence is finished the viewer witnesses the bride, Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst, delayed on the way to her wedding reception as the limousine in which she is travelling with her new husband fails to negotiate a tight bend in a country road. Eventually the couple arrive two

hours late, and are greeted by the frustrated figures of Clare, Justine's older sister, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and her husband, played by Kiefer Sutherland. Justine increases this frustration by immediately going to say 'hello' to her favourite horse in the family stables. As the scene progresses from this point it becomes clear that her sense of time is not commensurable with the world in which she finds herself. The wedding is running ac-

ording to a strict timetable, one that, as Claire's husband remarks, was drawn up by 'the most expensive wedding planner on the planet.' In contradiction with this attempt to manage her subjectivity, Justine frequently drops out of the appropriate forms of behaviour. The Archerean social roles present themselves for her to play. She is a new bride, she is a woman and is clearly from a privileged background. As such, her agential status seemingly equips her with everything necessary to become a successful actor. What is missing is a reified relation to the future; a desire to realise her own concerns as they placed before through a temporally bound series of commitments.

The assumption of such roles appears to her as an essentially de-meaning and boring act. Options available are meaningless. Upon her arrival at the reception, she is asked to guess how many beans are in a jar and upon receiving a congratulatory speech from her employer, during which she is promoted, is given the task to come up with a tag-line for a new advertising image. Both these tasks she fails to achieve, eventually telling her boss that she despises him and having sex with the young man who has been plucked from obscurity to encourage her to come up with the slogan. Throughout this sequence, the constitution of social identity is shown to be an inherently violent act. Not only does Justine fail to

achieve her combination of the personal and the social identities that would enable her to function as an active human, but she induces in those around her the feeling that this very relation as it exists in themselves may be something inessential. Characters, with the exception of her father, react with increasing desperation and frustration towards her behaviour. Her husband leaves, presumably for good, and Claire tells her how some times she hates more than she can say. This is not the reaction of a benevolent social world nurturing personal identity; rather it manifests the inherent violence of subjective constitution. This is not to suggest that Justine manages to sublimate gender in any meaningful way, however her negative relation to it, along with the economic structures in which she finds herself placed, allows disjunction between these structures and a subjective freedom to come to light.

Melancholia and the Negative

If the first half of Von Trier's film deals with the false objectivity of the world of second nature, then the second introduces objectivity of a new and absolute kind. The tautological domination of the object by the subject, the second nature of subjective existence, is obliterated by an object unable to be domesticated within the subjective framework. The half, entitled 'Claire', starts an indeterminate amount of time after the wedding. The opening

scenes deal with the title character's efforts to cope with the, now literally, debilitating depression of her sister. Several scenes depict her attempting to help Justine with small tasks, such as getting into a bath and eating supper. The latter remains incapable of doing these things, screaming as she is walked to the bath tub and saying that food tastes 'like ashes.' At other times she is seen as marvelling over specific flowers in the garden, and at the flight of a bird passing above her. When this happens, Claire looks on, seemingly happy but unable to participate.

In the previous section, I mentioned that Archer's subjective ontology is explicitly Kantian, in that she predicates the subject's knowledge of itself on the knowledge of its objective surroundings. This results in the subjective alienation experienced as 'second nature', an inability to know oneself and a persistent sense of entrapment. If the discourse of melancholia allows one to notice the particular of individual suffering that is missed in the social universal, it also contains intimations of a state in which neither the object or the subject are committed to their mutual bind. This is something that may approach subjective freedom: 'A freedom to step outside of the object, a freedom which the identity claim cuts short' (Adorno 2000, 313). The identity claim, the fastening of an object to its concept by a subject that in turn is fastened to the object, is something that reaches to the

core of positive subjectivity.

From the images that open the film there is consistent emphasis on an ability to experience passively within Justine's character, to achieve something approaching a relationship to an object which does not amount to subsumption. In *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Archer makes reference to what she describes as the possibility of a 'fracturing' within a subject's internal conversation which would result in an inability to prioritise one's concerns and move through the world accordingly (Archer 2003, 298). Needless to say, this is judged as an incomplete subjectivity. However, what Von Trier (2011) emphasises is that it is precisely this inability to function according to the standard normative ground that maintains itself against that ground's failure in moments of objective crisis.

This ontology takes centre stage as it emerges that a planet named Melancholia has been 'hiding' behind the sun and is approaching Earth. Claire begins to worry that it will collide with them and her husband assures her that it will not. From this point, the planet represents precisely the social world's inability to appropriate an absolute object. Indeed, I would argue that this failed domestication is present from the opening shots of the film. Von Trier's affinity and familiarity with the work of Nietzsche has been noted (Bainbridge 2008). This rela-

tion between object and metaphor is a pre-occupation in both their work. As one reads in the small essay 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense':

Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal.... What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished...truths are illusions...*metaphors* which are worn out and without sensuous power' (Nietzsche 1994, 47, my emphasis).

The construction of discourse, of objectivity itself, predicates itself on making the visceral familiar via the use of metaphor and translation, in which objects are literally transplanted into different areas of discourse. As the film progresses, this appropriation is made explicit in its failure. The opening shots, originally taken as metaphor, become increasingly prophetic as this failure becomes more and more evident. In the most moving example Claire's husband presents her with a device made by their son. It consists of a stick of wood with an adjustable ring of metal that can be held up to the planet and adjusted according to its size. The holder then waits for five minutes and places it over the planet again to see whether or not it is approaching or receding away. Ultimately, all that can be known

about this object is its relative size.

Merleau-Ponty (2005) writes that 'sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of *our* life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness' (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 61, my emphasis). What emerges in *Melancholia* is a process by which an object appears that cannot provide a foundational point for a life-world precisely because it is too much of an object. As such it causes terror amongst those whose subjectivity is contained within a schema of a positive futurity.

Justine's relation to the planet is strikingly different to her sister's. Two scenes serve to illustrate this. The first takes place at night. Justine goes walking in the grounds of the house, and Claire follows her clandestinely. *Melancholia* is shining brightly in the sky and after a few minutes the latter stumbles across Justine who is lying naked on a river bank staring back up at the planet and bathing in its white light. The position here is clearly voyeuristic. What is witnessed is a mode of comportment towards an object which manifests itself as a paradoxical stepping outside of the remit of subjective objectification. Such a position is only possible via the fractured subjectivity of the melancholic and from a subjective perspective that is outside of social time. It is from this position that the apocalyptic object appears as both

redemptive and destructive; as the messianic perspective from which the false is shown in its falseness.

The second scene occurs close to the end of film when it is now irrefutable that the Earth will soon be destroyed. Claire finds her husband dead in the stables, and tells Justine that she wants to re-enact a familiar ritual and to sit out on the terrace drinking wine with her sister and her young son. According to all of the requirements of rational behaviour, this plan is a good one. Claire has the means and the money at her disposal to actualise her plan, and the act exists within a social role that she is comfortable in playing. After a few moments of strained silence Justine tells her sister that this is one of the most stupid ideas that she has ever heard and proceeds to walk out into the grounds of the house where she meets her nephew and tells him that they will make a magic cave to escape the apocalypse. What is revealed in the convergence of the objective lack of a future with the attempt to maintain a degree of behaviour within the social world is that those normative behaviours are themselves guaranteed by a false objectivity.

The film ends with a negative image of redemption as the planet impacts and the three characters are sitting in a makeshift house formed from dead branches. History ends with an event which is precisely a-historical and the object that is never appropriated into schema of the fu-

ture converges with the consciousness unable to participate in it. The societal roles, the sedimentations of social history are obliterated along with the very subjectivities that they render necessary. For Justine, the melancholic always outside of time, the last moment is immortal. The social world that throughout has been predicated on a violent appropriation of subjectivity and time dies because the lost object that founds the ego in its melancholy state returns in all of its objectivity. Justine's relation represents a model for a comportment outside of exchange, a relation that can only exist as essentially negative.

Conclusion: Crisis

As the preceding discussion has investigated, the condition of melancholia acts against time in two ways. It refuses the necessary incorporation of the subject into the schema of the world's temporality, and it focuses on the particularity inherent in that world's crass universals. In both of these ways it is experienced as a deviation from the normal mode of existence. It represents a prolonged existential crisis, the process which, for early phenomenology, reveals the 'world as world' (Heidegger. 1978, 139). It is the visceral experience of being out of joint with one's surroundings, an interruption in the Kantian self-narrative.

The experience of financial crisis can be described in a similar way. It is the point at which discourses of

progress and inevitable subjective actualisation fall away. To view this position as ontologically secondary to the normal flow of life in the social world, is to appropriate the crisis into a discourse of the future in which the basic ontological ground of pre-crisis states will inevitably re-emerge. One could argue that the apperception of capital mimics that of its subjects. Every drive towards economic growth necessitates the enforcing, and tightening, of acceptable social roles and the subjects / objects which occupy them. The conception of a 'constellation of concerns' is rendered meaningless in the face of social objectivity attempting to recover from such a crisis. The situation which led to one elderly man shooting himself outside of the Greek parliament is a fitting example of what remains of subjective freedom when objective circumstances allow no avenue for its realisation.³

It is situations like this when one realises the essentially conservative nature of a focus on positive subjectivity. This is a focus that must take the currently existing world of social relations as its normative ground. As such, throughout her work Archer refers to the 'epistemic fallacy' as the mistaken belief that the world is how we imagine it, and not as it is in reality (Archer 2003, 207). However, whilst the world in which the naïve person moves may be opposed to their own conceptions of it, this does mean that it is, in itself,

something right and true. One who affirms the idea of wishful thinking serves only to justify the punishment of those mad enough to believe that the world could be different, and to sympathise with those who benefit from such punishment. It is no coincidence that Don Quixote receives his most sadistic humiliation at the hands of the nobility.

Benjamin once described the state as possessing a 'monopoly on violence' (Benjamin 2004, 239). A direct consequence of this is an equal monopoly on time. This monopoly is two-fold and involves both demarcating the social roles available and the subjective conditions of those who occupy them, and in dictating the narratives with which any crisis within those roles is explained. Actions orientated towards economic recovery focus themselves equally on fixing the ontological gap experienced in times of financial crisis and on re-establishing a universal narrative between both subjects and objects; a narrative that does not belong to either of them. In the UK one saw this process working explicitly in the discursive domestication of the London Riots of 2011. The reaction of the media and political mainstream served to either condemn what took place or to provide a liberal framework of justification for the actions.⁴ Actions which interrupt the expected temporality of capital accumulation must be re-appropriated into its structure, both through a narrative and a legal pro-

cess of punishment based on the grounds of individual responsibility. However, before any retroactive justification takes place, I would argue that acts that necessitate this reaction are essentially melancholic in nature. They represent a negation of the expected behaviour of actors who occupy a minimal social role, not by a slow burning change in a society's normative ground, but by a violent rupture in its time-frame. It is at these historical moments that the appropriative elements of the state come into full view.

It is also at these moments when the potential for something new emerges. In early March 2012 Cambridge University invited ex-head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss Kahn, to speak at their student union on the subject of economic recovery. Outside approximately two hundred protestors gathered demonstrating against the speaker's on-going involvement in allegations of sexual assault. As the evening proceeded, women began to come forward from the crowd and share stories of surviving rape. Individuals emerged from the crowd, told their stories and returned to tears of solidarity from complete strangers. One independent blogger described the atmosphere as such: 'We sustain one another, we create a vocabulary for our experiences, a discourse where we get to tell our own stories, and no one else can tell us what they mean.'⁵ These experiences exist outside of the time of

narrative appropriation; they maintain a melancholic negation and singularity achieved through, as much as is possible, the refusal of the social world's sedimented discourses. It is this phenomenon of stepping outside, via the paradoxical act of negation, of prevailing time frames that presents an intimation of something approaching the ground for a positive subject. To affirm this positivity outside of these demarcations is to affirm the conditions that make such a stepping outside necessary.

A piece from the string of university occupations in California declared itself to be a 'Communique from an Absent Future' (After the Fall 2009). This is wrong. The future is not absent, but it is estranged. This is not a time stream from which anyone may 'opt out,' precisely because it exists tangentially to the subject. But it is one that one may act against. In the words of another recent publication:

A revolutionary time form, a time away from time as we know it, cannot be understood in anything other than negative terms...It is not exhaustion and industry, but neither is it free time and leisure in the current ways in which those are understood...Time must be interrupted by us. Not Eden, not Heaven. NOW' (Escalate, 63).

Time, as a reified quantity, cannot be taken as a defining aspect of a meaningful autonomy because it is a time that can always be cut short; a freedom in chains. Rather,

the subject, if it is to mean anything at all, must stick fast to its own potential for negativity. At a time when statements regarding the universal reification of life impress one with their empirical verifiability rather than their rhetoric, such an aggressive fidelity could hardly be more vital.

Endnotes

¹ See Alexandra Topping (2011). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/oct/19/dale-farm-eviction-police-taser>.

² See John Elster (1985) *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*.

³ See Helena Smith (2012). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/04/greek-man-shoots-himself-debts>.

⁴ For an example of an article which manages to do both, see Mary Riddell (2011). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/8630533/Riots-the-underclass-lashes-out.html>.

⁵ See Elly (2012). <http://www.gender-agenda.org.uk/discuss/931/breaking-silence-breaching-the-peace/>.

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