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Melancholy in Art History: Mourning or Nostalgia?

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The article reflects some aspects of a wider work dealing with notion of melancholy used in contemporary art history. Starting with the study of historiography of the engraving Melencolia I by Albrecht Dürer, the author came to know that the notion of melancholy itself became an often used trope in contemporary theory. Michael Ann Holly's controversial concept of art history as a melancholic discipline being the most vivid example of this application became the subject of this article. Her theory invokes several questions: what is the methodological basis of Holly's reasoning, are there any conceptual influences for her theory, and is it indeed melancholy and not anything else present in art historian's work. In answering these questions the author of this article refers to philosophy of history, namely to the works of Frank Ankersmit and Peter Fritzsche who conceptualize the notion of nostalgia in their writings. This context allows presenting a hypothesis that the tendency of the neighboring discipline could influence Holly's meditations and inspire her to use the similar trope in her field. By analyzing the effectiveness of Holly's employment of Freudian definition of melancholy, and appealing to the notion of nostalgia as it is theorized in philosophy of history, the author comes to the conclusion that Holly's "disciplinary melancholy" is actually of nostalgic origin.

Keywords: methodology of art history, melancholy, nostalgia.

The notion of melancholy that became spread in European Humanist culture in the Renaissance still has some respect in Humanities. It was first introduced in psychoanalytic theory in the article *Mourning and Melancholy* in 1915 by Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1957). Psychoanalysis, being closely related to medical science, has updated itself and replaced the term by the notion of clinical depression. However, art history deals with past epochs' cultural phenomena and it still employs the term belonging to the past times.

On the functioning of the notion of melancholy throughout cultural history, Juliana

Schiesari briefly and precisely describes it as "inaugurated by the Renaissance, refined by the Enlightenment, flaunted by Romanticism, fetishized by the Decadents and theorized by Freud" (Schiesari, 1992). And "resuscitated in postmodern critical theory" – adds art historian and historiographer Michael Ann Holly. She takes the resuscitated notion in hands to describe the peculiarity of the whole discipline of art history (Holly, 2007).

Holly starts in 2002 with the article *Mourning and Method* where, basing her argument on Freud's definition of melancholy, she claims that art

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history is a melancholic discipline (Holly, 2002). Later, she develops her ideas in *The Melancholy Art* of 2007 (Holly, 2007). In the latter, the range of psychoanalytic theory broadens, but there is not so much of certitude about the melancholic nature of art history anymore. The analysis of Holly's reasoning in those two articles seems to make possible to define the real nature of these "melancholic thoughts" and this is the aim of this paper.

It is essential to start with the psychoanalytical basis of Holly's meditations, namely Freud's definition of melancholy. In *Mourning and Melancholy* he claims that the starting point for the development of both mourning and melancholy is the loss of a loved object, but different ways of experiencing this loss makes "mourning" a natural state and "melancholy" a pathological one. In mourning, the subject recognizes his loss and is capable to overcome the circumstances of his mourning. On the other hand, in melancholy the subject is not capable to recognize his loss (and if the loss really occurred), which prevents him from recovery. An individual in mourning, who realizes the loss of the object of love, experiences the emptiness of the world surrounding him. But for a melancholic person, for whom sometimes ego is identified with the lost object, it is his *self* that becomes empty, making his mourning unresolved, keeping his "psychological wound open" (Freud, 1957).

The notion of loss is crucial in Holly's reasoning. She considers art history as a subject suffering of melancholy, and consequently, a loss, which is subconsciously lived through, the lost meanings of art works. They were part of the past, where they served a certain duty, but they are not there any more. For Holly, "The distance between present and past, the gap between words and images" is the representation of Freud's "open wound" (Holly, 2002). In this case loss does not belong to the subject itself (which can

be art history or an art historian); it belongs to the object (I mean the art work). This claim seems to contradict the psychoanalytic definition of melancholy, but it gives us an original concept. What are these "distance between present and past" and "gap between words and images" for an art historian? They are the space opened for historian's interpretations. So, it appears that Holly equates interpretation and loss. And if the essence of art history is lost, as according to Michael Holly than art history is a melancholic state indeed. Unlike the Nietzschean beast that lives "unhistorically", "feeling neither melancholy nor satiety" Holly's art historian experiences "institutional melancholy" due to his lack of "objective meanings to make contemporary words say something definite about historical images" (Nietzsche, 1957; Holly, 2002).

At the same time Holly has doubts on whether it is melancholy or mourning that art history really experiences. She claims that "deeply philosophical recognition of *loss*" is "functioning almost as the latent *unconscious* of the discipline". And according to Freud, it is *unconscious* experience of *loss* that makes melancholy differ from mourning (Holly, 2002). However, the other example of art historian's loss that Holly suggests is not speaking in favor of melancholy anymore. She recalls Kant, who, speaking about the "four moments of taste", claims that aesthetic judgment must be devoid of all interest (Kant, 1952). Therefore, Holly concludes, art historians "suffer the most primal loss of all, the pure experience of beauty" (Holly, 2002). But in this case the loss is comprehended by the subject; the art historian completely realizes that he is experiencing a certain kind of loss. In this manner, it seems that we are dealing with mourning not melancholy.

Holly acknowledges her doubts about the distinction between the two, and claims with certainty that it is not the third one – nostalgia –

because the latter “is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups and nations” (Boym, 2001). However in this paper I intend to show that it is exactly nostalgia that Michael Holly is calling melancholy in trying to create her own historiographic concept.

One of the quotations used by Holly to support her reasoning about melancholy, belongs to one of the founders of art history, Johann Joachim Winkelmann: “[We] have... nothing but the shadowy outline left of the object of our wishes, but that very indistinctness awakens only a more earnest longing for what we have lost... we must not shrink from seeking after the truth, even though its discovery wounds our self-esteem.” (Winkelmann, 1968) In this sentence we indeed find the key notions of psychoanalytic understanding of melancholy: the object of wishes, longing, and loss. However these notions can be applied to nostalgia as well: in both cases the subject is experiencing longing or mourning which is caused by loss. In the case of melancholy it is the loss of the object of desire or the ego itself. In the case of nostalgia, it is the loss of homeland, more precisely, the ideal image of homeland that the subject has in his mind and which is no longer physically accessible to him.

The concept of nostalgia became spread exactly at Winkelmann’s (1717-1768) time. The term was introduced by Johannes Hofer, a medical student, in his dissertation of 1688, to describe the longing for homeland experienced by Swiss mercenaries in France. Jean-Jacque Rousseau in his music dictionary of 1767 claimed that Swiss mercenaries were severely punished for singing their Swiss songs, and this claim made nostalgia the topos of Romantic literature.

Winkelmann dealt with the art of classical antiquity, art works that were partly lost, hence the notion of loss was initially inherent to the art work. As the art of ancient Greece for Winkelmann

was the prototype of all the following art, its ideal origin, the ancient Greece can be called the homeland of the classical art. That is why there is so much of nostalgia in Winkelmann’s dealing with it. But as this ideal norm is also to be achieved, his nostalgia has a second direction – towards the future (Wallenstein, 2011).

Thus, if we rely on Winkelmann’s work, the lost object of desire, which awakens nostalgia, is being an ideal example, absolute. Canadian philologist Linda Hutcheon says that the decline of the formal value systems in Western culture starting with postmodern time is the cause of nostalgia for the absolute (Hutcheon, 2000). In her case she means general dissatisfaction with the culture of the present which results in idealizing of the past in both high art and mass culture. In my opinion humanities can not be separated from culture and are influenced by the cultural tendencies, thus we can speak about “nostalgia for the absolute” in this field as well.

Michael Ann Holly’s writings seem to be nostalgic, grieving for big methods in art history. It can be author’s intention to transform this nostalgia into the “melancholy in art history” concept, or this transformation can be hidden from the author herself. Her writings seem to be in accordance to Winkelmann’s nostalgia, which is directed not only into the past but also towards the future, because supposedly the objects of desire of any art historian are a flawless method and a most accurate interpretation (the ones that should be achieved).

Historian Peter Fritzsche defines nostalgia as the “symptom of erratic cultural stress due to social complexity and rapid change” – it is the state inherent in individuals as a consequence of radical changes in the country (Fritzsche, 1991; Fritzsche is writing about..., 1987-1988). If we divert from the sociologic understanding of this term, and substitute the notion of the country by the notion of the discipline and the notion

of social status by the notion of the method employed within this discipline, then we can see that Michael Ann Holly's melancholic moods are actually symptoms of nostalgia.

According to Peter Fritzsche and his colleague Frank Ankersmit, nostalgia is a conceptual tool for revealing the meaning of the experience of the past, therefore I assume it is nostalgia that lies beneath the studies in historiography, allowing us to comprehend the past methods of the discipline (Fritzsche, 1994). Ankersmit claims that through the nostalgic experience we come to know not the past itself but the difference and the distance between present and past (Ankersmit, 2005). That is exactly what historiography does, drawing the differences of methods through the history of the discipline. And thus I conclude that the reason for Michael Ann Holly to find the symptoms of melancholy throughout the

history of art history is actually a nostalgic feeling inherent in this endeavor.

Why it is so important whether the art historian's writing is melancholic or nostalgic? Opposing two abstract notions and finding arguments for each of them shows the possibility of the discipline to easily change concepts and to be a fiction, to some extent. For some, this situation might remind what Hans Belting described in *The End of the History of Art?* (Belting, 1987) as the loss of the practical value of interpretational instruments of art history or when art historian's writing becomes an end in itself. But to my mind, such a play with abstract notions in the theory of art history allows the discipline to be considered as an art itself, the Melancholy Art, as Michael Ann Holly puts it, or simply the Art of Art History (remembering Donald Preziosi's anthology of the most influential art history writing) (Preziosi, 2009).

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Меланхолия в истории искусства: скорбь или ностальгия?

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Статья отражает некоторые аспекты более широкой работы о понятии меланхолии, используемом в современной истории искусства. Начав с исследования историографии гравюры «Меланхолия I» Альбрехта Дюрера, автор обнаружил, что само понятие меланхолии стало часто используемым тропом в современной теории. Наиболее яркий пример того – противоречивая концепция Майкл Энн Холли истории искусства как меланхолической дисциплины – стал предметом данной статьи. Теория Холли вызывает несколько вопросов: какова методологическая основа ее рассуждений, есть ли какие-либо концепции, оказавшие влияние на ее теорию, и действительно ли это меланхолия, а не что-либо другое, присущее истории искусства. Отвечая на эти вопросы, автор данной статьи обращается к философии истории, а именно, работам Франка Анкерсмита и Питера Фрицше, которые концептуализировали понятие ностальгии в своих исследованиях. Этот контекст позволяет представить гипотезу о том, что тенденции соседней дисциплины могли оказать влияние на рассуждения Холли и вдохновить ее на использование похожего тропа в собственной области. Анализируя эффективность использования Холли фрейдистского определения меланхолии и обращаясь к понятию ностальгии в том виде, как оно разработано философией истории, автор приходит к заключению, что происхождение меланхолии дисциплины Холли в действительности ностальгическое.

Ключевые слова: методология истории искусства, меланхолия, ностальгия.
