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Visual Forms and the Therapeutic Medium of Melancholy[1]

Abstract

Considering artworks' socio-political framework, we explore the therapeutic use of visual artworks to relieve a melancholic condition. The transformative effects of aesthetic artifacts are evident in Durer's work, intersecting physiological, religious, and political elements in a program for self-knowledge and redemption. We will see that what is proposed is not a simple emulation of the means of *curatio verbi* but the sketching of a specific semiosis, providing perception with an autonomous pathway for self-transformation.

Keywords

Melancholy, Therapeutic Medium, Albrecht Dürer, Art System, Visual Semiotics

Preliminary Notes

Drawing on the history of melancholy, in the present paper, I propose to understand how the pictorial forms of particular works of art were integrated as autonomous elements of the therapeutic medium. I argue that, for this to be possible, a path of self-transformation independent of verbal forms of therapy and relying upon the specific potential of visual forms had to be envisioned and created.

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Before proceeding, two presuppositions require revision. The first is the alleged linearity of therapeutic treatment, a common assumption deeply entrenched in our time, which is disproved by a paradox. Instead of relying on suppressing symptoms, therapy summons painful passions to proceed with their treatment. The second states that the success of the artwork's purported therapeutic valences would depend on the artist's ability to influence an audience directly. In this case, it is crucial to understand whether a piece of art was created with a therapeutic purpose in mind and, if so, whether that purpose necessitates a strict reading or interpretation for it to be effective. It is also necessary to clarify whether, given the context of its reception and the appropriate interpretative guidelines, the therapeutic potential of the original art piece survives its reproductions in identical or different media, considering the properties attributed to it, its singularity, and history. If that is not the case, then an artwork must be present for its therapeutic meaning to be understood, though this may be conceivable with a complete revision of the model of the emanation of properties given to the aesthetic artifact by its creator.

Art History and the Accommodation of Loss

According to J. Pigeaud, experts have engaged in abstract discussions concerning the date and style of creations but remained inattentive to how they relate to the generativity of nature. This inattention is all the more evident in the case of "melancholia," a substance inserted in a dense network of cosmic remissions which, according to the classical scheme Mundus-Annus-Homo,[2] translated into a distinct temperament associated with a particular astrological sign, a season and a life phase. Should this diagnosis of faulty imagination affecting philologists, destitute of the reverie required to enliven the letters of the past,[3] and their insertion into a cosmic and social worldview, be extended to art historians?

M. Ann Holly's "Mourning and Method" (2002),[4] a reflection on the loss inherent in art history, echoes Pigeaud's concerns. In light of Warburg's ostensive approach to visual works,[5] Holly attributes this state, which is "easier

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[2] For a presentation of the humoralist worldview and its immense body of medical and philosophical knowledge, see my study on Burton and the Conimbricencis (Carvalho 2021).

[3] "Le drame fut que cette littérature, si longtemps dynamique (…) se voit capturer par la classe non rêveuse des philologues modernes" (Pigeaud 1995, 8).

[4] Latter included in *The Melancholy Art* (2013).

[5] So influential in Baxandall (e.g. 1985, 8-11).

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to feel than to define," to the constitutive binaries of the discipline: present–past; word–image. Confronting the melancholic nature of her *métier*, she evaluates to what extent an author's intentions can be known by taking into account their biographical, social, and theoretical context and in what sense may that be decisive in asserting the value of a given work (representative, aesthetic, therapeutic).

That melancholic feeling plays a vital role in art history, being the consequence of the displacement of artworks from their original context and purpose. This discussion over the original meaning of "old objects that continue to exist materially in the present, but whose once noisy and busy existence has long since been silenced" (Holly 2013, 98) has intrinsic affinities with the goals of Rancière's "aesthetics of knowledge" (2009b, 15-16). However, unlike Holly, whose "disciplinary yearning" (2013, 16) remains trapped in a self-enclosed tension between the urge to enliven the artistic object and the institutional requirements of critical distance, the French author advises against the restrictive interpretations of artworks.[6]

To assess the early modern creation of visual forms conceived to relieve melancholic burdens, we must reject watertight disciplinary boundaries between the history of ideas, medical anthropology, and art history. Our perspective attends to Didi-Huberman's call for inserting the image artifacts "within the limits of the simple practice," recognizing their original context and avoiding the imposition of anachronistic categories (2005, 12-52). As we shall see in Albrecht Dürer's work, this necessitates acknowledging the complex context that presided over the differentiation of modern society's art system, a time when its grammar and objectives were heavily influenced by religious and medical discourses, which were frequently at odds with one another. I contend that this does not imply a disregard for the aesthetic qualities of works of art—quite the opposite. Following Sloterdijk (2004, 450ff), we can contend that art's potential is renewed through its insertion into a more extensive network of therapeutic institutions.

The emergence of the therapeutic role of art in the Renaissance takes place within the framework of the contestation of medicine as the sole source for treating infirmities, particularly those affecting the mind. Beyond the technical insufficiency of medical interventions expressed in jocular rep-

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[6] "To speak of an aesthetics of knowledge thus is not an occasion to get closer to the sensuous experience. It is an instance to speak of that silent battle, to restage the context of the war (…). In order to do so, an aesthetics of knowledge must practice a certain ignorance. It must ignore disciplinary boundaries in order to restore their status as weapons in a struggle" (Rancière 2009b, 17).

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resentations of lithotomy,[7] this questioning of medical methods and theories is driven by the appearance of new paradoxical symptoms. This situation is the case with religious "ancias" (Serrado 2014, 160-172) and the liberating suffering or the "beloved prison" of *amore heroico*, respectively, the religious and loving variants of melancholy.[8] Although medical descriptors and semantics shape these, they both resist medicalization.

The therapeutic recourse to the musical[9] and visual arts[10] has firm roots in the medieval period. One of the novelties of early modern art is the resort to visual *signifiers that become increasingly autonomous in relation to the linguistic codification of knowledge*, even though those signifiers remain anchored in the Christian worldview, whose congruence was increasingly threatened.

As it will become apparent, our approach has affinities with the so-called cognitive turn in visual semiotics (Dondero 2020, 15-45), but it provides more attention to the social semantics grounding the composition of visual artworks with therapeutic purposes. Religious and medical perspectives traverse these frequently incongruent and conflicting works. This conflict is all the more noticeable concerning the understanding of human perception and cognition where the emerging materialist view of the soul was under religious scrutiny, and the normative goals of medical intervention, with competing views of proper health as being equivalent to either bodily equilibrium or spiritual realization of the *salus animae.*[11]

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[7] Particularly following Hieronymus Bosch's *The Cure of Folly*, also called *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, completed around 1494. On the meaning of renaissance representations of brain surgery, see e.g.: Gross 2009, 119-129.

[8] The differential diagnosis of love and religious melancholy was introduced in the west by Constantinus Africanus's *Viaticum* and will achieve its exhaustive conceptualization in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

[9] Echoing its praises in ancient philosophy, in *De Medicina*, Celsus commended music's ability to relieve melancholic thoughts (III.18.10). This perspective will be renewed in the eleventh-century, with Constantinus' influential *De melancholia*, and, in the late fifteenth-century, with Ficino's program for combining musical harmonies and enchanted words to attract the cosmic *spiritus* able to restore one's health.

[10] Supported in the healing power of sacred artifacts, as it occurs with iconic images (e.g.: Goffen 1975) and the inscription of Christ's passion in one's memory (Belting 1998). The recognition of the benefits of images, especially in conveying divine mystery to the unlearned devout, lead to various attempts to revise their biblical interdiction (Carruthers 1998, 206ff).

[11] The health and salvation of the soul were promoted by the publication of small-sized prayer books with religious evocative illustrations. The inclusion of Dürer's works in one of these Salus animae published in Nuremberg in 1503, or even its authorship, is still under discussion (e.g. Cerkovnik 2019).

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Beyond *Curatio verbi*

Since time immemorial, visual artifacts have been used to understand and control human surroundings. This matrix would develop in the magical-religious sphere as a form of reparation or favor, calling upon natural or divine forces. According to Pigeaud (1995, 20-26), the power of the image evoked by the word, the ancient mode of *ekphrasis* engaged in the logic of the living, has as its first known occurrence the narration of the composition of Achilles' shield as "a wonder to behold" [θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι] (*Iliad* XVIII, 84) relieving the loss of a dear friend. Classical rhetoric will conceive of the linguistic evocation of *imagines* as a privileged way of arousing and influencing the soul's passions since it "affected the imagination with particular immediacy and power" (Gowland 2012, 13).

In Aristotle's natural philosophy, the melancholic is presented as profoundly affected by the sensory images, cause for their agitated imagination as expressed in vivid and premonitory dreams. Along with the role of *phantasia* as the basis "for an abatement attached to a single representation, without fever" (Pigeaud 1984, 503), Areatheus seems to be the first author to reflect upon the metaphoric nature of the *melaina cholé* (Pigeaud 2004, 187-192), paving the way for the transition from the darkness of the physiological humor to that of writing (and painting) ink. This connection is explicitly explored in Chapter 10 of Campanella's *Del senso delle cose* (1604). Through this metaphorical transposition, the transformative qualities ascribed to black bile in Aristotle's Problem XXX.I are both preserved and magnified. The black bile, similar to iron, oscillates between its dry-cold natural state and extreme heat under specific conditions, thus amplifying its significance and impact. It is the first ground of the evolving representations of melancholy as an intellectual concept with its contagious potential (Starobinski 2012, 24 ff.). At the same time, attached to the Hippocratic affections of "fear and sadness" as distinctive of melancholic unbalance, emphasizing the inner faculty of imagination allowed for a broader spectrum of affective expressions, reinforcing its classification as the most philosophical mental conditions. This case was also the grounding for a conceptual intersection between the medical and the philosophical concepts of "disposition," inserted in their respective ways of care for the self.

Melancholy refers to a certain temperament or acquired disposition involving excess or degradation of the black bile (*diathesis*), with the depletion of animal spirits,[12] but also a self-referential affection of sorrow, frequently

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[12] See, in relation to Burton's work, Carvalho 2019a, 116-132.

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associated with the loss of someone (or something) at the individual's core. The expressive necessity of nature characterizing medical humoralism will mold its devising of proper ways of treatment, resorting to the distinction between the naturals and the non-naturals, as defined by Galen, as decisive to induce therapeutic change. While the natural balance of individual constitution may be restored through the attunement with the healing power of certain airs and places, the "non-naturals" involve the consideration of the lifestyle and habits of the subject, correcting activities that may damage the quality of animal spirits. Among the non-naturals, the passions of the soul, mainly due to their imaginative grounds, assumed increasing importance as a way to re-establish one's health. Their integration into the larger framework of the care of the self was significantly transformed by the philosophical conceptualization and consolation of *taedium vitae* and the imposition of the Christian conception of virtue, both requiring deeper forms of self-examination.

The individual pursuit of a redemptive way may coincide with bodily health and earthly fortune, but it tends to exceed it. Indicative of the anxieties that pervade early modern Europe's mentality, its medical treatments are saturated with religious assumptions and symbols. Nevertheless, the organization of the cosmos according to the four classical humors: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm, crystallized in human characters identified with a given temperament expresses highly anthropomorphized natural potencies that have been challenging to harmonize with a Christian view of transcendence, particularly as this, in the Augustine tradition, depends on the inner dialogue of the soul. However, the ancient mythical worldview, particularly in the case of melancholy and its association with Saturn's tragic fate, left an indelible mark on medieval and early modern societies. The end of crops and the freezing of vegetative growth, social and natural counterparts of the liturgical calendar, refer to a period of decay and messianic renewal, retained in the duality underlying the late medieval rehabilitation of Saturn (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl 1964, 204-219). Along with his representation as wicked and meager, Saturn emerges as the God of contemplation, promising to break the endless circle of creation and destruction that characterizes the natural world according to the principles of love and strife sketched by Empedocles. In that sense, it personified a feeling of anxiety that, since the dawn of times, has instilled the search for something beyond[13] or to come.[14]

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[13] "We bathe ourselves in the melancholy of nature, always already weeping, always already inconsolable. One understands why the gnostic would want to uproot himself

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In the late medieval period, the visual arts were increasingly integrated into religious practices and rituals, assuming curative, redemptive, and palliative vocations and calling for meditation and self-examination, often based on the allegorical interpretation of the scriptures but also everyday existential conditions. Visual imagery and paintings provided dynamic frames for practices of meditation and self-examination (Enenkel 2011). This overflowing of the aesthetic ideal was rooted in a strong homology between the narrative and the figurative (Praz 1979), in a process where the pictorial forms were molded by the *curatio verbi*, *i.e.,* by the rhetorical means to instill a putative reader or listener with a beneficial new perspective on themselves and the world. An example of this, inserted in a long list of paintings with canonical themes related to salvation, is the *Spiegel der Vernunft* (ca. 1488), which, interpellating the individual viewer with words and pictorial symbols, calls for identification with the central figure of the traveler, the *homo viator* confronted with his finitude (Pezzoli-Olgiati 2014, 112-117). Some of these artworks were integrated into church hospices, especially in the palliative areas, testifying to the religious assimilation of the medical approach (see: Puff 2010, 125-129).

Painting has played a crucial role in bringing biblical texts and hagiographic episodes to life. Through the use of vibrant imagery, artists have personified assumptions and beliefs, invoking a range of emotions and fostering a deeper connection between viewers and the characters depicted in familiar narratives. The ability of painting to elicit deep emotions and facilitate viewer identification extends to its potential therapeutic purposes. An example of this can be found in early depictions of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Matthias Grünewald's renowned painting of this Christian saint, featured in the Altarpiece (ca. 1512-1516) at the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, served as an initial viewing experience for patients from a hospice dedicated to treating afflictions such as ergotism, commonly referred to as "St. Anthony's Fire." This connection between the patients and the depicted scenes demonstrates how art could be employed as a means of offering solace and healing (Hayum 1989, 13-52, 118ff).

Despite the recognition of the power of images, the eminent model for regulating passions continued to be the verbal one, whether through the confessional route, "civil conversation," or biographical examining of one's

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from this world which, in its very being, is impassioned, and would want to flee 'anywhere out of the world'" (Chrétien 2014, 160).

[14] See Eric Zafran's (1979) classical study on the relation between Saturn and Jewish Messiah.

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time, appealing to the stoical route of rational inspection of inclinations and habits. The reluctance to deal with the passions involved in politics is recurrent, but this contemplative standpoint is countered by Stoic and Aristotelian moral philosophy, which underlined the role of the social bond as a natural duty (*oikeosis*). Rooted in earlier humanist values, sixteenth-century humanist culture will praise the benefits of friendship in relieving melancholy.

Philosophy would renew rhetorical forms of exhortation aimed at repentance and self-exam that could complement the vast battery of physical interventions aiming to restate humoral balance, mostly through purges and bloodletting.

In early modern Europe, the artists and *litterati*, i.e., those aiming at the limits of reason under demanding and increasingly precarious conditions, were considered more disposed to melancholic illnesses. In his *Trattato della nobiltà della pittura* (1585), Alberti notes that due to their prolonged efforts in retaining images, abstracting them from matter, visual artists are more prone to melancholy (Hersant 2010, 24), and in that sense, they must take preventive measures to manage their emotions. Therefore, it is not surprising that, even when commissioned, art images frequently serve therapeutic and redemptive purposes for the artists.

Melancholy is not magically projected onto the canvas. The artist's imaginative activity mediates its inscription. The decisive question will be if (and how) the regulation of this faculty, operating between the external and internal senses, can produce a kind of "melancholia generosa" or even explore its grimmer tonalities to bring relief to the author and viewers.

The search for the attunement with the potencies of the great chain of being, according to one's temperament, the use of talismans that attract cosmic potencies, and the resort to the extraordinary powers of natural products (electuaries) are part of the great cabinet of melancholy. They were frequently viewed with suspicion and sometimes targeted with charges of heresy.[15] However, at the same time, they are far too promising to be discarded. Following Ficino and Agrippa, we find various elements in Dürer's painting.

Leading the medieval worldview to its zenith, we address the image not as a psychological category but as the mediator between the physical and the spiritual. Nevertheless, this mediation can only become effective through an exercise that involves a transformation of the viewer's sensitivity, relying on his selection of the relevant elements of the image. The imposition of

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[15] See e.g.: Carvalho 2019b, 342-346.

an ordered sequence of perception and reflection is the dynamic application of intention aiming for an inner transformation in relation to the cosmos. In this sense, since it concerns the principles and causes of movements, the intrinsic relations between *dynamis* and *energeia* as the origin of forms, this mediation is a part of physics in the Aristotelian sense. Irreducible to the scientific study of the elements of the universe in its ancient and medieval forms, the understanding of the generativity of nature summons the imaginative potential of dreams. Instead of a coincidence between the object to be perceived and the organs of perception, the experience depends on a medium where things appear (*De Anima*, 419a). This medium tends to reinforce the homology between words and images, or at least to explore the undetermined space of their difference, but the construction of an independent pathway of visual perception, primarily through pictorial forms, is also possible.

This possibility promises a transition from the primacy of humors, physiological fluids following their pre-established ways of cosmic expression, into an aesthetic framework where imagination is the primary operator in addressing and improving one's state. In this sense, by emancipating wonder from its natural and divine sources, assuming the uncertainty of freedom, the modern artist fully assumes his ingenious role. This assumption comes with a heavy social price since the patronage system restricts independent affirmation of creativity, and authors such as Dürer had to affirm themselves as entrepreneurs.

In the act of seeing, analogous to rhetorical *speculatio*, the constitutive oppositions of man, firstly corporal vs. spiritual, come to establish a productive relation, called as they are to participate in a collective experience of revelation where they become actual (Merback 2017, 70-77). Instead of coinciding, petrified by an ultimate interpretation, they are continuously propelled to discovery.

The impoverishment of the imaginary that characterizes contemporary depressive disorders contrasts with the exuberance of inner images accompanying much of its ancient and early modern depictions. A similar contrast divides *acedia* and melancholy since the latter maintains its connection with something constitutive for which one strives. As a state of altered consciousness, melancholy was close to inebriation and dreaming, establishing a means to react and confront inhibitions instead of avoiding conflict. Contrasting with the other classical mental illnesses, phrenesis and mania, characterized by the suspension of cognitive faculties, in melancholy, the loss of someone (or something) one holds dear is frequently accompanied by a sense of

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"heightened self-awareness" (Klibansky, Panofsky, Saxl 1964, 228-240). According to the need to prevent the damaging effects of unrestrained imagination, in the visual form of cure, the tonic will not be so much on the need to stimulate imagination, as we may assume from our contemporary understanding of melancholy, but on regulating its obsessive and enthusiastic fixations, proper of the main variants of melancholy.

On Dürer's Therapeutic Program

Dürer stands at the threshold, navigating between employing imagery that evokes the restoration of the *vinculum mundi* and pioneering the development of innovative techniques for representation and visualization. These conditions enable an exploration of the faculties of perception, fostering a deeper understanding of subjectivity and strengthening one's character. In this context, Dürer's artistic approach combines elements of traditional symbolism with advancements that facilitate the depiction and interpretation of subjective experiences. He was deeply influenced by the tradition of landscape painting that appeals to identification with the tribulations of the central characters, which can be seen, for example, in the anagogic images representing John Climacus's *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (*Scala Paradisi*) or the temptations of Anthony the Great, usually complementing a hagiographic narrative, sometimes figured sequentially. However, he goes beyond exploring the potential of devotional images described by Warburg as *Pathosformel* and votive images, involving the conception and use of talismans advocated by Ficino.

In his *Perfection's Therapy*, M. Merback (2017) showed that Dürer elevated the therapeutic use of the image to a transformative program that, within the religious horizon of redemption, adapts aspects of current medical theories of cognition to promote certain dispositions and evidence essential to the examination of consciousness. In that sense, the meditative pictures will be released from their iconographic conventions, opening to reception and exploring their "symptoms and traces of a mystery" (Didi-Huberman 2005, 52).

Dürer will propose his therapeutic project within the "Maximilianische Humanistenkreis," a group of scholars, poets, and artists who frequently gathered in Willibald Pirckheimer's house to celebrate the humanist ideals of friendship. Interestingly, to this end, he would assert the curative autonomy of painting in a foreign medium. In poems that some of his colleagues considered too crude: "Not only writing will I do, / But learn to practice

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physic too; / Till men surprised will say, "Beshrew me / What good this painter's medicines do me!" / Therefore hear and I will tell / Some wise receipts to keep you well" (Heaton 1881, 272; Merback 2017, 224-228).

Foreshadowing the discussion regarding the specificities and value of painting vis-à-vis the poetic arts, Dürer provides an autonomous perceptual *ductus* that exploits the specificity of the figurative medium. This exploitation occurs not only via the determination and transformation of the self-image, already evident in his early self-portraits, aiming to attract fertility and resistance to adversity (Koerner 1993, 31; Merback 2017, 204-211), but also by inviting a transformative viewing of his Denkbilder.

Composed in a period of grief, after the death of Dürer's friends and especially of his mother in 1514, according to Panofsky (1955, 171), *Melencolia I* proposes and combines an esoteric and a programmatic way. It is an example of the abandonment not only of the scientific[16] but also the evocative or allegorical representations of melancholy, for one that compels a recursive exercise driven by contrasts: darkness–light; finite–infinite; temporal–eternal; eastern–western; measurable–immeasurable; visible–invisible.

In the "image of images," we can find the development of a programmatic application of the therapeutic properties of art, based on the artist and spectator being summoned to exercises of the sensitive and intellectual soul. At stake is not a complete revision of the passive sensitivity of the classical theory of the faculties. Dürer proposes an exploratory way of attunement which, while waiving an ultimate ground in the form of *mathesis universalis,* remains spiritually open. In Koerner's words (2004, 142): "Dürer recognized that pictures are, at best, mediators, affecting without determining what their viewers see in them."

Concerning Ficino's influence on the composition of *Melencolia I*, and the dramatization of the emulation of divine gifts (Anzelewsky 1983), K. Moxey noted that: "[t]he suggestion that Dürer's works are to be approached as learned allegories characterizes them as spiritual achievements." This achievement is substantiated by his works inviting interpretation, stirring compulsive attempts to determine (and close) their iconographic meaning. But at the same time, this attempt "removes them from the context of communal life so as to embed them more deeply in his personal consciousness" (2013, 158-159). This significant socioeconomic context, starting with the

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[16] "The first representation in which the concept of Melancholy was transplanted from the plane of scientific and pseudo-scientific folclore to the level of art" (Panofsky 1955, 170).

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commissioning of the artwork and its pragmatic insertion into contemporary practices, is decisive in understanding its aims and the material basis of its successful viewing (Didi-Huberman 2005, 52).

The generativity of pictures, i.e., the sequence of the signs and symbols that are interpreted in the observer's reading, is affected by the materiality of the artwork but also by the context of its presentation. This reading includes aspects like 1) the precise time and space of its display, 2) the conditions of access to its observation, and 3) the institutional setting of such activity. The proliferation of reproductive art techniques, along with increased accessibility and new modes of "consuming" artistic content, cannot fully eradicate the crucial aspect of establishing a sense of presence as an integral part of the quality of an experience. This notion is intertwined with the formation of instituted practices and rituals that govern the act of observation, further enhancing the depth and significance of the encounter. Despite advancements in technology and alternative means of engagement, the inherent value of being physically present and engaging in established traditions remains indispensable in shaping and enriching the overall artistic experience.

Melencolia I's semiosis

Since Dürer's masterpiece opens to multiple dimensions of the image, the relational, the spatial, and the temporal, this metaphoric potential, unfolded in each observation, can be considered in the light of Rancière's notion of "pensive image" (2009, 107-132). There are two main routes to such reading. One which points to the regimen of truth expressed by the image concerning the sociopolitical assumptions it conveys, even those outside the author's conscious intention or awareness. The other exceeds the characteristics and particular circumstances of the image, concerning its impact on the viewer, accounting for how his or her sensitivity, expectations, and goals, occasion inner resonances which cannot be thoroughly policed nor closed into a definitive meaning. The history of melancholy may be read in light of the frequent intersections of these paths as an inner disposition whose singular outlook and revelations, particularly those produced by the consumption of artworks, cannot be abstracted from their larger sociopolitical framework. At the same time, even in social conditions where effective action is restricted, art remains the stronghold to make sense of and share one's discontent, even where seclusion and precariousness seem overwhelming.

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   While the visual signs of Dürer's engraving are certainly part of a more
dense experience encompassing dimensions such as interpersonal frame-
work and the artwork's presence, we may say affirm this to be the more
accessible (also to us) aspect of such personal transformation.

   The paradigmatic shifters enable the composition of verbal communica-
tion and their semiotic interpretation regard the determination of persons,
time, and space, resorting to specific discursive categories: pronouns, verbs,
and adverbs (Dondero 2020, 24ff). The paradigmatic structure of visual
communication is based on different forms, particularly in autographic sys-
tems such as visual artworks, where the density of the signs obstructs a dif-
ferential reading, always demanding mediations. The circuit of the gaze
through the image is conditioned by salient points such as signs and inscrip-
tions, impacting their holistic perception and focused reading, both of which
can be molded by social mediation. These ways of seeing may be grounded
in the author's intention regarding the relationship between the subject or
themes of the artwork and the viewer, which could have been idealized as
a particular person or even a social group.

   A rigid characterization of pictorial markers as corresponding to verbal
categories would fail to acknowledge the specific power of the visual medium.
It would entrap the interpretation of the painting in a shallow containment
of its elements, stalling their dynamics. The evocative and metaphoric poten-
tial of images would also be unaccounted for by an objectivist perspective on
a painting dedicated to its correspondence with a particular person, time,
and space. This is clear in images subordinated to the theme of melancholy,
either due to their designation or presentation or by virtue of the specificity
of their icons. These are frequently marked by a dense grammar of refer-
ences, part of the scheme where man is the microcosm, subjected to various
levels of influence. Even in the quaternary scheme of the humors, those im-
ages are frequently invested with ambiguities, preventing a strict and de-
terminate reading. At the same time, and this is of great importance to the
present essay, the depiction of real-world environments opens a pathway to
internal inspection and correspondence, sometimes depicting interiority in
close affinity with the tradition of spiritual writings directed to erect and
reinforce the inner citadel.

   In *Melencolia I*, the over-abundance of elements next to the angelic figure
(supposedly) impersonating melancholy makes the vanishing point oscillate
towards the oneiric horizon where the signs to be resolved appear. Follow-
ing F. Yates's interpretation, the figure of the angel does not personify *acedia*
(as Panofsky thought), but perseverance in adversity, of not a saturnine im-

passe, but of an "intense visionary trance" (2001, 66), characteristic of the first phase of creation. As such, various elements are opened to an alternative signification, beginning with the dog, which, instead of depression, indicates the suspension of bodily appetites resulting from visionary absorption.

According to Merback, the angel's decentered gaze induces a perceptive movement of "open-ended kinesis" (2017, 51). It is a hydraulic conception of the higher and lower faculties that aims to heat the black bile, counteracting the coldness and dryness of its natural state but preventing *hybris,* an excessive agitation or exertion that would burn the finer animal spirits. It concerns a virtuous regime, indicated by the *arma Christi*, the balance, and the magic square, all concerning the correct administration of finite existence through the observance of religious liturgical rhythms, as expressed by the sundial, the bell, and the ever-present hourglass. Measurable time is allusive to communitarian and liturgical time, but also to inner duration, allowing us to abstract from the objectivity of the thinker's situation. Therefore, pictorial forms elicit a temporal sequence, requiring their revision of the strict division between spatial and temporal arts later popularized by Lessing (Antonova 2010, 5-28; Dondero 2020, 27-28).

The passage through the signs of chaos and threat compels a return to the capacity to attribute stable, virtuous forms. Peter-Klaus Schuster (2005) pointed to the decisive bipartition of *Melencolia I*, allowing us to equate the envisioned sequence and recursiveness of the pictorial forms in one's perception. The right side is marked by the signs of virtue, restoration, and self-referentiality, while the left part of the image displays the signs of the whims of fortune, the uncertain and dangerous: wave, flood, and mutability of the sphere, which challenge self-sufficiency. The elements on the right side transform to a brighter perspective: the angel's leanness indicates curiosity while the open compass represents creativity. The purse and keys, iconographically associated with the greed of a destitute Saturn, are now the promise of the reestablishing of order. Medical cures are also present, with a crown composed of watercress, known for its humidifying potential and used to counter the dryness of the melancholic complexion. To this horizontal partition, we must add the fragmentation between the lower and upper parts of Dürer's engraving. The lying objects obstruct the access to the staircase leading to the top of the tower, signifying a superior level which, with the current resources, remains out of reach.

In the economy of the gaze of classical paintings, we may generally contrast the depiction of third persons, such as occurs in characters appearing in profile, particularly in the representation of biblical episodes that, even in-

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spiring present rituals, happened in "another time and place," and the frontal view that concerns an action taking place here and now, between an I and a Thou. Significantly, Dürer seems to break the conventions regulating that economy. It presents a single figure that stares at an uncertain point in a skewed way, unbalancing the viewer's gaze. The angelic figure is physically accompanied by the *putto*, presumed to be an assistant to his measurements,[17] whose involvement in an action contrasts with the contemplative rapture of his master. If the estrangement of the figure, surrounded by objects and figures cut from its action, could pronounce a dialogue between the viewer and the angelic figure, this is short-circuited, forcing "a detour to self-reflection" (Koerner 1993, 13). Facing the *Vexierbild*, the viewer are left all by him or herself, a position that in modern therapeutic parlance requires (or convokes) a "negative capability" or "depressivity" of the viewer, addressed and immediately abandoned in an apparently inhospitable atmosphere, marked by imminent accidents and displaying precision tools that seem useless to control further calamities. The depth of the paintings generally presents different orders of time or a series of events taking place in a specific sequence. Here, the scenes of deluge and the comet's passing indicate upcoming catastrophes, foreshadowing tribulations, while their inscription seems to suggest the assumption of the divinatory attributions of the melancholic.

Its interpellation of the viewer's inner world is disquieting, particularly since, instead of providing a stable point, the eyes of the angel force the viewer to find reassurance or a point of equilibrium. The centrality and sturdiness of the polyhedron are countered by its evident instability, once again luring the viewer into a swirl of references rather than rescuing them from the worrisome situation. From then on, the viewer is also put in a perplexing situation similar to that of the angelic figure, which, at first glance, bears the classical symbols of the saturnine.

The beyond of salvation is outside the framework of the painting, announced in the firmament. This outside is also a break in perspective, which in classical paintings tends to delimit the space of events. The ladder leading to the upper side of the church tower symbolizes a transition to another realm, for which both the angelic figure and the viewer can only prepare once confronting the suffering and uncertainties of existence, the fortune. This acknowledgment can resort to the instruments of art and science, fre-

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[17] This interpretation is based on Dürer's sketches where the *putto* holds a sextant and a plumb line.

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quently intersecting in the revealing power of magic, but ultimately it will have to accept their limitations. The fact that the instruments of the liberal arts, mostly architecture, and geometry, are disposed along with those of the "arma christi" used in the crucifixion suggests the call for an attitude of humbleness.

Final remarks

Over the last decades, various visual media supports have been successfully integrated into therapeutic techniques and programs, exploring their aesthetic potential. Although the aesthetic value of recreational and therapeutic creation is disputable, these new programs have a respectable ascendancy that culminates in modernity, with the differentiation of art as a social system.

As material creations, images provide a mediation for one's viewing, forms that condition and orient perception, favoring the restoration of bodily equilibrium and redemption. At first, the primary distinction of the system of art [Leitdifferenz] remains congruent with its inner logic, embedding non-artistic forms from medicine (cure) and religion (salvation) (Luhmann 1995, 301-340). The fading of a methodical application of art as a therapeutic route is inseparable from an internal differentiation that suspends the subservience to the religious regime of visibility, with its worldview, practices, and elements originating in medical discourse. This difference is accompanied by changes "external" to the art system. In medicine, we see the farewell to the interactionist views that characterized the dominant humoralism and the gradual imposition of a mechanistic paradigm that tends to obliterate the reciprocal influence of mind and body (e.g., Radden 2017). The therapeutic application of visual artworks will also decline by virtue of their religious appropriation and dismantling, initiated in the late fifteenth century and aggravated by the reformist movement (Koerner 2004, 52-68).

This point does not mean the possible therapeutic application has been entirely suppressed, but it loses that programmatic impulse. Could this take place as a (non-linear) transformative reception within the framework of the autonomy of artistic grammar and the sovereignty of art?

Cutting art from nature's generative powers implied its distancing from Man's embodied nature (Sloterdijk 2014, 308). German Idealism and Romanticism attempted to restore the curative role of artworks, sometimes noting the decline of such a function (Koerner 2004, 29). Schelling, for instance, stressed that the healing potential of art can only become actual if it

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can mobilize the power of nature (Marquard 1973, 85ff). In line with Marquard's view (2003, 64-81), art would again be delegated with a compensatory function, potentiating the goals of medical and pastoral institutions, sometimes attenuating their shortcomings.

In Dürer's work, we may find a thoughtful expression of the power of images. Beyond the simple representation of melancholy and its therapy, he explores therapeutic properties elicited through viewing of the artwork. Beyond the integration between writing and the expressive potential of the image, the German artist posits the possibility of the image's autonomy towards the textual construction of meaning. This positioning will reintegrate symbols and conventional uses into a new program for the viewer's self-transformation.

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