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## Planet *Melancholia*: Romanticism, Mood, and Cinematic Ethics

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* is not only a remarkable study of depression, it offers a fascinating exploration of cinematic romanticism and the aesthetics of cinematic moods. With its peculiar fusion of Dogme-style melodrama and apocalyptic disaster movie, Schopenhauerian pessimism and German romanticism, Bergmanesque psychodrama and art cinema experimentation, *Melancholia* projects an enchanted cinematic world dedicated to the disenchanting idea of world-destruction. It presents a devastating portrait of melancholia, dramatizing the main character Justine's [Kirsten Dunst's] experience of a catastrophic "loss of world" that finds its objective correlative in a sublime cinematic fantasy of world-annihilation. In what follows, I analyse some of the aesthetic and philosophical strands of *Melancholia*, exploring its use of romanticism and of cinematic mood, and showing how different readings of the film – from cognitivist analyses to ecoaesthetic interpretations – are responding to its arresting evocation of mood. Von Trier explores not only the aesthetics of melancholia but its ethical dimensions, creating an art disaster movie whose sublime depiction of world-destruction has the paradoxical effect of revealing the fragility and finitude of life on Earth.

### Romanticism

*Melancholia*'s remarkable Overture consists of sixteen colour slow-motion shots, slowed to near stasis, creating an uncanny *tableaux vivant* effect, accompanied by the Wagner's *Vorspiel to Tristan and Isolde* (1859). The opening image is a close shot of a woman's face [Kirsten Dunst], her head slightly to the left of mid-screen, opening her eyes and gazing directly at the camera, her face pale, tired, blank. A moment later dead birds fall from the sky behind her, an apocalyptic sign in many mythologies of God's disapproval of the conduct of humankind. The second image depicts a symmetrically arranged front lawn, flanked by rows of trees, with a large sundial magnified in the foreground (reminiscent of Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1966)). In the background a tiny figure can be seen swinging a

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child around, like a tiny clock movement. Also striking are the dual shadows that the trees and other objects cast on the ground, anticipating the revelation of the planet Melancholia, its soft blue light rivalling the sun and the moon.

The third shot is of a painting, Pieter Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), showing a weary band of hunters and their dogs, cresting a hill and about to trudge home to their village, dormant in a small valley under a grey winter sky. Ashes appear in the front of the image, falling gently like snow, or like the dead birds, as the image slowly turns to flame. Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow* also features prominently in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) and in *Mirror* (1975). Von Trier's homage is thus twofold: to Brueghel's early modern depiction of the mood of melancholia and the spiritual vacuity of crass materialism (later we see Justine's advertising image of sprawling models, modelled on another Brueghel painting, *The Land of Cockaigne* (1567)); and to Tarkovsky's art cinema of the 1970s, to moving images now sacrificed, reduced to ash, a cinematic world consumed in the transition to post-classical digital imagery. The Prelude cuts to a cosmic image of an enormous blue planet slowly wending its way around a red or orange star. This image (and a later one) rhymes with the opening shot of Justine's head and face, thus drawing the visual parallel between the melancholic Justine and the planet Melancholia, a cosmic pre-figuration of the mood of impending doom and disaster.

The next shot is an oneiric portrait of Justine's sister, Claire [Charlotte Gainsbourg], clutching her son, and trying to make her way across the golf course, her boots sinking into the grassy ground. The image features a suspicious flag, the nineteenth hole, which refers, von Trier remarks, to limbo.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by an image of a black horse, Justine's beloved Abraham (recalling the many horses in Tarkovsky's films but also reversing Muybridge's classic study of animal motion), falling to the ground beneath a night sky glowing with northern lights. This is followed by an image of Justine standing in the golf course, arms outstretched like Christ, as moths dance around her (perhaps a biblical reference to a passage in Isaiah, referring to moths and mortality in the face of God's infinite power).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The golf course at which the wedding reception is to be held having only eighteen holes (as we will be told twice in the film).

<sup>2</sup> As Manohla Darghis remarks, the image could be a reference to Isaiah 51:8: "For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation." Manohla

A striking tableau vivant follows, one of the signature shots in the film. We see the gloomy castle at twilight, with the bride Justine, young Leo, and Claire, arrayed symmetrically on the lawn, barely moving, flanked by rows of trees. Twin sources of nocturnal light, Melancholia's *blaue Licht*, and the moon's eerie glow, lend the scene a strongly romantic cast, reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich. This cuts to another image of the planets in their *danse macabre*, the planet Melancholia, dwarfing the Earth, performing its teasing fly-by, followed by a shot of Justine, her hands slowly rising, electricity sparking from her fingertips and from the light poles behind her. The interaction between the planets, their mutual attraction, transfigures both nature and culture, transforming the manicured golf course into an elemental cauldron of energy, and Justine into a lightning rod for the catastrophic collision to come.

The images in this Prelude, however, are not chronologically arrayed, tracking the movement of the narrative to come. They cross back and forth, rather, between different temporal frameworks of the film, from the narrative time of Justine's disastrous wedding reception, the psychological or subjective time of the characters' anxious wait for the impending catastrophe, to the cosmic time that frames the final collision between the earth and Melancholia. An image evoking the first part of the film appears, one that captures the oppressive feeling of time slowing and one's physical energy ebbing; a nightmarish but beautiful vision of Justine in her wedding dress, striding against skeins of black, weed-like strands, wrapped around her limbs and holding her back, but also unfurling from the trees, as though nature itself were refusing to let her go. Another shot of the planets Earth and Melancholia appears, looming larger this time, the parallel now explicit between Justine's psychological state, her physical distress, a generalized *Weltschmerz*, and the cosmic cataclysm to come. A shot from inside one of the melancholy rooms in the castle, a Baronial style interior framed by archways and intricate window-frames, reveals a burning bush in the garden outside, another image combining a biblical reference with an elemental, Tarkovsky-like evocation of fire. We then cut to a romantic image of the drowning bride clutching her wedding bouquet, half-immersed in a watery pond, slowly

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Darghis, "This is How the End Begins," *The New York Times*, Dec 30, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/movies/awardsseason/manohla-dargis-looks-at-the-overture-to-melancholia.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/movies/awardsseason/manohla-dargis-looks-at-the-overture-to-melancholia.html?_r=2)

sinking amidst the lily pads and wavering weeds, reminiscent of John Everett Millais's pre-Raphaelite homage, *Ophelia* (1852).

The oneiric vision flashes forward to Justine and Leo in the forest, Justine approaching from a distance, Leo whittling a stick he will offer for Justine's "magic cave" that the surviving trio will build for their final moments together. What becomes clearer with hindsight is that these are prophetic images of events still to come (Justine, seated on a stone wall will watch Claire return carrying her son during a hailstorm; Justine's horse Abraham that will fall to the ground rather than cross the bridge to the village; Leo whittling sticks in the forest in preparation for the final collision between Melancholia and the Earth). This vision of world-destruction weighs heavily upon Justine and is perhaps the deeper reason for her profound melancholia, the lost object here being not only her own life (her marriage, career, and family) but sheer attachment to the world itself. Leo looks up from whittling wood and gazes off into the distance, just as the image cuts to a long shot of Melancholia approaching the earth; the Prelude now swelling to its climax, the image suggests a perverse cosmic embrace as Melancholia pulls the earth into itself, a *Liebestod* to end all others. As the image fades to black the Prelude ends with a primordial rumbling that persists beyond the void, accompanying the painted screen title: "Lars von Trier *Melancholia*."

### A Cognitivist Interlude

What are we to make of this remarkable neo-romanticist vision of sublime world-destruction? Although there are a number of available interpretations of the film, Danish cognitivist film theorist Torben Grodal has published one of the few unabashedly theoretical analyses of *Melancholia*.<sup>3</sup> According to Grodal, art cinema films, such as those of von Trier, generate their aesthetic effects by blocking the ordinary processes of cognition, what he calls the "PECMA flow": the circuit linking perception, emotion, cognition, and motor action. Interestingly, Grodal's cognitivist approach parallels, in striking fashion, Gilles Deleuze's analyses of the breakdown of the sensory-motor action schema that defines the post-

<sup>3</sup> Torben Grodal, "Frozen Style and Strong Emotions of Panic and Separation: Trier's Prologues to *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 2 (1/2012), pp. 47-53.

war emergence of time-image cinema.<sup>4</sup> According to both Grodal and Deleuze, most narrative film follows a conventional “sensory-motor” circuit: perception elicits affective/emotional responses linked with cognition that are typically expressed in actions (in non-spectatorial contexts). Classical narrative film emulates the PECMA flow via the devices of continuity editing, character-driven action, and narrative closure (what Deleuze calls the “sensory-motor schema” defining classical “movement-image” cinema).<sup>5</sup> Art cinema, by contrast, blocks or impedes the PECMA flow: motor action is interrupted or dissipated, which generates dissociated perception, “saturated” affects or emotions, and open-ended reflection oriented towards “higher order” meanings. This account accords well with Deleuze’s analysis of the effects of the breakdown of the sensory-motor action schema, which, in like fashion, interrupts the circuit between perception and action, thus realising varieties of affect, thought, and temporal experience (expressed in time-images) ordinarily subordinated in “movement-image” cinema. Deleuze’s concern, however, is not with the affective-cognitive processes involved in our response to art cinema with its emphatic use of time-images; rather, it is to articulate an alternative semiotic typology of image-signs corresponding to different modalities of cinematic expression. In any event, Von Trier’s films are replete with such time-images, which open up aesthetic experiences – of affect, memory, and time – that resist explicit discursive articulation, and thus chime well with the tradition of romanticist theories of art indebted to Kant’s account of aesthetic ideas – indeterminate but aesthetically rich ideas that invite infinite interpretation – as elaborated in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>6</sup>

Grodal analyses the “prologues” to von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011) from a cognitivist point of view that, nonetheless, resonates with aspects of Deleuze’s account of the “pure optical and sound situations” defining time-image cinema.<sup>7</sup> Both films commence with super slow-motion sequences using arresting visual imagery (black-and-white and colour respectively) and

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, pp. 197-215.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-159.

<sup>6</sup> For Kant, an aesthetic idea is “an intuition of the imagination” that resists determinate conceptualisation, “so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.” See *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, Indiana 1987, pp. 215-217.

<sup>7</sup> See Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galatea, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 13-24.

affectively charged music (the Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga" and Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*). They both block action, principally through ultra slow-motion imagery, suggesting but also thwarting narrative and symbolic meaning, thus evoking saturated affect, "global" (rather than personalised) emotions, and what Grodal calls the quest for "higher-order meanings." In both Preludes, moreover, the play between movement and stasis both stimulates and checks strong emotions such as panic and anxiety, emotions that Grodal attributes to von Trier as creative but tormented cinematic auteur who uses these aesthetic strategies in the service of his cinematic art.<sup>8</sup>

The forward thrust and affective charge of the romantic music, Grodal notes, is checked by the arresting of movement in the images, resulting in a simultaneous intensification of perception, affect, and reflection.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, for Grodal, the Preludes reflect four general strategies evident in von Trier's films for coping with strong or destructive emotions, particularly anxiety and panic: aesthetic stylisation and containment (or what we might otherwise call sublimation) through beauty or poeticism; sublime submission to a powerful force or higher order of meaning; manipulating the reality status of the image; and obsessive control of the image's aesthetic elements.<sup>10</sup> Shifting between the film's aesthetic style, and von Trier's own famously troubled psychology, Grodal concludes that the Overture of *Melancholia*, like that of *Antichrist*, is a way of controlling the disturbing emotions of panic and separation anxiety, solicited and managed within a highly controlled aesthetic construction. The pointed use and display of romanticist imagery, for example, both by von Trier in the Wagnerian Overture and by Justine in her angry outburst in the library, serves to express then allay anxiety and panic by way of aesthetic containment: using beautiful imagery to defuse anxiety, to sublimate panic, and to solicit reflection in the service of an ambiguous "submission" to higher orders of meaning. As Grodal remarks,

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<sup>8</sup> Grodal, "Frozen Style and Strong Emotions of Panic and Separation: Trier's Prologues to *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*," pp. 49 ff.

<sup>9</sup> The arresting of movement via striking but static imagery coupled with the use of evocative, expressive music in von Trier's Prelude, as Grodal remarks, has the effect of both arresting and stimulating affective and emotional responsiveness: it "presses the accelerator and touches the brake at the same time." *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Trier's use of romantic imagery is an effort to produce humility and also a way of inscribing the prologues in an art film tradition that often caters to a quasi-religious submission to higher meanings.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the strategy of submission to sublime meaning, the images not only arrest movement but drain colour from the image, and stylise the composition of the frame through arresting, unusual, or striking elements disrupting balance, symmetry, formal expectations, and visual conventions. The result is a manipulation of the reality status of these images, which occupy an ambiguous position somewhere between dream, fantasy, and reverie. Even the otherwise terrifying images of the Earth being dwarfed by the planet *Melancholia* are rendered as arresting and beautiful, accompanied by the romantic Wagner Overture, defusing the sense of panic or anxiety such images might otherwise induce and replacing these with a "derealised" aestheticized image suggesting sublimity or other symbolic meanings. The entire sequence, moreover, amply displays von Trier's own "obsessive control" over the aesthetic elements of image, with its self-consciously stylised composition, pictorial and cinematic allusions, complex aesthetic problem-solving, ambiguous reality status and indeterminate connotative meanings spanning narrative, poetic, and symbolic dimensions.

Indeed, like other von Trier films, *Melancholia* works with self-imposed rules generating a complex series of artistic experiments grounded in the imposition of rules and elaboration of games expressing what a number of theorists have described as "creativity under constraint."<sup>12</sup> Acknowledging but also subverting a European tradition of art cinema and pictorial representation, von Trier's aesthetic game-playing involves a complex series of aesthetic strategies designed to both intensify and dissipate the emotions of anxiety and panic, providing an aesthetic transformation of these emotions in a manner that sublimates their negative affective valency towards poetic experience and symbolic meaning. Taken together, Grodal's cognitivist analysis offers an enlightening "naturalis-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> For a variety of discussions of von Trier's game-playing as an exemplary case of cinematic "creativity under constraint" see the essays in Mette Hjort (ed.), *On The Five Obstructions. Dekalog 1*, London/New York, Wallflower Press 2008. Thomas Elsaesser has recently discussed the film in relation to the idea of the mind-game film: See Elsaesser, "Black Suns and a Bright Planet: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* as Thought Experiment." *Theory and Event* 18.2 (2015) [https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v018/18.2.elsaesser.html](https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v018/18.2.elsaesser.html).

tic” account of the underlying perceptual-affective-cognitive processes at play – and artfully manipulated – by von Trier’s distinctive audio-visual sequences in films like *Melancholia* and *Antichrist*.

Interestingly, Grodal’s analysis not only accounts for some of the underlying affective and cognitive processes involved in our aesthetic response to the von Trier Overtures; it also recalls, ironically, earlier psychoanalytic film theories that applied a similar diagnostic to the analysis of cinematic images (sublimation, fetishism, fantasy projection) and to film auteurs (Hitchcock’s alleged voyeurism, perversity, and misogyny, for example). Grodal too tends towards a “pathologization” of von Trier’s aesthetic of romantic sublimity, suggesting that the film evinces von Trier’s own obsessive-compulsive tendencies, using art as a way of coping with his much-publicised depression.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, however, Grodal’s cognitivist-auteurist analysis says almost nothing about the very mood, aesthetic sensibility, or emotional condition one would expect to be addressed in analysing such a film: *melancholia*. How do these aesthetic strategies, and more particularly the evocation of a specific mood, express and evoke a state of melancholia that carries subjective, aesthetic, and metaphysical connotations? What is specific about the evocation and exploration of melancholia as both affective-psychological and aesthetic-metaphysical state? Grodal’s analysis also refrains from addressing the film’s broader cultural and ideological significance: its allegorization of Justine’s experience of melancholia to capture the apocalyptic cultural-historical mood of the present; to critique the vacuity of a naïve rationalist optimism in the face of the contemporary “crisis of world”; and to explore the putative “end of film” within a neo-romantic aesthetic of cinematic sublimity. In what follows will address these questions with respect to the concept of cinematic moods, and explore both psychological-aesthetic and ethico-cultural dimensions of the film’s presentation and exploration of melancholia.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. “the danger in *Melancholia* – from a strange and difficult to detect planet that may possibly destroy the earth –fits perfectly into such a system of obsessive–compulsive anxiety. The anxiety is linked to severe panic by fundamental threats to bonding that will be clear in the rest of the film (as OCD may reflect an insecure bonding in the past or in the present).” Grodal, p. 51.



## Melancholia

There is no doubt that one of the most impressive features of the film is its remarkable presentation of the experience of melancholia. For all the brilliance of Kirsten Dunst's performance, however, it would be a misleading to interpret the film solely a psychological study of depression. Rather, melancholia is evoked in the film as a mood, an aesthetic sensibility, a way of experiencing time; a visionary condition and aesthetic experience of revelatory temporality that contemporary cinema has all but forgotten. Chiming with Kristeva's remarkable meditation on depression and melancholia, *Black Sun*,<sup>14</sup> von Trier attempts to reclaim the romantic association of melancholia with prophetic vision and artistic genius (hence the references to Brueghel, Wagner, and Tarkovsky). It not only explores the subjective experience of this distinctive mood or state of mind, it evokes melancholia as an aesthetic, historically resonant mood expressing contemporary cultural-historical anxieties, while also commenting on the corruption and possible redemption of cinema in the digital age.

That Justine is both a melancholic and an advertiser, for example, should give us pause. She has a refined aesthetic sensibility, "knows things," but cannot cope with the everyday world of work, refusing to give her boorish boss, Jack [Stellan Skarsgård], the "tagline" he so desires (on her wedding night no less, a signal that commerce really controls art). Still, Justine eventually gives him an acerbic (and rather Heideggerian) tagline – "*Nothing*, just Nothing" – one that best describes what Jack stands for (the nihilistic corruption of art through advertising). Jack is the embodiment of a relentless drive to work, universal commodification, an expression of the new spirit of capitalism, a destructive force bent on annihilating anything that stands in the way of business. It is this world that Justine sacrifices, renouncing her promotion (as "artistic director"), insulting her boss, losing her job, thus negating the entire sphere of her social and professional identity, everything binding her to the empty world of wealth, work, and advertising with its nihilistic corruption of aesthetic experience.

One way of reading this episode is to treat it as von Trier declaring his conflicted persona as director: Justine, melancholic artist/advertiser ("artistic director");

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1989.

Claire, caring sister and anxious organiser trying to oversee the event (the wedding ritual or wedding movie *cum* metaphysical disaster movie). If Justine and Claire are contrasting aspects of von Trier's directorial persona, we could take the film's presentation of melancholia as an allegory of the corruption of cinema as art; a self-critique of von Trier's own ambivalent role as melancholic artist, anxious controller, and cynical manipulator of images – a loss resulting in a melancholic act of (cinematic) world-destruction.

At the same time, *Melancholia* reinvents the possibilities of art cinema in a commercial-digital age by channelling modernist cinematic masters, while fusing genre cinema with hybrid forms (domestic melodrama meets metaphysical disaster movie). In an important scene, Justine, having withdrawn from her own wedding celebration, reacts violently to the pictures of modernist art in the books on display in the library, replacing them with pre-modern and romantic images (Brueghel, Millais, and so on); as though her melancholia were itself as symptom of the decadence of modernist optimism, its corruption into contemporary advertising design. There is something rotten, for Justine, at the heart of modernism and its degeneration into consumer culture, just as there is something rotten in the humanist myth of progress, our rationalist faith in redemption from catastrophe through science and technology. Indeed, Justine's gesture of refusal and negation signals that these ideas – the corruption of modernist art by advertising, and the need to retrieve romanticism as an antidote to the myth of progress – prefigures the destruction of the image-world that is soon to come (recalling the image of Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow* being consumed by flame and turning to ash).

What is it that defines Justine's – and indeed the film's – melancholia? According to Freud, melancholia is a pathological condition resulting from the inability to “work through” the loss of a loved object through the normal processes of mourning that would allow the subject to detach herself from it.<sup>15</sup> In mourning, the subject's basic capacity for affective engagement with the world remains intact. In melancholia, the loss is so catastrophic that the subject negates its

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<sup>15</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, Hogarth, London 1959, pp. 237-258.

own self and withdraws herself from the world. It involves a negation of the self so radical that it leads to a complete negation of social reality as such. In *Melancholia* (the film), Justine's negation of self and failure to participate in the rituals of everyday life – like her own wedding reception – leaves her bereft of the capacity for affective engagement and meaningful social agency. She strives to play the smiling bride, but like the oversize limousine that gets stuck on the way to her wedding reception, she no longer fits the social milieu in which she now exists – the social rituals strike her as empty, trivial, and absurd. In the course of the evening, she withdraws from the wedding reception, withdraws from her husband, rejects the demands of her boss, loses her career, seduces an underling and prompts her husband to leave her, is abandoned by her family, and falls into a deep depression that leaves her unable to speak or to move. The next day she can barely make it out of bed and into a taxi, let alone walk or talk. She spends the days sleeping. When finally roused out of bed by the promise of her favourite dish – meatloaf – and half-carried to the table by her sister and professional assistant “Little Father,” Justine can barely swallow a mouthful of the meal before beginning to weep, declaring that her food “tastes like ashes.”

This melancholia, however, is not only confined to Justine's crippling depression but pervades the entire world of the film. Melancholia is a mood that imbues the world with a distinctive sensibility, congealing the present, negating the comportment defining everyday activity, thus revealing the emptiness of our everyday busy-ness (not to mention business) as well as opening up an uncanny, “prophetic” dimension of temporal experience. Justine's self-negation extends from her family and work to her investment in the world itself. It is thus with a sense of relief that she learns of the impending collision of Melancholia with the earth. Her sister Claire becomes increasingly anxious and frightened about what is to come, while her husband, initially reassuring, clings to his faith in science, only to fall into despair once he realises that the collision is inevitable, that his faith in scientific mastery and rational control was misplaced, committing suicide rather than face his family and the humiliating certainty of their deaths. Shattering our myths of progress, von Trier seems to suggest, could well lead to a cultural nihilism, a collective depression, if not societal self-destruction. Justine, by contrast, slowly emerges from her depression, gains a quiet strength, and becomes almost calm and contemplative. Seduced by the presence of the vast planet, she bathes nude in its eerie blue light, beguiled by its growing presence as it hurtles towards the earth, pulling our planet into its fatal embrace.

Justine's melancholia takes on cosmic dimensions, her negation of self and world enveloping the world itself. Her melancholia thus achieves its end, just as the planet Melancholia destroys the earth, along with Justine, Claire, and Leo in their "magic cave," and just as the film *Melancholia* annihilates the image-world it had so beautifully composed for us.

### **Melancholy Moods: *Melancholia's* Cinematic Ethics**

It is clear already from its Overture that *Melancholia* is a film concerned with the evocation of mood. Although it deals with the psychological aspect of mood (melancholia), it is also concerned with its aesthetic aspect, taken as an expression of aesthetic sensibility, a way of disclosing or revealing the world and time – an aesthetic experience of movies that is typically overlooked in favour of movement and action. As distinct from the clinical notion of depression, the film explores, in an evocative fashion, the kinship between melancholia and artistic creativity, the kind of aesthetic mood regarded as conducive to aesthetically mediated ways of knowing ("I know things," as Justine says, alluding not only to her capacity for intuitive knowledge linked to her melancholic disposition but to her acknowledgment of the inevitability of the planet Melancholia's destruction of the Earth). One of the most striking aspects of *Melancholia's* aesthetics of mood concerns the manner in which it also evokes an ethical sensibility or acknowledgement of the fragility, vulnerability, and value of life on our planet. How are these aesthetic and ethical aspects of mood related in the film?

One obvious way is via *Melancholia's* powerful evocation of the mood of melancholy, both as communicating Justine's own experience of profound depression and as an expressive aesthetic feature of the film's cinematic world. Here it is important to distinguish between moods attributed to a character perspective and moods expressed by the work of art itself. Indeed, a common conflation that occurs in discussions of mood concerns the difference between a subjectively experienced mood elicited by a work, and the aesthetic mood expressed by the work. Carl Plantinga has usefully elaborated this distinction between human moods (experienced by a subject) and art moods (the pervasive affective tone, atmosphere, or attunement conveyed by a work), what I have elsewhere discussed, drawing on early film theorists, as the *Stimmung* of a cin-

ematic work.<sup>16</sup> The mood of a work is distinct from the mood of the spectator, even though the work's mood – expressing, for example, the perspective of the film's narration, of a narrator, or a character – usually aims to elicit certain moods from its audience.<sup>17</sup> I can recognise the mood of gloomy dread or acute anxiety expressed by a horror film without actually experiencing that mood myself while watching the film; or I can be experiencing a certain mood that does not necessarily correspond with that expressed or communicated by the film (a nostalgic mood while watching an old slapstick comedy, for example). In sum, mood primes or orients us emotionally (and cognitively) towards perceiving or attending to certain elements, emphases, or aspects of a film-world, preparing us for an appropriate engagement with the emotional modulations and dynamics that unfold in the course of the narrative.

The two parts of *Melancholia*, for example, are explicitly designed to express and evoke different moods: the warmly lit, animated hand-held camera of Part I (Justine), conveying the conviviality and attempted merriment of the wedding (which soon starts to turn sour as familial tensions surface, Justine's Boss harasses her for his "tagline," and Justine herself slips into depression) versus the "cooler," darker, more subdued lighting of Part II (Claire), with colour-coded costuming, less animated camera work, and subdued lighting (more naturalistic, outdoor light, but also with increasingly blue-filtered light pervading each scene, reflecting not only the planet Melancholia's ominous presence but Justine's own state of mind) all of which gives the second half of the film a darker, ominous, melancholy atmosphere. The final part of the film, which centres on the inevitability of the devastating destruction of the Earth by the planet Melancholia, is striking for collapsing the distinction between the mood of melancholia attributable to Justine and the mood of melancholia expressed by the film. By the film's extraordinary final sequence, Justine's mood has itself alleviated, as she becomes more Stoically calm, focused and resolute in the face of impending disaster, while her "subjective" state of melancholia now pervades the film's cinematic world (the blue light bathing each scene, the rumbling sound of the approaching planet, and the recurrence of the Tristan and Isolde overture lend-

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Plantinga, "Art Moods and Human Moods in Narrative Cinema," *New Literary History* 43:3 (2012), pp. 455-475 and Robert Sinnerbrink, "Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood," *Screen* 53:2 (2012), pp. 148-163.

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, "Art Moods and Human Moods in Narrative Cinema."

ing the final sequence a tragic-romantic atmosphere of life and death entwined, and so on).

Mood, however, is not only an aesthetic dimension of cinematic worlds and the experience of spectator involvement in such worlds. It plays a significant role in what we might call “cinematic ethics”: cinema’s potential as a medium of ethical experience. By this I mean films that use the aesthetic power of cinema to elicit ethical experience, or to draw our attention towards phenomena and perspectives that we might otherwise ignore, overlook, or undervalue, inviting affective-cognitive forms of engagement directed towards opening up new forms of perception, the exercise of moral imagination, or exploring alternative ways of thinking. Cinematic ethics, from this point of view, expresses cinema’s power to evoke an ethical experience that can prompt aesthetic, moral-psychological, even cultural transformation; the aesthetic “conversion” of our feelings and perceptions, attitudes and orientations – the transformation of our ways of apprehending the world.<sup>18</sup>

There are three primary but related ways in which mood can evoke ethical experience in film.<sup>19</sup> The first is the “subjective-phenomenological” aspect of mood (showing what something is like, how it feels to experience X, presenting a distinctive experiential perspective on Y), which typically unfolds as part of a dramatic narrative scenario expressing either the perspective of a character or the worldview articulated by a film. The second is the “moral-psychological” aspect of mood (how it affects our moral sympathies and antipathies again towards characters, situations, ideas, or worldviews, how it affects or orients moral judgments, how it exercises or stymies moral imagination, potentially shifts ethical attitudes and moral convictions, even alters our disposition towards action). The third is the “ontological-aesthetic” dimension of mood (how it contributes to the composition of a meaningful cinematic world, draws our attention to certain features of the world, makes things salient, affectively charged, or matter to us). This third dimension of mood generally remains at a remove from narrative representation since it pertains to the expression or disclosure of a cinematic world rather than to the elaboration of its narrative content.

<sup>18</sup> I discuss this idea further in Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*, Routledge, London/New York 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See Plantinga, “Art Moods and Human Moods in Narrative Cinema.”

To say a few words about the first aspect, mood not only orients us within a cinematic world, it can open up a space (and time) of engagement in which we can experience phenomenologically the subjective (or “what is it like”) dimension of a certain experience, say of grief, loss, or depression. Here mood works most closely with the elicitation of emotion, operating in ways that provide an affectively rich means of orienting us towards certain kinds of cognitive or emotional responses. As many commentators have noted, one virtue of *Melancholia* is its impressively authentic depiction of depression, rendering powerfully and vividly the “what it is like” aspect of this subjectively debilitating form of experience.<sup>20</sup> Justine’s attempts to maintain a facade of cheerful involvement, her increasing inability to see the relevance or significance of the rituals she is performing, her inexorable slide into a state of detached indifference, followed by bodily inertia and utter affective disengagement – all of these aspects of her experience are rendered in detail, not least thanks to Kirsten Dunst’s remarkable performance. The scenes showing Justine’s inability to catch a taxi despite her sister’s encouragements, her complete lack of energy and inability to enter the bathtub, and her failed attempt to enjoy a family meal, rejecting the food she is offered as tasting like ashes, all highlight the experiential difficulties of suffering depression. As remarked, the mood of the transitional sequences between the end of Part I and beginning of Part II also underline the subjective sense of a world that has lost its colour, texture, flavour, and vitality. The lighting and colour scheme retreat to dark and drab tones, gloomy interior and exterior shots, with the increasingly pervasive blue of the planet Melancholia paralleling Justine’s affective, bodily, and “existential” sense of melancholia.

The second aspect (the moral-psychological dimension of mood) is the primary focus of discussions of the role of mood, affect, and emotion (e.g. empathy and sympathy) in rhetorically “moving” viewers towards changes in their moral attitudes, the exercise of moral imagination, or the slanting of our stances towards ideological worldviews. This is the aspect of mood most relevant to recent discussions of affective engagement with cinema, notably the focus on affect, empathy or sympathy, and the manner in which emotional alignment and mor-

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Rupert Read, “An Allegory of a ‘Therapeutic’ Reading of a Film: of MELANCHOLIA,” *Sequence* 12 (2014) <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/sequence1/1-2-an-allegory-of-a-therapeutic-reading/>

al allegiance are generated through cinematic means.<sup>21</sup> This is also the aspect that Carl Plantinga foregrounds as having significant potential to understand and explain the moral rhetoric of cinema and how it can persuade us towards certain social attitudes or ideological convictions.<sup>22</sup> Here again, *Melancholia*'s sympathetic presentation of the manner in which Justine's melancholy character develops more strength and resoluteness as the fatal planetary collision becomes inevitable, comforting her sister Claire who becomes more terrified and panicked, is a powerful example of how mood can elicit sympathy or empathy in affective terms. As (in part) a familial/domestic melodrama, focusing on the complex relationship between the two sisters, *Melancholia* takes great care to present the sisters in a sympathetic manner. The film focalises the narrative, in Part I, around Justine's failed attempts to successfully engage in her own wedding celebrations, and in Part II, and shifts focus towards Claire's well-meaning but failed attempts to care for her sister during a depressive bout, while becoming more frightened and anxious once the inevitability of the collision between *Melancholia* and the Earth becomes apparent. Claire's husband John [Kiefer Sutherland], a bourgeois proprietor (owner of the manor house establishment with its eighteen-hole golf course) as well as a rationalist optimist, is shown as having a rationalistic faith in science that proves hollow, choosing suicide rather than face the reality of destruction. Justine's calm acceptance of their fate, and her blunt rejection of Claire's misguided attempts to mask the reality of the catastrophe as though it were a pleasant dinner to be enjoyed over a glass of wine, culminate in the film's concluding sequence – Justine reminding young Leo about the “magic cave” they need to build that will keep them from harm, a fragile make-believe construction (like a tent or tepee) that allows Justine to comfort the distraught Claire and frightened Leo during their final moments on Earth together.

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There is also a third ethical dimension of mood – more aesthetic, ontological, and existential – that contributes to how a cinematic world is composed and communicated, how it is presented with particular elements foregrounded as affectively charged or emotionally salient: moods that can reveal a world and dispose the viewer to notice, attend to, or be moved by the sheer existence of

<sup>21</sup> I discuss this further in Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*.

<sup>22</sup> See Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2009.



a world. The manner in which Terrence Malick's films, for example, compose a cinematic world presenting the majestic indifference of nature, the contingency of human identity, the presence of transcendent beauty and revelatory moments of moral grace, the metaphysical-ethical as well as romantic-sensual experience of love, are all dependent on the expression of mood as a constitutive element of the composition and aesthetic disclosure of a cinematic world. Making something beautiful, arresting, or memorable makes it meaningful, shaping how much we care about and thus how we habitually respond to the world. Mood can make the world – including salient elements and aspects of it – matter to us in ways that might ordinarily remain “backgrounded” in favour of more cognitively-driven instrumental relationships with things and others. The selection of elements and manner of composition of a cinematic world thus takes on implicit ethical significance as shaping and orienting our responses to narrative film.

This aspect of the mood of *Melancholia* is, I suggest, what prompted a number of critics to interpret the film as having an ethical dimension pertaining to the threat of ecological and environment destruction figured through the “un-thinkable” scenario of world destruction. We might consider here Rupert Read's therapeutic, personal-philosophical interpretation of the film as an existential experiment in traversing mortality in order to affirm existence in an immanent manner.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on Wittgenstein's conception of a therapeutic philosophy, Read elaborates his reading of the film as inducting viewers upon an experientially rich learning arc that traverses Justine's path from melancholy depression to authentic life-affirmation in the face of mortality, finitude, and the threat of world-annihilation. Read emphasises, moreover, the profoundly rich depiction of melancholia (or depression), emphasising both its realism and plausibility; but he also acknowledges and passionately defends the ethical-allegorical dimension of the film as depicting the cultural-societal state of denial that many Western societies display in the face of catastrophic, world-threatening, environmental danger (catastrophic climate change that threatens future generations).

This stands in sharp contrast to Steven Shaviro's reading of the romanticist elements of *Melancholia* as evoking an anti-capitalist critique of the “closed” world of Western wealth, power, and privilege (emphasising the viewer's supposed pleasure in seeing the film's presentation of the affluent but isolated world of

<sup>23</sup> Read, “An Allegory of a ‘Therapeutic’ Reading of a Film: of MELANCHOLIA.”

the “One Percent” being utterly destroyed).<sup>24</sup> Shaviro’s claim seems to be based on the idea of a parallel between apocalyptic “end of the world” scenarios and the “end of capitalism” as something that remains beyond our cognitive-imaginative frameworks. Such a catastrophic “loss of world” can only be evoked indirectly, or allegorically, as evident, for example, in apocalyptic disaster movies such as *Melancholia* (and presumably numerous others), signalling that the “One Percent’s” refusal to forego their wealth and conspicuous consumption can only end in the utter destruction of our world.<sup>25</sup>

While sympathetic to Shaviro’s claims concerning the film’s critical stance towards the “One Percent,” Read examines more closely the relationship between Justine’s depression, Claire’s well-meaning but ineffectual attempts to respond to the imminent catastrophe, and the ethical dimension of the film as enacting an experiential shift in viewers that traverses depression, evokes the thought of world-destruction, but also guides us towards an ethos of life-affirmation. Indeed, for Read, the film’s ethical significance ought to be recognised more widely: its exploration of how an acceptance of finitude opens up an existential authenticity, an implicit demand to take responsibility for our collective future (or otherwise) on this fragile, threatened planet. In this respect, Read offers a persuasive interpretation of *Melancholia*, one that captures important aesthetic and dramatic elements on the film, not only as a study in melancholia and existential authenticity, but as an exercise in environmental ethics and eco-aesthetics with a subtle political orientation – the fragile possibility of a “community to come” (Agamben) figured in the film’s devastating final image of Justine, Claire, and young Leo, comforting one another in their makeshift tepee, as the planet *Melancholia* hurtles into the earth, annihilating everything in its path. What is striking in this “ecological” reading of the film, moreover, is the manner in which the cinematic mood of existential care for a world under threat of extinction imbues this metaphysical disaster movie cum domestic melodrama with an ethical urgency and moral power. The sublime images of a carefully ordered world under threat, the romantic-melancholy evocation of nature and the fragil-

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<sup>24</sup> Steven Shaviro, “MELANCHOLIA, or, The Romantic Anti-Sublime,” *Sequence*, 1.1, 2012. (eBook)

<sup>25</sup> The rather dubious “argument” seems to be that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; ergo, films depicting the end of the world are really allegories of the end of capitalism! A suggestive parallel, however, is quite different from a relationship of implication.

ity of human life, and the psychologically and affectively moving depiction of the two sisters striving to cope with the threat of world-destruction all contribute to a profound sense of concern over the finitude of life on this planet, threatened by destruction thanks to forces beyond our control. It is in this sense that Slavoj Žižek described *Melancholia* as staging the thought of “world-sacrifice” as an aesthetic spectacle, one that “traverses the fantasy” of world-destruction but without the reassuring narrative perspective of a vantage point from which we might contemplate our own demise.<sup>26</sup>

All three ethical dimensions of mood work throughout von Trier’s *Melancholia*: the subjective phenomenological experience of “what it is like” to experience depression; the moral-psychological aspect of soliciting sympathy/empathy for Justine’s perspective and experience as a melancholic (also that of her sister, Claire, a “normal” individual shown trying to cope with the reality of imminent death); but it also highlights the third existential-ontological dimension of mood as showing what matters to us, how life itself on the planet is fragile, flawed, and finite. Despite von Trier’s reputation as a cynical manipulator and the film’s critics describing it as a stylised exercise in nihilism, *Melancholia* reveals, on the contrary, the profoundly ethical dimensions of our aesthetic experience of cinematic moods.

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<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek discusses the fantasy situation of being in a position to contemplate our own death or absence from the earth. Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso Books, London 2012, p. 273 ff.