

Research Article

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The Melancholia of Extinction: Psychoanalysis and Speculative Realism at the End

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Abstract: This article considers the end through cinema, psychoanalysis and speculative realism. Among contemporary end-of-the-world films Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* stands out for its emphasis on the simultaneity of psychic and cosmic annihilation. On the one hand, this of course evokes Sigmund Freud's famous essay on grief and depression, "Mourning and Melancholia", as well as Julia Kristeva's own stellar intervention on the topic, *Soleil noir*, while also highlighting a strange blindspot in the work of Jacques Lacan. On the other, it points to Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*, where he examines (via Lyotard) the possibility of thought in the certain knowledge of the end of all things through "solar catastrophe". This article seeks a dialogue between such positions – beyond Brassier's incomplete appeal to the death drive – to explore the possibilities that von Trier's film, and cosmological end-of-the-world cinema more generally, might allow for a rethinking of realism in the context of intellectual and affective *extinction*. Where Mark Fisher suggests that our everyday "capitalist realism" gives rise to a deadening melancholia, and Frank Ruda argues that "real freedom conceptually presupposes the assumption that the worst has always already happened", this article asks how to practice critique after the end of the world.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; speculative realism; capitalist realism; apocalypse; film-philosophy

We should need a cosmic psychoanalysis, one that would abandon for a second human considerations and concern itself with the contradictions of the Cosmos.

– Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*.

– Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*

It has, by now, become something of a cliché to cite Frederic Jameson's observation that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism".¹ Evidence abounds in the Western cultural imaginary to support this assertion: Hollywood disaster movies would rather destroy all living things than reconsider consumer culture, while post-apocalyptic narratives insist that even if life *did* go on, all that would be left would be a *Mad Max* hellscape of roving bandits – a Hobbesian war of all against all – laying bare the essential logic of the capitalist in violent individualism and accumulation. That Jameson's adage has thereby entered the realm of truism itself perhaps indicates the triumph of what Mark Fisher calls *capitalist realism*, the psychic-libidinal – which is to say, ideological – enclosure of our world by the values of capitalism to the extent that it seems there can be *no alternative* to the present system.² Consequently, of course, this means no alternative to the

¹ Jameson, "Future".

² Fisher, *Capitalist*.

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brutal exploitation and destruction of the planet as a habitable environment, with anthropogenic climate disaster meaning that the *end of all things* itself becomes inevitable.

In our imagining of the end times, then, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) stands out for several reasons: not least for its emphasis on the simultaneity of psychic and cosmic annihilation as Kirsten Dunst's depressive, Justine, communes with the planet Melancholia on its collision course with Earth. On the one hand, the film obviously evokes Sigmund Freud's famous essay on grief and depression, "Mourning and Melancholia", as well as Julia Kristeva's own stellar intervention on the topic, *Black Sun*, while also highlighting a strange blindspot here in the work of Jacques Lacan. On the other, such images of planetary destruction suggest certain strands of "speculative realism", particularly Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*, in which he examines (via Jean-François Lyotard) the possibility of thought in the certain knowledge of the end of all things through solar catastrophe. In what follows, I will seek a dialogue between such positions – beyond Brassier's own, incomplete appeal to the death drive – to explore the possibilities that von Trier's film, and cosmological end-of-the-world cinema more generally, might allow for a rethinking of realism in the context of intellectual and affective *extinction*. My aim, therefore, is to show how melancholia becomes legible at the intersection of psychic suffering, film form, and capitalist enclosure by recasting apocalypse not as access to some pure external truth but as a way of confronting contradiction within the subject and within the social order. Where Fisher suggests that everyday life under neoliberalism gives rise to a deadening melancholia, and Frank Ruda argues that true freedom presupposes "that the worst has always already happened",³ this article brings film, philosophy and psychoanalysis together to ask what it might mean to practice critique *at the end*.

1 Thinking Melancholia

Melancholia presents a cinematic meditation on extinction that extends, as Caroline Bainbridge observes, an "invitation into the melancholic state of mind [...] that is difficult to resist [coloured] as it is by the director's own well documented experiences of mental illness and collapse".⁴ Of course, biographical readings only take us so far but in this instance it would appear that, in a meaningful way, *Melancholia* is a film "tracing the contours of depression from the inside".⁵ As such, it stands out against much of the director's other work – not least for aesthetic reasons, with its *Festen*-like Dogme realism overwhelmed by the cinematic *Sturm und Drang* of full-screen CGI destruction – but also for the sense in which, unlike that of her literary namesake, Justine's suffering here is *intrinsic* and subjectively-articulated, rather than being sadistically visited upon her by a cruel tormentor-god.⁶ This is not to say that the film avoids melodrama, but it does shift away from quite the same of sense of *extrinsic punishment* that we find elsewhere in von Trier's oeuvre, such as his so-called Golden Heart trilogy.

Melancholia thus opens a space for thinking through melancholia. Freud, as we know, defined it in contrast to mourning, the latter being the "normal", painful process of letting go, and the former the *pathological* persistence of attachment to the object as a refusal of the mourning process.⁷ In the history of psychoanalysis, however, it is a topic that has been taken up rather unevenly. The spectre of object-loss is of course vital to the British School, while Klein theorised the *depressive position* as a melancholia-like stage of development.⁸ By contrast, Lacan barely addresses the topic at all. Over the course of his seminars, he mentions *mélancholie* on only four occasions: notably in the seminar on *Anxiety*, where he reasserts the Freudian connection between mourning and desire, and declares melancholia to be the triumph of the object.⁹ Lacan's most striking intervention in this area, however, comes in an equally rare remark on *depression* during a television interview, where he claimed:

3 Ruda, *Abolishing*, 13.

4 Bainbridge, "Experience", 142.

5 Shaviro, "MELANCHOLIA", 19.

6 See *ibid.*, 36.

7 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", SE 14.

8 Klein, "Mourning".

9 Lacan, *Anxiety*, 335.

We qualify sadness as depression, because we give it soul for support [...] But it isn't a state of the soul, it is simply a moral failing [*une faute morale*], as Dante, and even Spinoza, said: a sin, which means a moral weakness [*lâcheté morale*; "moral cowardice"], which is ultimately, located only in relation to thought.¹⁰

This seems, as Derek Hook and Stijn Vanheule observe, to be a characteristic Lacanian provocation and might, then, be best simply dismissed on those terms. Yet they also note a productive distinction drawn by Lacanians between "neurotic" depression as the expression of unconscious conflict and "psychotic" depression, melancholia as a body overwhelmed by *jouissance*.¹¹

Žižek, for his part, insists that, "Against Freud, one should assert the conceptual and ethical primacy" of melancholia. He explains:

In the process of the loss, there is always a remainder that cannot be integrated through the work of mourning, and the ultimate fidelity is the fidelity to this remainder. Mourning is a kind of betrayal, the second killing of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce his or her attachment it.¹²

Such notions of melancholia as *ethical fidelity* are widespread but Žižek adds a further spin to the formulation. Melancholia, he elaborates, in fact entails a confusion of loss and lack: it obscures that fact that, rather than being an object that was once possessed and subsequently lost, "[it] is lacking from the very beginning, [...] its emergence coincides with its lack", and thus can only be possessed in its loss.¹³ As a result, he reframes melancholia not as the persistent attachment to the object (i.e., failed mourning) but as a paradoxical mourning that *precedes* the loss of the object: so that we treat something we still fully possess as already lost. This, which he describes as the "melancholic's stratagem", entails "a faked spectacle of excessive, superfluous mourning" for an object one no longer desires.¹⁴ Yet this seems more like Hamlet's performative *melancholy*, his "antic disposition", than – for example – Ophelia's wretched, muddled *melancholia*: the latter connection being made explicitly by von Trier's film through its visual reference to John Everett Millais' well-known painting *Ophelia* (1851–52), with both showing their heroine surrounded by flowers and submerged in water as events overcome them (Figures 1 and 2).

Finally, then, we should turn to Kristeva, who announces her *Black Sun* from a profoundly personal place, as she aims "to address an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions and even life itself".¹⁵ With this "us", she establishes a community of melancholics while also offering to the reader something of a séance with melancholia itself. Even from its opening paragraphs – where Kristeva wonders, "Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?"¹⁶ – do we get an evocative sense of Justine's personal and cosmic anguish in *Melancholia*. In this context, we could observe that Thomas Elsaesser, for instance, has mapped out a reading of *Melancholia* in light of Kristeva's account of feminine depression and the "maternal Thing",¹⁷ with the uneasy relationship between Justine and Gaby making for a decent fictional case study on this point. Yet I want to move away from such a cine-aetiology of Justine's malady in family discord to examine instead the more meta-psychological possibilities for the film in relation to Kristeva's thinking of melancholia and the *death drive*. I want to consider how this might be combined with dimensions of both Brassier's project in *Nihil Unbound* – which concludes precisely with an appeal to Freud's *Todestrieb* – and the planetary scale of apocalyptic cinema with which *Melancholia* would be in dialogue, to rethink the relation between psychoanalysis, speculative realism and the end.

There seems, then, to be a sort of cosmic thread, a kind of conceptual gravity, holding together a constellation of ideas and images that I am here attempting to chart. For example, we also find this pull of attraction in

¹⁰ Lacan, *Television*, 22.

¹¹ Hook and Vanheule, *Lacan*, 8–9.

¹² Žižek, "Melancholy", 658.

¹³ Ibid., 660.

¹⁴ Ibid., 661.

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Black*, 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Elsaesser, "Black", 318–323.



Figure 1: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851–52): watery melancholia.



Figure 2: *Melancholia* (2011): Justine as Ophelia.

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) and a confrontation with the image of the “hungry giant”, Gargantua (Figure 3): that black hole which Coop (Matthew McConaughey) must first navigate around, and later through, during the film. As a body collapsed in on itself to a point of infinite density from which nothing can escape, not even light, Gargantua offers a compelling figure of cosmic depression. It is a devouring void of inescapable darkness, strongly echoing Freud's description of the complex of melancholia as being “like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies from all directions [...] and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished”.¹⁸ Where Hook and Vanheule observe that “the melancholic confronts an impasse of communication”, they suggest that this “agony” might be communicated through “figurative” references: “Hence, perhaps, the frequency of recourse to descriptions of heaven, hell, or purgatory in various historical eras”; and conclude that “Such descriptions can have a formative impact on the experience of the melancholic, providing an expressive framework for melancholic despair”.¹⁹ Apocalyptic cinema, as we can see, equally emphasises the *cosmological* figurations of this impasse.

Whether a black hole, a *soleil noir* or – at least according to medieval astrology – the mark of Saturn over one's birth, melancholia thus has a long celestial history. At this point, therefore, it is worth introducing some distinctions in the way that this topic has been treated: first, between “depression” as a *not uncontroversial* clinical category, thought currently to affect around 280 million people worldwide,²⁰ and what we might specifically call “melancholy” as the aesthetico-philosophical category grounded in the ancient theory of the four humours, but carried in to the Renaissance, the Romantics and beyond; and then, while both of these categories clearly *do* pertain to von Trier's film, it is “melancholia” defined as the form of the *coincidence* of psychic and cosmic *extinction* in a film-philosophical conjunction here that will be at the centre of my investigation.

¹⁸ Freud, “Mourning”, SE 14, 253.

¹⁹ Hook and Vanheule, *Lacan*, 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 1.



Figure 3: *Interstellar* (2014): all-consuming Gargantua.

2 Thinking the Limit

What the end-of-the-world movie and speculative realism share is an attempt to think a certain limit, which turns out to be the limit of thought itself. The speculative nature of science fiction is of course widely recognised, and the connection between the genre's literary expressions and speculative realism has been examined by Brian Willems, for example.²¹ Not all end-of-the-world movies are science fiction, strictly speaking, but those staging the cosmic eschaton of planetary and/or solar death are certainly moving in that orbit. Potentially binding these films with the investigations stemming from Quentin Meillassoux's philosophical intervention in *After Finitude* is a sense of pushing *beyond* the horizon of the human subject and, ultimately, an erasure of that very horizon itself. As we know, Meillassoux – with his *arche-fossils* and *ancestral statements* – claims that contemporary philosophy is unable to contend with proof of existence *before* the dawn of thought on Earth, such as the “luminous emission” of a star that is already dead.²² Thus, he proposes, in a rather *melancholic* way, that philosophy has failed “to come to terms with a bereavement”. We have, he claims, “lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside [...] which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not”.²³ This implies an opposition between a correlationist world “for us” and the scientific world “in itself”, which – as Eugene Thacker proposes – opens the possibility of a speculative, “world without us”, marked by “the subtraction of the human from the world”.²⁴ It is this latter possibility which takes us on to Brassier's philosophy of *extinction*.

Brassier observes that Meillassoux's emphasis on *anteriority* is still open to recuperation into human chronology, or a thinking of the “before us”; instead, he proposes not just a thinking of temporal posteriority but the extinguishing of *all thought*, along with time, space and matter, in the destruction of first the Earth (through solar catastrophe), and then of the universe itself in the eventual “asymptopia” of cosmic nothingness.²⁵ This Brassier, contends, takes us to the *true* limit because, as Lyotard put it, we reach the thought that “after the sun's death, there will be no thought left to know [that] its death took place”.²⁶ Thinking extinction thus leads to the inexistence of all thinking as the horizon of the human is erased once and for all. Thus, as Brassier concludes – again via Lyotard but also starting to sound very much like von Trier's Justine in their equally apocalyptic proclamations – “Everything is dead already”.²⁷ We should consider the solar catastrophe as having *already happened* and announce the subject of philosophy as *dead on arrival*.

The question Brassier poses is thus something like: *How do we think in the knowledge of certain death?*, or *How do we think the thought of death?* If thought itself will die, then we need to reorient our philosophical relation

²¹ Willems, *Speculative*.

²² Meillassoux, *After*, 10.

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Thacker, *Dust*.

²⁵ Brassier, *Nihil*, 229, 228.

²⁶ Quoted in Brassier, *Nihil*, 229.

²⁷ Brassier, *Nihil*, 223.

to the death and nothingness. This problem becomes particularly clear when we turn to the end-of-the-world film, which also hints at the *limitations* of Brassier's thinking the limit of thought. For example, the 1951 Technicolor sci-fi, *When Worlds Collide* – as an early forerunner to *Melancholia* – puts the rogue star, Bellus, on collision course with Earth, leading to widespread panic and despair until scientists build a rocket capable of transporting people to another planet. This film was made by Rudolph Maté who is perhaps better known as director of the existentialist-noir *D.O.A.* (1949), in which Edmond O'Brien's Frank Bigelow is a *dead man walking* as he has 24 hours to discover who has fatally poisoned him. In this authorial connection, then, we can clearly discern a shared preoccupation with Lyotard's "already dead": particularly as it coincides with global extinction.

Moreover, what is most interesting about *When Worlds Collide* is how it treats the journey into space, which is to say, beyond the horizon of Earth. Here, it contrasts with later films that similarly attempt to go beyond the subjective horizon and put us in contact with something like Meillassoux's "great outdoors", such as *Solar Crisis* (1990), Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007), and, once again, *Interstellar*. The first two concern solar catastrophe by heat flare and heat death respectively, while the latter's vague ecological crisis similarly necessitates escape from Earth. Like Maté's film, all involve a space mission to save humanity, but distinctively each of these more recent voyages reaches a point, a crossing of a specific threshold or limit, that bears the indelible mark of Kubrick's "Star Gate" sequence from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (Figure 4). In the *solar* films – which literalise the cinematic imagery of Lyotard's essay on solar death in *The Inhuman* – this limit is the sun itself: the crew must fly *into* the sun in order to avert the coming disaster (Figures 5 and 6); while *Interstellar* attempts this feat twice: first with a wormhole in the vicinity of Saturn (that original melancholic planet of medieval astrology) and then with Coop's plunge into Gargantua's hungry abyss (Figure 7). In each instance, this crossing of the boundary signals a kind of death, indicated by the hallucinatory images we see deployed there as a means of representing the unrepresentable beyond.

In the first instance, then, we might observe the resonance here with Kristeva's suggestion that, while Freud maintained that death is not known to the unconscious, the "imprint of the death drive" could be found in certain dreams or psychedelic experiences that present like "abstract paintings' or cascades of sounds, intricacies of lines and fabrics", in which the analyst could identify "the work of death as such [...] precisely in the dissociation of form itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out".²⁸ This notion of an image imprinted with *Todestrieb* will be vital to what follows; for now, however, I want to emphasise the way in which the crossing of the threshold in *these* films leads us ineluctably, in fact, to a certain fantasy space. This becomes most clear in *Interstellar*. After all the Kip-Thorne-endorsed scientific precision, and the 120 computational hours of rendering for each of its spectacular frames, Coop plunges *into* the black hole only to find himself in a place of pure plenitude where all impassés are dissolved, and all desires satisfied: he saves the day while also managing to return to his family several decades later. In *Solar Crisis* and in *Sunshine*, disaster is similarly averted by a moment of seeming transcendence so that what we get is *not* Brassier's thought of extinction but the fantasmatic triumph of humanity over extinction. The abstract image here signals neither the index of death drive nor the thought of extinction so

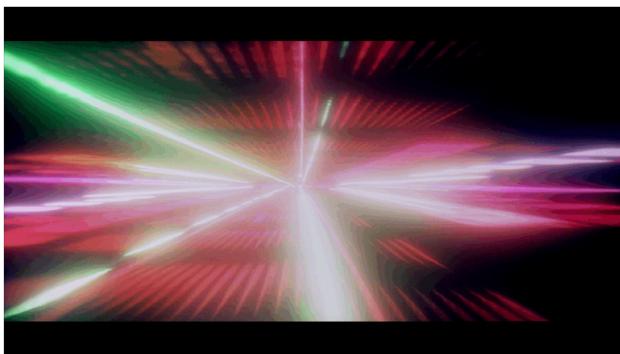


Figure 4: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): beyond the infinite.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Black*, 27.



Figure 5: *Solar Crisis* (1990): into the heart of the Sun.



Figure 6: *Sunshine* (2007): touching the solar beyond.



Figure 7: *Interstellar* (2014): feet first into the infinite.

much as a kind of projection *of* the beyond *into* the beyond: an imagined space in which the limit is not an absolute outside but a knowable and reachable “for us” within the bounds of human desire.

When Worlds Collide, by contrast, could be seen as challenging this immanentist position when, at the moment of Earth’s destruction, the rocket blasts off with the fiery cosmic collision visible on the ship’s video screen (Figure 8). The entire crew are seen *passing out* due to the G-force of their escape so that there are effectively *no witnesses* to the destruction of the planet (Figure 9). Does this then provide an instance of the “great outdoors”, a speculative vision – just for a moment, before they wake up – of the “world-in-itself” that isn’t mediated by a “world-for-us”? The first and most obvious objection is, of course, that planetary death is still staged *for us*, as cinematic spectators, and that, in fact, within the diegesis humanity nonetheless survives its erasure as the “ark” takes survivors to the habitable nearby planet Zyra. There is also a further, more psychoanalytic point made by this sequence. Firstly, that the spectacle remains enframed by the ship’s *video screen* and secondly that the crew are rendered *unconscious*, point once again to the function of *fantasy* at work here: indeed, the *fundamental fantasy* of being present at one’s own conception or extinction. The space of correlation, it seems, is not so easily escaped.



Figure 8: *When Worlds Collide* (1951): screening planetary destruction.



Figure 9: *When Worlds Collide* (1951): no witnesses.

3 Thinking Extinction

Melancholia, then, might seem to take us *all the way*. Steven Shaviro suggests that Justine makes contact with “the world outside of its relation to us, and outside of all the categories that we impose upon it”, finally reaching Meillassoux’s “absolute outside”.²⁹ The images of planetary destruction in the film’s Overture, for example, lack the enframing device of *When Worlds Collide*, and could therefore be seen as hinting once more at our exit from the scene (Figure 10). Shaviro thus claims that *Melancholia* is indeed a “‘speculative realist’ film.”³⁰ Yet what is most interesting in Shaviro’s approach is the claim he makes immediately prior to his invocation of Meillassoux, that “Justine makes contact – *affectively, if not epistemologically* – with [the absolute]”.³¹ Shaviro effectively claims that Justine – through her depression – arrives at the same point as Brassier, her “non-rational” affective state coinciding with his scientific rationalism in *the truth of extinction*. However, it is an idea that Shaviro develops no further, as he turns instead to discussion of the film’s anti-sublime “beauty”, and – I’d suggest – things are a little more complicated than the equivalency he seems here to imply. As Shaviro himself notes, in von Trier’s film, planetary death marks the *failure* of scientific knowledge to account for extinction: John’s attempts to mathematise *Melancholia* come up short as it looms ever larger in the sky and destruction thus lies firmly beyond his epistemic horizon. It is, in fact, only through Justine’s *affective* state that we arrive at the truth of extinction: thus hinting at the limits of Brassier’s own scientism. Enlightenment rationality might lead us to the *thought* of extinction – which can only be accounted for as a kind of lacuna in Brassier’s philosophy (as the extinction of thought) – but von Trier’s film (read with psychoanalysis) can bring us to a different kind of understanding, where extinction becomes *the truth of Melancholia*.

²⁹ Shaviro, “MELANCHOLIA”, 39.

³⁰ Ibid., 37.

³¹ Ibid., 39.



Figure 10: *Melancholia* (2011): planetary destruction.

Elements of both Shaviro's and Brassier's thinking can therefore be redeployed via psychoanalysis in a productive way. As I noted above, Brassier concludes *Nihil Unbound* with a section on Freud, the "trauma of life", and theories of psychic *binding* in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". Seizing on Freud's idea that "the aim of all life is death", that organic life has a tendency to return to the quiescence of inorganic existence – which is expressed in the production of pleasure through the binding of excess energies – and what he calls Freud's "realist thesis" that "inanimate things existed before living ones", Brassier suggests that "the catastrophe of extinction reiterates the trauma at the origin of life".³² If, as Freud contends, life emerged in single cell organisms when some external part was "sacrificed" in order to achieve the scission between organic inner and inorganic outer worlds, then – like extinction – this death would also be "outside of experience", present only as a trace compulsively reiterated by the death drive as an unbindable excess.³³ This Brassier relates to what he calls "philosophy's binding of the trauma of extinction", where.

the will to know is driven by the traumatic reality of extinction, and strives to become equal to the trauma of the in-itself whose trace it bears. In becoming equal to it, philosophy achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself.

He thus seems to posit a non-correlationist philosophy modelled *on* the death drive, in its tendency *towards extinction* and its compulsive insistence on giving form to that trauma, producing: "the *adequation without correspondence* between the objective reality of extinction and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise".³⁴ This, however, is a model based upon Freud's idiosyncratic paleobiological musings in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", which rather lack the degree of irrefutable scientific facticity that Brassier suggests the concept of solar death presents to us as a challenge to thought.

In fact, psychoanalysis and *Melancholia* – brought into dialogue here – reveal what Brassier overlooks in his formulation. In the weird space-time distortions that we might expect at the end of the world, it is with the once stridently *anti-Lacanian*³⁵ Shaviro that we find surprising potential for a psychoanalytic reconsideration of *Melancholia*. In his discussion of the film's Overture, Shaviro comments on the use of Richard Wagner's unresolved "Tristan chord" to "create an odd sort of churning suspension" in the film.³⁶ He further notes that this theme is compulsively repeated throughout *Melancholia*, becoming a "maddening automatism [...] a sticking point for the film, a moment that we return to incessantly, because it can never be surpassed".³⁷ This, he suggests, is what "the Lacanians would call the film's death drive: a kind of insurpassable, idiotic reiteration, or – as Žižek puts it – 'the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain'".³⁸

³² Brassier, *Nihil*, 234.

³³ *Ibid.*, 235–6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁵ See Shaviro, *Cinematic*, viii.

³⁶ Shaviro, "MELANCHOLIA", 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13–4.

He continues, suggesting that Wagner's Prelude is the "sonic equivalent – as well as the actual accompaniment to – the visual tableaux that open the film":³⁹ sound and image both working together to create an intense *stasis*.

4 Contradictions of the Cosmos

It is here, then, that we have the basis for developing what Gaston Bachelard called for as a "cosmic psycho-analysis",⁴⁰ in a theory of melancholia providing the ground on which to critique both Brassier's appropriation of Freud and Shaviro's own assimilation of *Melancholia* to speculative realism. Again, Shaviro's overall aim is to refute the idea of the *sublime* and so he does not pursue such avenues, but when he characterises the Overture's tableaux of the end of the world "as paralysis and impossibility",⁴¹ what we can recognise is, precisely, the image of melancholia. The 5000-frames-per-second Phantom HD Gold camera footage used here provides moving stills in a version of what Gilles Deleuze called the affection-image.⁴² Each scene constitutes a visual expression of the affective state of melancholia, most strikingly embodied in Dunst's heavy-lidded, greying close-up that opens the film (Figure 11): the quality of depression playing out across the surface of her body, not as *movement* but as its denial. Extrapolating from Shaviro, I would say that they are *death drive images* giving expression to the *stuckness* of melancholia, the all-encompassing catastrophe of unnameable grief and abyssal sorrow. This returns us to Kristeva's claims that certain experiences suggest the imprint of the death drive within the image, as the abstract deformation of form, as well as her theorisation of a metapsychology of melancholia in relation to a primary masochism that would equally find its origin in the *Todestrieb*.⁴³ Here, in von Trier's shots – not *tableaux vivants* but *tableaux mourants* – do these two ideas coincide: the image of melancholia marked by what Žižek calls the "undead" repetition of the drive.⁴⁴ The hollowing out of the melancholic subject is slowly, painfully enacted in each fatiguing frame.

Moreover, the "living death" of melancholia in these images is inter-cut with the "already dead" of planetary extinction, once again reaffirming the connection between the truth of each. Where Hegel famously declared that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject",⁴⁵ we can grasp that understanding of melancholia can only come through its joint articulation with extinction: the crucial gesture of von Trier's film is its assertion of the direct connection between Justine and the planet, between her depression and the extermination of all life on Earth, as if to tell us in no uncertain terms: *this is how it feels*. The



Figure 11: *Melancholia* (2011): death-drive-image.

³⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁰ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 115.

⁴¹ Shaviro, "MELANCHOLIA", 14.

⁴² Deleuze, *Cinema*, 87–90.

⁴³ Kristeva, *Black*, 16–17.

⁴⁴ Žižek, *Parallax*, 62.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

death drive, as it is lived in melancholia, is – as Žižek reminds us – the opposite of the “return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension”⁴⁶ as the very refusal of death to a subject who is nonetheless already dead. Kristeva speaks of depression as “a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and unnamable. *Cadere*. Waste and cadavers all”.⁴⁷ And yet, *der Todestrieb* is not a drive towards self-annihilation even while, in the heaviness of total despair, this can seem like the only way out; while extinction, *Melancholia* insists, is better understood as an affective state rather than an epistemological object. In fact, von Trier’s film *does* allow us to “think” extinction so long as we do so first *affectively* and then conceptually. In this sense, we encounter extinction only by encountering melancholia itself.

The “tendency towards zero” with which Brassier identifies his project is only *one* aspect of Freud’s formulation of the death drive, which is better understood as the “Nirvana principle”.⁴⁸ It is here that Freud’s own tendency towards dualistic thinking might derail us. Formulation of the “Nirvana principle”, Freud himself concluded in “The Economic Problem of Masochism”,⁴⁹ puts it into external *opposition* with the pleasure principle. This necessitates a conflict of life and death drives that, once we reach “Civilisation and its Discontents”, itself becomes cosmic in scale as, once again, a projection of the inside into the outside. A *dialectical* understanding, by contrast, would see the drive as that which seeks satisfaction irrespective of our conscious will: *putting us at odds with ourselves, undermining us from within. The drive does not, in itself, constitute a compulsion towards the grave*; rather this is a potential outcome of it seeking its goal while another, as Lacan observed, would be the detours that lead to the reproduction of the species.⁵⁰ The drive itself remains totally indifferent to these epiphenomena. The compulsion to repeat puts the subject in opposition *to itself*, and the death drive – which Lacan suggests is virtually the drive as such⁵¹ – can be understood as a name for this self-relation: this *self-relating negativity*. Such a perspective on the drive thus offers a philosophical alternative to Brassier while also challenging certain readings of *Melancholia* in that, as Žižek puts it, “it is wrong to claim that the ‘pure’ death drive would have been the impossible ‘total’ will to (self-)destruction, the ecstatic self-annihilation in which the subject would have rejoined the fullness of the maternal Thing”.⁵²

Encountering melancholia therefore entails a thinking with the death drive: not as Nirvana principle but, as Alenka Zupančič would insist, as the *ontological* question of negativity and the point at which the subject appears.⁵³ Contrary to Brassier’s proposition that a death drive philosophy, as the “organon of extinction”, would be “equal to the trauma of the in-itself”⁵⁴ – which finds its film-philosophical corollary in Shaviri’s claim that Justine, in her depressed position, makes contact with the absolute outside of Meillassoux’s “great outdoors” – I propose a reading of the extinction of *Melancholia* as that which puts us in touch with, if I can be forgiven such an awkward formulation, something like the “great indoors”, instead. The Bachelardian “contradictions of the Cosmos”⁵⁵ are the contradictions of the subject. Rather than the aboriginal trauma of inorganic existence, what the death drive unrelentingly repeats is in fact the traumatic emergence of unconscious enjoyment as constitutive of the Lacanian subject. Where speculative realism goes in search of the in-itself, it thus finds only the recursive insistence of the Real. And where Brassier attempts to think extinction, as the extinction of thought, von Trier’s Justine *lives* extinction in the embodied knowledge of the melancholic. *Melancholia* thus leads us to the undead life of the death drive: already dead, and never dying, before every dawn and beyond every horizon, persisting in the curved space of the subject.

⁴⁶ Žižek, *Parallax*, 62.

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *Black*, 15.

⁴⁸ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, SE 18, 56.

⁴⁹ Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism”, SE 19, 160.

⁵⁰ Lacan, *Encore*, 120.

⁵¹ Lacan, *Écrits*, 719.

⁵² Žižek, *Parallax*, 62.

⁵³ Zupančič, *What*, 106–110.

⁵⁴ Brassier, *Nihil*, 239.

⁵⁵ Bachelard, *Poetics*, 115.

5 Economic Depression

We cannot, however, abandon the outside entirely. That apocalyptic planet might hurtle through the void of space towards Justine, but melancholia itself does not exist in a vacuum. Von Trier's film shows us that a speculative realist philosophy of extinction does not, in fact, get us to an outside, but emphasis on the affective state of extinction that it so compellingly portrays could also put us at risk of entrapment. Fisher argues that the contemporary treatment of mental health entails a fundamental turn *inward* so that depression becomes reduced to a question of individual neurobiology and personal history. This constitutes a "privatisation" of the problem that does not just parallel the individualisation and atomisation of society under neoliberalism but plays an active role in the onset and reproduction of what Fisher calls capitalist realism, or the pervasive sense that there can be no alternative to the present social order.⁵⁶ If we accept the lie of meritocracy, then we happily accept that we deserve our successes, but we must equally *deserve our failures*. This crisis of "responsibilisation" means that we blame ourselves rather than blaming the social structures that make it impossible to succeed – and which are, thereby, rendered invisible to us – inducing an attitude of "fatalistic submission" to capitalist domination.⁵⁷ Such depoliticization of depression thus enacts the ideological enclosure of capitalist realism and its continued maintenance through, for example, the self-help industry. Lacan himself reproduces this neoliberal entrepreneurialism of the subject in his attribution of blame to the individual (in their "moral failing"), while, for Fisher, the global pandemic of depression should instead be recognised as the melancholia of capitalist realism – a psychosomatic response to a closed world devoid of hope – and solutions sought in political economy as much as the talking cure.

Fisher situates his critique as a response to specific changes in the landscape that have led to "pervasive [...] cultural and political sterility"⁵⁸ since Jameson's original intervention on late capitalism and the end of the world, which signal not so much what comes *after* postmodernism as its *exhaustion*. Capitalist realism is the depressive comedown after those heady days of the 1980s. Where the neoliberal slogan "there is no alternative" perhaps originally indicated a question of preference for capitalism over other, less favourable systems – *It may not be perfect, but it's the best we've got* – it has now taken on "an ontological weight".⁵⁹ There are not even any other conceivable alternatives from which we might choose so that it is no longer necessary to make the case for capitalism as a "good" thing: *It's the only thing that ever could be*. What Fisher identifies as "depressive realism"⁶⁰ in this context can be understood as adjustment to this capitalist reality, a lowering of expectations to the point of total indifference because, while they can certainly get worse, there is no chance of things getting any better.

There is, then, a parallel between the "speculative" critique (Meillassoux/Thacker/Brassier) and the deflationary perspective of the Fisherian depressive, who "thinks that they are being realistic, that they have perceived the real state of things denuded of illusion".⁶¹ Each supposes that they have taken up a position outside of the life of the world, which gives them special access to knowledge: a conjunction embodied in that melancholic pessimist Rustin Cohle's declaration that he was "mainlining the secret truth of the universe". The recurrence of McConaughey's star image here, of course, ties us back to the cosmic dimensions of *Interstellar* and his other grieving screen father, Coop; while Cohle's soliloquies in Season One of *True Detective* (2014) – what Fisher might call his depressive "case against the world"⁶² – not only echo Justine's judgement that "The world is evil [...] Nobody will miss it", but also demonstrate the influence of philosophers including Thacker and Brassier on the series. Yet this turns out to be a dead end – as *Melancholia* shows, a turn to an inner world that has been emptied out – which takes on a political dimension where the depressive "believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" and all that is left to do is accept the present state of things.⁶³

⁵⁶ Fisher, *k-punk*, 461.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 749.

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Capitalist*, 7.

⁵⁹ Fisher, *k-punk*, 462.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 576.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 667.

⁶² Fisher, *Ghosts*, 59.

⁶³ Fisher, *Capitalist*, 5.



Figure 12: *Melancholia* (2011): stuck in capitalist realism.

For von Trier and Fisher alike are apocalypse and melancholia intimately related. Is *Melancholia*, therefore, a work of capitalist realism? In its spectacle of planetary destruction, it clearly does not envisage an *alternative* to the present system and thus might seem to reaffirm the Jamesonian adage. What the film *does* demonstrate is discontent within the capitalist reality. Justine's world of conspicuous consumption and hyper-accumulation is shown to be vapid and ridiculous: her wedding limousine is too big to wind its way around the driveway (Figure 12); her brother-in-law, John (Kiefer Sutherland), bloviates about his expenditure on the reception and the number of holes on his golf course; Justine's boss, Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), turns his Best Man speech into an employee appraisal meeting; while his subordinates – bridegroom, Michael (Alexander Skarsgård), and lackey, Tim (Brady Courbet) – are simply clueless as to how to connect with the melancholic bride.

In Todd McGowan's analysis, such dissatisfaction combined with the film's appeals to the Romantic tradition – particularly the repeated use of Wagner – suggests that *Melancholia* puts us “on the way to the disaster of fascism”, with the planet Melancholia constituting an ultimate authority that will relieve the subject of the burden of subjectivity.⁶⁴ It is the case that *Melancholia*'s aestheticisation of the end aligns the film with Walter Benjamin's identification of fascism with the “supreme pleasure” of “self-annihilation”,⁶⁵ Justine's apparent preference for classical art over modernist abstraction has unsettling echoes of the Nazi *Entarte Kunst* exhibition,⁶⁶ and von Trier's own, typically controversial statements about Hitler while promoting the film at Cannes would seem to support McGowan's contention. However, this would be to overlook melancholia itself. McGowan characterises Justine as an “hysteric”, posing challenges to a series of disappointing masters (Jack, John, her father Dexter) while finally finding a satisfying partner in the planet Melancholia, which will put an end to her suffering.⁶⁷ Yet this is not quite what happens. Many critics assert that Justine seems to “get better” in the latter parts of the film but, while she does seem to experience a brief period of respite as she enjoys the taste of jam and gathering fruit in the garden, Justine *remains depressed*. She subsequently tells her sister not to mourn the “evil” Earth and when the end finally comes, she does not welcome it. Justine's apparent “acting out” should be understood in this context, as coming from the leaden burden of the capitalist horizon rather than from the need for a master: she replaces a display of Kazimir Malevich with Bruegel, Caravaggio and Millais not necessarily because she romanticises death but because their direct representations of suffering better accord with her mood in a moment of frantic desperation. Michael cannot console her not because he is a “weak authority figure” but because *everything* falters in the face of melancholia. All is lost to the pit of depression that drains the life from things – even a sun-dappled orchard – and turns them to ashes. Such moments do not make *Melancholia* a fascist film so much as they highlight the potential pull of fascist enjoyment – as destruction of both self and other – in a time and place of hopelessness such as we find in the depression at the end of the world. *Melancholia* thus performs an *affective critique* of speculative realism and capitalist realism alike, showing how each will inevitably lead to a kind of ruin.

⁶⁴ McGowan, “Not”, 198.

⁶⁵ Quoted in McGowan, “Not”, 181.

⁶⁶ See McGowan, “Not”, 194.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 193.

Against this catastrophe, Fisher calls for a return to what he sees as the politicised ground of the anti-psychiatry movement,⁶⁸ but this could risk a Deleuzo-Guattarian-style romanticisation of suffering and a collapse back into the Nirvana principle, as demonstrated in certain readings of von Trier's film. Fisher's position finds firmer ground in the assessment of Lacanian analyst Pierre-Gilles Gueguen, who insists: "the Unconscious is political, in the sense that it concerns above all the social bond between a speaking being and others. From this viewpoint Depression and suicidal passage to the act will be considered according to our paradigm as diseases of disconnection [*débranchement*] of the social bond".⁶⁹ Rather than being a burden on the individual, the "moral failing" of melancholia is on the part of a social order committed to capitalist extinction. Gueguen equally shares Fisher's commitment to the cure where he asserts his aim as being to restore "the possibility of action and of the social bond".⁷⁰ The disasters of neoliberal capitalism and global depression must be faced together rather than alone.

6 Another End of the World

Capitalist realism and speculative realism equally depend upon reference to an outside. For speculative realism, as we have seen, this takes the form of an absolute outside that would allow us to escape the supposed philosophical impasses of correlationism. For capitalism, an outside is required as endless externality (of the natural world) into which extraction and exploitation can extend endlessly to support the fantasy of endless growth: from strip-mining asteroids to colonising Mars once resources on Earth are exhausted. Yet, at the same time, capitalist realism cannot abide any reference to the outside – understood as the expression of an alternative to the capitalist mode – and so effects an enclosure of the world within its ideological horizon. The depressive realism that we find there is nothing but an expression of the inherent limits of capitalism, while, as Zupančič points out, "the Great Outside is the fantasy that conceals the Real that is already *right here*".⁷¹ The truth of extinction is not to be found beyond the horizon of the human, but within melancholia as embodiment of the death drive. In both cases does this appeal to the external serve to avoid the internal contradictions of the system.

Melancholia allows us to *traverse the fantasy*: not, as it is commonly *misunderstood*, by going all the way the through the fantasy to reach some non-fantasmatic, non-ideological other side, but by entering into the fantasy *fully* in order to encounter its negative core. Von Trier's film shows us the end not as some unmediated truth of absolute externality, but to remind us – as Hegel would put it – that philosophy begins at the end, as "the reconciliation following upon the destruction of that real world which thought has begun".⁷² The apocalypse is prologue to *Melancholia*, after all. Yet, as Ruda notes, this "is not reconciliation that overcomes destruction but reconciliation with destruction".⁷³ Traversing the fantasy of extinction does not reveal knowledge of an absolute outside but of the absolute, inside: the absolute knowledge that contradiction is absolute, as the very substance of the subject and of the social order. Knowing this, one thing fills the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: that if we look to the starry heavens above us, we will inevitably find the self-relating negativity within us. The apocalypse is not just cosmological, while depression must never be purely privatised. If the end is, in the end, inevitable then, by embracing this truth, another end of the world might become possible.

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⁶⁸ Fisher, *k-punk*, 667.

⁶⁹ Gueguen, "Plunge", 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁷¹ Zupančič, *What*, 76.

⁷² Hegel, *Lectures*, 52.

⁷³ Ruda, *Abolishing*, 105.

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