



Prognosis End-Times: Madness and Prophecy in Melancholia and Take Shelter

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Conceptions of madness and, subsequently, its representations in art and literature have changed dramatically from the time of Hippocrates theory of the four humours to the advent of modern psychiatry and its accompanying billion dollar pharmacological industry. 'Melancholia', a condition first characterised by Hippocrates as an excess of black bile and later by Sigmund Freud as "grief without an object" has now become a literary or filmic trope on the one hand and a neurological disorder diagnosed as depression on the other (Burton 2012, Freud 2005). Madness, once a blanket term covering a diverse group ranging from 'incorrigible' women, to the violent, the traumatised and the 'weak of mind', is now reframed as mental illness, a variety of distinct disorders of emotion, thought and behaviour, each concatenation with its own specific diagnostic and treatment protocols (Association 2000, Foucault 2006: 79).

In the last century, behavioural normalcy has found stronghold in the guise of a multitude of forms of self-help focussing on mental health. Concurrently, the anti-psychiatry movement and theorists from R.D Laing to Deleuze and Guattari, have focussed on the ways in which the paradigms of psychiatric thought – such as the



Oedipus complex in all its guises and the predication of desire on lack – cripple those who dwell in late capitalism (Deleuze 1983, Szasz 2011, Laing 1960).¹

In his *History of Madness* Michel Foucault tracks centuries of madness, using documents from houses of confinement, letters, court documents, news items and the history of western painting and literature (Foucault 2006). The latter is rich with primary sources. Turner became mad, as did Artaud. Both continued to produce work that influenced the imagination of madness. Famously, De Sade became an archetype for a new definition of madness. The historical relationship between madness and artistic genius is almost as marked as that between madness and poverty (Foucault 2006: 59-75)

Until the renaissance, madness was also intrinsically linked to prophecy and the end of time. In 15th century painting for instance, the “weave of experience and secrecy, of immediate images and hidden enigmas, is unfurled...as the *tragic madness of the world*.” So too, “the theme of the end of the world, and of the great final violence, was also a part of the critical experience of madness such as it was formulated in literature.” (Foucault 2006: 24, 23)

After the renaissance however, in the period Foucault defines as 'classicism' the link between madness, “forbidden knowledge”, prophecy and the end of days was gradually dropped from the popular imagination and the mad subject became an object, rather than a possessor of knowledge. For the early moderns madness was coupled with unreason and moreover, “it is still true today that our scientific and medical knowledge of madness rests implicitly on the prior constitution of an ethical experience of unreason.” (Foucault 2006: 18, 89)

Foucault's genealogy shows the intimate connection between our conceptions of madness and the shaping of the family as a disciplinary space. It was in the asylums of the classical period, he asserts, that madness was first held up to the gaze. The community were its judges and the family charged with its keeping or its exorcism. Madness became subject of a new medical gaze, that of psychiatry, a discipline which Foucault describes as “a monologue by reason *about* madness”. He notes how the chains and shackles of the middle ages were replaced by the straightjacket, a device which further restricts the wearer as the violence of their movements increases,

¹ 'Late capitalism' is used here in Frederic Jameson's sense of a term deriving from the Frankfurt School's identification of an increasingly “tendential web of bureaucratic control” as well as the “interpenetration of government and big business” and progressing to the point where “no one particularly notices the expansion of the state sector and bureaucratization any longer”. Writing in the late '80s, long before the Global Financial Crisis, Jameson describes late capitalism as a system marked by: “The new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies and gentrification on a now global scale” (1991: xvii-xix, xii).



showing that “in madness, the experience was no longer of an absolute conflict between reason and unreason, but rather of a play – always relative, always mobile – between freedom and its limits”. (Foucault 2006: xi, 440).

This sense of play between freedom and limits continues into the present day via the trend for treating the symptoms of madness with ongoing pharmaceutical dependence. Now, an individual unable to function within a system is medicated, and hence becomes dependant on the very same system.

Madness then has historical links with desperation, discipline and repression but also with creativity and mysticism. And the existence of madness is essential to assert the continued existence of reason and therefore social continuity.

Today, madness is renamed mental illness and categorized under a list of pathologies published as *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the DSM), a 943-page tome that grows yearly and includes every complaint and dissatisfaction imaginable (Association 2000). It is an industry inseparable from the pharmaceutical industry and also from our conception of surveillance and education, two mechanisms Foucault includes in his evocation of 'governmentality', a conception of state power not limited to politics, that exerts disciplinary power on the populous. In short, we do not want to be considered mad, and so submit to various disciplinary measures, whether administered by ourselves, our families, community or experts such as psychiatrists (Foucault 2008).

Mental illness is still held up for the scrutiny of the community through educational 'awareness' campaigns on the 'social problem' of suicide, or empathy campaigns that frame anxiety as depression as outside forces which strike at their unsuspecting victims without warning. Popular culture and the media also guide our gaze to representations, which utilise the psychiatric pathologies to create tropes and explain developments in fictive (TV, books, movies) and non-fictive (current events, the news) spheres (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Source: Beyond Blue: <<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx>>

In film, pathologies become character tropes such as the psychotic serial killer, the hyperactive teen-delinquent, the depressed housewife or the happy fool. Here, the hysteric woman (a condition once characterised by a roving womb and treated with medical masturbation) exists, often uncomplicated alongside the idiot savant (Maines 1999).² These tropes are often presented without further elaboration and serve as a priori explanation for the movements of actors within narratives, supporting the idea that, for the mentally ill, pathology equates to behaviour. Here, the pathologised subject is, in a Foucauldian sense, engaged in play with the limits of freedom, presented simultaneously as without agency and a dangerous actor.

Some films use mental illness/madness as allegory or metaphor, a vehicle for the critique of our social system. 2011 saw the cinematic release of two films notable in this respect, and on which this article will focus – Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter* and Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*. Here the link between madness, prophecy and apocalypse is

² Examples of these tropes in film can be found in *Manhunter*, *Safe*, *Donnie Darko* and *The Fisher King*. For further discussion see the wikis at tvtropes.org. For a detailed and accessible, feminist analysis of tropes in film and TV see Anita Sarkeesian's Feminist Frequency video series *Tropes v Women* at: <<http://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency>>(accessed 10.1.2013)



restated in order to form a greater critique about a specific, post global financial crisis moment in late capitalism, a time we cannot help experiencing as critical but which remains situated, as Frank Kermode observes, "in the midst" (Kermode 2000: 8).

From a cinematic perspective, both films can reasonably be described as postmodern in their genre-blending presentation of realistic family-drama narratives, intersected by the devices of horror and science fiction, such as fantastic sequences and special effects as well as dream sequences that fit uncannily within the naturalist style of the film. So too, they both appropriate biblical, advertising and art imagery. While neither film presents an alternate world, there are elements in the portrayal of their present-day, North American setting, which evokes, if not the dystopian tradition, then at least the seeming impossibility, for the present moment, of using the apocalyptic arc to get to a utopia. Through the journeys of the respective protagonists this impossibility (or nihilism) is depicted as part of a psychological state, inherent to the temporal moment in which the narrative is set.

Von Trier's *Melancholia* presents a world-ending interplanetary collision as the cosmic correlative of wealthy protagonist Justine's battle with depression. Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter* on the other hand, links apocalyptic visions and prophecy with schizophrenia and presents an atheistic, working class prophet, a protagonist whose visions of storms reveal, not only a catastrophic future but also the sense of being at breaking point experienced by many living in rural North America at in the mid 2000s.³ *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* present schizophrenia and depression respectively as 'reasonable' mental responses to the specific conditions of their protagonist's lives at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a time characterised by economic as well as political and environmental instability in North America, as evidenced by the global financial crisis and Hurricane Katrina. They also attempt to represent, within the cinematic context, the subjective experience of these conditions, often described as existing on an isolated, chemical or neurological level in the sufferer and not corresponding to any phenomenological connection with the real world.

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag notes how, problematically, metaphors and the imagery of illness have been used to illustrate the injustice of society and today, these metaphors are extended on to master diseases, which are then used to diagnose the ill health of all of society. Metaphors surrounding disease are often reductive, for example cholera's attendant metaphors, in retrospect, "simplified a complex self, reducing it to a sick environment" (Sontag 1977: 41).

This argument corresponds to mental illness too, where selves are camouflaged within the madness of pathologies or described as products of a sick civilisation.⁴ In

³ Both interplanetary collision and great storms are familiar from blockbuster disaster narratives such as *Armageddon*, *When Worlds Collide*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Twister*.

⁴ An important example that Sontag devotes another essay to is the insistence by certain fundamentalist Christian sects on seeing AIDS as a plague wrought by God upon sinners. While this is a pertinent instance of linking illness with biblical prophecy through metaphor, it is beyond the scope of this paper.



the films discussed here however, the individual is neither blamed nor reduced in their condition, and madness exists in *relationship* to a broader context.

Other theorists have asserted the link between the rise of capitalism and the pathology of mental illness in more radical ways. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari insist that the schizophrenic is not only a product of capitalism (as much as Prell Shampoo or Ford Cars) but also its external limit and that accessing schizophrenia *as a process* will allow us to decode the despotic “flows of signification” which are part of the repressive power of capitalism. Here, madness disturbs rather than locates meaning. Schizophrenia in their conception cannot be impacted by metaphor because it disrupts the process of signification rendering metaphor impossible. Schizophrenia then, is a tool of resistance, and, as it is held as both a limit of and a potential antidote to capitalism, schizophrenia also becomes an apocalyptic concept i.e. the processes of schizophrenia or, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it the 'schizophrenization' of signification, reveals a new world. Here, it's not that schizophrenia, as a process or production, somehow 'knows' the limit, or has some mystic intelligence but rather the schizo is said to embody (theoretically) the absolute limits of capitalism (Deleuze 1983: 113, 245). Jameson too links schizophrenia with postmodernity. Writing at the end of the 20th century he claims it is as if “our utter forgetfulness of the past exhausted itself in the vacant but mesmerized contemplation of a schizophrenic present” (1991: xii).

In the case of *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* schizophrenia and depression form part of a metaphoric schema indicating the impossibility of clarity of mind or indeed any form of normality in late capitalism as well as remaining intact as an experience for the sufferer and those around them. The protagonists are not reduced to their illness but rather, are lifted from individual pathology into a greater context of alienation, grief and trauma, which is spatial, emotional, political, historical and always in flux.

Neither film refutes the existence of mental illnesses such as depression and schizophrenia. Rather they seek to restore, through cinematic presentation, a poetic imagination of madness. This is done both within the narrative and diegetically through immersing the viewer in the catastrophic fantasy of the protagonists.

Take Shelter's masterful use of the devices of horror film including making the familiar sinister, a staccato score and the use of bird's eye or partially concealed camera angle creates a strong sense of suspicion and foreboding for the viewer. *Melancholia* uses visual styles such as montage, super slow motion filming, a highly saturated palette and computer animation to bring to life an uncanny vision of the end of the world, which is inhabited viscerally by the audience. In both instances, the protagonist's psychology is indivisible from the mise-en-scene and we are invited through the mechanism of cinema, to partake (and too delight, as many of these sequences possess unnerving beauty) in their mad, prophetic visions.

Despite Foucault's assertions, madness and apocalyptic prophecy have not become entirely untangled since the renaissance. In popular culture the trope of the mad mystic (*The Fisher King*) the person from another time persecuted as mad (*12 Monkeys*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*) or the prescient vagabond (*The Road*) are familiar. So too a long tradition of religious mania exists in North America, where



charismatic, self-proclaimed prophets such as Jim Jones and David Koresh led small groups into delirium and the end of (at least their own) days (Boyer 1992). These incidents highlight the interpretive quality of madness. To those inside the cult, following the teachings of their prophet will save them from Armageddon, it is the rest of us who are mad.

What the narratives of *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* present however is prophecy without religious agenda or belief. The annihilating catastrophes evoked in both films do not result in full blown apocalypses with their accompanying revelation of new worlds and the salvation of a righteous elect, rather the films adhere to a secular trope of apocalypse and reveal, instead of a New Jerusalem, a critique of capitalism and its pretext of infinite expansion (Meadows 2012).

The first and last shots of Jeff Nichols' second feature *Take Shelter* are of a storm. In the first, protagonist Curtis (Michael Shannon) stares at the threatening horizon, his upturned palms are splattered, with yellow rain, "like fresh motor oil" or perhaps stigmata (Nichols 2011). We then cut to Curtis in the shower, attempting to wash away his sense of impending doom, then to yellow eggs – domesticity and continuance. There is no mention of the weather at the breakfast table and the sun appears to be shining outside. It is business as usual in Curtis' 'regular', white, working class household in small town Ohio.

Curtis works in construction for a patronising and demanding boss. His wife Samantha (Jessica Chastain) sells crafts and works as a casual seamstress, saving her takings in a biscuit tin for the small dream of a beach vacation. The family is under various financial pressures, not the least of which being the care and education of their hearing impaired daughter, Hannah, for whom they are currently battling insurance companies, in order to secure a cochlea ear implant.

A tight weave of family, work and community responsibilities begins to unravel for Curtis with the recurrence of vivid dreams in which a terrible storm turns all that is familiar strange, making friendly neighbours malevolent and rendering all the most banal aspects of the day to day as dire threat. Curtis, a man in his 30s, wets the bed, has fits in his sleep.

On waking Curtis is unable to shake the impressions of his dreams. Following a nightmare in which his dog attacks him, his arm hurts all day. Unable to reconcile the dream with reality, he puts the animal 'out back' and eventually gives him away. A dream of a co-worker turning violent leads to an enduring distrust and a terrible real life feud. Curtis begins to see the storms in daylight. A vision at work prompts him to leave the construction site and drive fast and far.

The significance of Curtis' debilitating dreams is underscored by a family history of mental illness. His mother developed schizophrenia in her 30s resulting in her moving into an assisted living facility. Fearing that he is genetically doomed to follow his mother's path, Curtis goes to the library to read about the signs of schizophrenia. He takes self-diagnosis quizzes and informs a local councillor (there are no psychiatrists in the area) that he has exhibited two of the five signs of the disorder. He visits his mother to ask her about her own sense of the onset of her illness, however in their interaction we are left with the impression that the subjective experience of



schizophrenia is shameful and should not be talked about. When asked, Curtis' mother first tells her son that she hardly remembers the time of her diagnosis. She seems to parrot the line that she simply became unable to take care of her young children. When pushed though, she lowers her voice to a whisper, "I thought people were watching me," she says.

This admission prompts Curtis to silence his Mother. He neither wishes to let her get carried away with the delusions that constitute her experience, nor hear a shameful echo of his own paranoia. Despite any delusions though, a real sense of scrutiny forms part of the objective experience of Curtis' life in a small community. In the case of Curtis and his mother, it may well be a statement of fact to say that 'everyone' is watching them.

While Curtis suspects that his dreams and visions are symptoms of the onset of schizophrenia, he concurrently develops an obsessive interest in fixing the tornado shelter at the back of his house. The viewer is introduced to the shelter itself as a door in the perfect green of his lawn, suggesting a psychoanalytic portal into a deeper unconscious; a symbolic representation that supports either the reading that Curtis is developing the schizophrenia latent in his genes or that he is coming into possession of a prophetic, unconscious knowledge. As he gathers supplies for making the shelter fully storm-ready, Curtis struggles under the dual conviction that he is both acting foolishly and out of necessity. He spends hundreds on a gas mask and then throws it into the truck with exasperated guilt.

Sarah Lichtman describes the cold war craze for DIY and particularly fall-out shelters as a patriotic way to assert masculinity (2006). By contrast, in the world of *Take Shelter* spending money and time on renovating the storm shelter is seen as an act of paranoia and mental instability within Curtis' community. Here, instead of survival predicated on an individual's willingness to learn and implement practices such as catastrophe preparedness, it is predicated on the individual's capacity to ignore any sense of impending doom.

Curtis' urge to protect his family is seen as evidence of insanity. When he tells Samantha of his intention she is baffled and then angry, especially when he takes on a dangerous home improvement loan in order to renovate the shelter. Curtis' friends and family all caution against wasting money on such a useless endeavour at a financially critical time. Rather than preparing for some future environmental catastrophe he should be labouring his way through the present economic one.

For Curtis though, as the prospect of developing a crippling mental illness threatens to make him unable to provide for his family, financially or emotionally, the shelter becomes paramount. Here at least is a place he can protect his family physically from the inevitable storm. As other relationships break down, Curtis begins to substitute the shelter for the symbolic safety offered by his community and country at large. This substitution can be read as a direct comment on the general dissolution felt in North America in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when so many lost their homes and jobs as well as a sense of foreboding in a century of geographic instability in which North America fell victim to 9 major hurricanes in 10 years. In fact, Curtis' plight echoes that of early proponents of the theory of climate change. His question,



on witnessing the lightning charges on the side of the highway – “Is anybody seeing this?” – could easily be applied to the exponentially hotter summers and more frequent natural disasters that seem to have characterised the first decade of the 21st century (Weart 2008). Though, just as the fall-out shelters of the 1950s were shown to provide no guarantee of safety in the case of nuclear strike, Curtis' project offers mainly symbolic protection, a factor that may well be a nod to the latest scientific reports on climate change, which suggest it's too late to introduce any useful evasive measures (Knight 2012, Lichtman 2006).

In its deployment of film style *Take Shelter* encourages our sympathy with Curtis' fears. Non-diegetically, an eerie, suspenseful soundtrack makes banal sites such as the Sparkle Supermarket seem sinister. Wide shots show Curtis as only a small part of some greater cosmic chaos and we frequently view the storm over his shoulder. Tracking shots encourage us to see Curtis as a part of, rather than the inventor of the apocalyptic visions. Masks of grotesque judgement on the faces of his neighbours support the paranoid view that at any moment a friend might become a foe.

When his spurned buddy really does attack Curtis at the Lions Club Supper over perceived disloyalty at work, Curtis is unable to uphold his stoic veneer. In a disturbing outburst he yells to his peers who “think he is crazy” that a storm is coming, “like nothing you have ever seen before, and not a one a you is prepared for it”. A particularly terrifying sequence sees all the furniture in Curtis' lounge room unhinged from gravity, lunging toward the ceiling suggesting his prophecy is not just about storm but a complete, molecular disruption of everyday life including the laws of physics (Nichols 2011).

While religious publication *The Christian Century* read Curtis as “a prophet of the old testament” whose storm shelter is “like an ark” on which he must keep “hammering away”, it is important to note that Curtis, to the chagrin of his wife's family, is not a Christian and refuses to attend church services (Petrakis 2011). His prophetic notions therefore lack religious motivation, despite their obvious biblical symbology (the bird imagery particularly, which we will encounter again in *Melancholia* is evoked in the gospels of *Ezekiel* and *Zephaniah* as well as *The Book of Revelations*) (Bible Gateway 2012). When Curtis warns his community, it is not in order to provoke repentance or to urge them to follow him but rather out of a sense of desperation in the face of their own harsh judgement of him and his fervent unshakable sense of an impending, traumatic future. However unlike in Marge Piercy's feminist dystopian novel *Woman on the End of Time*, in which a woman, institutionalised for her visions of a terrible future, is able to overcome persecution and circumvent catastrophe, Curtis is unable to affect any kind of social change in order to prevent the storm.

Neither does Curtis' prophecy cast overt religious judgement on the end times in which he lives but rather suggests a particular kind of instability, which I term 'post-sustainability' – the sense that things cannot continue as they are. This sense is highlighted in the film by the omission of moral judgements in favour of continual references to unsustainable practice, whether environmental or social: the vacation money saved in a biscuit tin, the overpriced sleeping tablets, the uncooperative



insurance company and insufficient health care infrastructure, news reports of disastrous chemical spills, land stripped for development and even the unnatural yellow food served at every meal and fetishized by the camera. In making the latter a motif, *Take Shelter* draws the viewer's gaze to the everyday signs of unsustainability.

By the time Curtis goes to a councillor with his DIY diagnosis and tells her he simply, "needs to know what to get on to get this under control", we understand that the irony is, for Curtis, the USA and perhaps the world at large, the time for Band-Aid cures and the dream of being under control has long passed (*ibid.*).

There is a similar sense of life being lived post-sustainability in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. Like *Take Shelter*, *Melancholia* opens with a glimpse of the future catastrophe. In the first shot protagonist Justine (Kirsten Dunst) blinks heavy, depressed lids as a rain of dead birds falls in agonising slow motion behind her. The prelude to the film continues by way of a montage of 16-colour saturated, fantastic images of apocalypse set to the overture from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*: a bride wades through a jungle of oppressive tendrils. A charge of electricity emanates from Justine's fingertips. She stands Christ-like in the midst of a storm of moths. Her sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) sinks into the disintegrating green by the 19th hole of a fantastic golf course, which von Trier has said is symbolic of limbo (Sinnerbrink 2012: 4). A painting, Bruegel's 1566 *Hunters in The Snow* burns to ashes. On the horizon, a magnificent planet, the errant *Melancholia*, rises to eclipse the sky.

These images create, as Sinnerbrink has observed, a kind of "uncanny tableaux vivant effect" as well as recalling the kind of popular fantasy art we might associate with genre fiction paperbacks or even tarot cards and astrology books from the ever apocalyptic and often 'mad' New Age movement. (Figure 2)



Figure 2

Source: Beyond Blue: <<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?>>



After this 'prelude' montage, the film is presented as two acts. The first given the title 'Justine' after its protagonist, is closer to von Trier's usual visual style than the spectacular prelude. In the opening, a hand held camera follows a farcical attempt to get a stretch limo up a tiny, rural driveway.

The bride, Justine, and her groom, Michael, both take turns trying to manoeuvre the vehicle before heading to their wedding, two hours late, on foot. When they arrive at the venue, an opulent family mansion, Justine pauses to observe a red star in the night sky. Her rationalist brother-in-law John informs her that the star is a part of Scorpio.

While the viewer (who only moments before was witness to the interplanetary collision of the prelude) already suspects that this star represents cosmic threat, the first half of the film ignores this and continues in its narrative, perhaps echoing the way we continue our own lives in the face of environmental catastrophe or even the eventual and inevitable heat death of the universe evoked by Jean Francois Lyotard in his postmodern fable (Lyotard 1997). Rather than dwelling on such cosmic calamity however, the first half of *Melancholia* concentrates on depicting, in painful detail, the destruction of Justine's fairy-tale wedding. This bleak comedy of manners recalls fellow 'dogma' director Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* and there is certainly the sense that the overblown, opulent occasion of the wedding is the orgy before the end, in the fin-de-siècle sense of romantic, wilful decay; the notion that civilization leads to decadence and ultimately death (Vinterberg 1998).

We meet Justine's dysfunctional upper class family, her prudish control freak sister Claire and greedy prig brother-in-law, her insensitive lush father and stubborn, selfish mother. We watch her go sour on her well-meaning yet gormless groom and shallow advertising boss. Justine is described by all (even herself) as a handful, a person who must promise not to make a scene, a person who has days of sadness and who feels as though she is (like the fantastic image of the prelude) wading through heavy, grey yarn.

In some ways, Justine epitomises the hypocrisy of success in late capitalism. She is unreasonably wealthy in a world of economic collapse. She even works in advertising (often heralded as the corporate coloniser of art) convincing people of their desire for unnecessary things. But she is also a melancholic who cannot bear to enter into the pretence that everything will be okay. By the end of the wedding she has quit her job, spurned her new husband and burned her bridges. Unlike *Take Shelter's* Curtis, who fights for his modest existence while simultaneously preparing for a future that threatens to annihilate it, Justine self-destructively abandons the privileged life laid out for her and works to annihilate every opportunity it presents. By the end of her wedding night her marriage is over, she is unemployed and her family is atomised.

In the cool light of dawn, Claire convinces Justine to go for a ride. When her horse refuses to cross a bridge beneath a clearing, Justine dismounts and notes that the red star she had noticed at the start of her wedding, the one which John claimed was a part of the constellation Scorpio, is no longer there. "Antares is missing," she



observes, though we know that the star is not Antares but rather Melancholia, Justine's cosmic corollary, already set on its apocalyptic trajectory.

In the second half of the film, given the title 'Claire', we see Justine return to the mansion in the grips of a paralysing depression. She can't walk or bathe herself. Her favourite meal tastes "like ashes". For Justine, the world is already a dead thing. Claire takes on the thankless task of nursing her sister and we are given the distinctly classed impression that Justine, unlike Curtis, would be able to live on in opulent devastation within the bourgeoisie family unit, like many of the mad of the classical period, or in the literary tradition, like the mad woman in the attic of stories such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

This is not to be though, as Melancholia is looming on the horizon, its approach the only thing that lifts Justine's spirits even as her sister nervously searches for information and clings to her husband's unconvincing assurances from that all the 'real scientists' know Melancholia will pass right by the earth offering no more than a beautiful spectacle.

Von Trier has no sympathy for "the vacuity of a naïve rationalist optimism in the face of the 'crisis of world'", the rationalist is first up against the wall come the end of time – when it becomes obvious to all that Melancholia will not pass peacefully in the night sky John commits suicide rather than admit the error of 'real science' (Sinnerbrink 2012). Justine meanwhile claims foreknowledge of the fate of Earth via a psychic sense she has possessed since childhood. She is cheered by the imminent demise of Earth as it confirms her intuition that things cannot continue as they are.

In this way we see a similar mode of post-sustainability thinking in *Melancholia* as in *Take Shelter*. Here, it is wealth that is an unsustainable delusion rather than poverty, however the conclusion – it's all over for capitalism – is the same. Claire's obsession with making things nice, her insistence that they do the end of the world "right", with "a glass of wine on the patio" exemplifies how wealth and consumption mask deeper anxieties and inadequacies. Of course, Justine thinks this plan is "a piece of shit". She can no more play Pollyanna than shake the conviction that life on earth is "evil". To keep things nice as the planet and all human life are incinerated is, for her, abhorrent (Von Trier 2011).

The contrast between John's deluded rationalism, Claire's controlling anxiousness and Justine's nihilistic certainty can be read as refusal on behalf of the film maker to perpetuate the coupling of madness and unreason. In *Melancholia* the perspective of the rational man is presented as far more dissociated from reality than that of the melancholic Justine or the hysteric Claire, and perhaps worst of all, the rational position is cowardly, denying inconvenient truths.

The judgement of the film however does perpetuate traditionally gendered pathologies of emotion, though it's not clear whether this is intentional, satire, or unconscious. While *Melancholia* shows nothing but contempt for John (the man of science), Claire, who is arguably the more female character (she is a mother, a care giver) is given the more female diagnosis of hysteria while Justine, a protagonist with whom von Trier himself famously identifies is poised to resurrect the dignity and intelligence of depression. Von Trier's own battle with depression is significant here, as



it is precisely this condition that he seeks to open to the viewer (and perhaps even endow with a heroic sensibility) in *Melancholia* (Thorsen 2011).

While the anxious person rails against death, an inevitability not dealt with adequately by late capitalism, the melancholic is already, by Freud's definition, mourning for a lost object (Freud 2005). In Justine's case this lost object is an evil world where happiness is impossible, where any worthwhile human project is already doomed.⁵ This is a world already dead to her, already ashes. The actual Earth on the contrary need not be grieved for. "Nobody will miss it," Justine tells Claire ironically the morning before the collision. When Claire insists that perhaps there is hope of life on some other planet, some place for her son to grow up, Justine refuses. She claims once more to "know things" and that "when I say we are alone we are alone. Life is only on Earth and not for long".

For Slavoj Žižek, this acceptance of the finitude of the human race is not evidence of a nihilistic worldview but rather of the inherent optimism of the film (Žižek 2011). Žižek takes this idea further and claims that if we are to resist the logics of totalitarianism, we all should reach this acceptance of finitude. Certainly, in *Melancholia*, if Claire's anxiety, passivity and self-delusion are caused by an inability to accept the pressing finitude of life on Earth, Justine's depression and inability to conform is caused by the collective drive to ignore it.

In *A History of Madness*, Foucault has observed the link between madness and a special kind of foreknowledge in the dark ages, the renaissance and well into the classical period. In the middle ages

It was no longer the end of time and the end of the world that would demonstrate that it was madness not to have worried about such things. Rather, the rise of madness, its insidious, creeping presence showed that the final catastrophe was always near: the madness of men brought it nigh and made it a forgone conclusion.

The bond between madness and nothingness was tied so tight in the 15th century that it would last for a very long time indeed, so much so that it will still be found at the heart of the experience of madness in the classical period. (Foucault 2006: 13)

⁵ It is worth noting here the references to art and cinema in *Melancholia* suggest this melodramatic, melancholic declaration of the end of humanity is routed in a pessimistic view of the death of art and cinema. In an earlier scene, Justine furiously replaced all the abstract art books on display in the library with examples of allegorical and romantic paintings. In his film-style von Trier references Tarkovsky as if, as Sinnerbrink (2012: 280) has observed "meditating on the corruption and redemption of cinema in the digital age". Jameson (1991: xvii) claims that in the time of postmodernity Hegel's famous claim of the 'end of art' "modestly simmers down to the 'end of the work of art' and the arrival of the 'text'", with *Melancholia* von Trier appears to hold a similar position; the work of art as text is possible, but art itself is dead.



It is precisely this bond between madness and nothingness that *Melancholia* seeks to restore. Here “melancholia is evoked as a mood, an aesthetic sensibility, a way of experiencing time; a visionary condition and aesthetic experience that cinema has all but lost” (Sinnerbrink 2012). So too, art may have lost its role in the imagination of madness. We can argue that through the burning Bruegel, along with Justine's insistence on replacing all the abstract prints in the library with narrative and figurative paintings, von Trier seeks to align himself and his film making practice with the tradition of allegorical and mythological art. His subject then, melancholia, or for our purposes, madness, is restored within the cinematic context as a site for imaginative play rather than rational diagnosis. With Justine, von Trier stages a romantic reclamation of madness, tying it once more to the end of time, prophecy and creative genius as well as to an ironic yet still cosmic (or perhaps Gnostic) epistemology in which our fate really does “lie in the stars”.

In addition to the historical link between madness and the imagination of the end of time, there is also a demonstrated relationship between periods of social upheaval and apocalyptic belief. Norman Cohn, in his survey of apocalyptic movements in the middle ages noted that it was the many people living “in a state of chronic and inescapable insecurity” (Cohn 1970: 88) who were attracted to apocalyptic belief. In times of uncertainty, he argues, millenarianism becomes “a social myth”, perfectly adaptable to people's needs. This certainly applies to the way in which biblical imagery and the secular tropes of apocalypticism are utilised to add narrative weight in both *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia*. Writing in the 1960s, Cohn also observes that today, people attracted to apocalyptic belief systems are

Populations of certain technologically backward societies which are not only overpopulated and desperately poor but also involved in a problematic transition to the modern world (...) and certain politically marginal elements in technologically advanced societies – chiefly young or unemployed workers and a small minority or intellectuals and students. (Cohn 1970: 285-286)

While these descriptions encompass both Curtis and Justine, their belief (Justine's calm and rational, Curtis' feverish and manic) is not in a revelatory apocalypse but rather in the end of the world without revelation; an end point to an impossible continuity of socially, politically, economically and environmentally unsustainable practices the evidence of which demonstrated in their respective milieus.

From another angle, *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter* present protagonists who suffer, not only from depression or schizophrenia but also (or perhaps only) from trauma. In these instances, their affliction is not the result of a past injury but of an annihilating future. In *Take Shelter*, Curtis's future is not only represented as threat by his prophetic visions of a storm “like nothing we have seen before” but also through medical 'prophecy' which uses genetic patterns to predict individual crises. For Curtis, catastrophe is certain even if the accuracy of his own prophecy is not. If he is suffering from a psychotic breakdown then the prescribed treatment will necessitate leaving his



family (an already economically disadvantaged wife and a deaf daughter requiring special care) without means of financial support, in a ruthless economic and social climate. Because of this bleak reality, in *Take Shelter* the viewer has the disquieting experience of wishing for the storm, because the alternative (simply continuing) is too awful to consider.

For Justine in *Melancholia*, her wedding is an inadequate and ultimately abandoned prophylactic measure against a catastrophic future. The dissolution of the wedding then is the manifestation of her inability to ignore her own (and the Earth's) annihilating trajectory. She 'destroys' her life through colliding with it in the same way that her planetary corollary destroys earth. On Earth and in space, bodies and desires collide, causing deep impact that shatters all other narratives.

These future wounds intercede on the protagonist's present as a radical epistemological disjuncture, begging the question – how to continue with the present while facing a traumatic horizon? It is a conundrum that echoes the biblical tradition of the punished prophet, physically blinded in order to see the future, or martyred to a course of events, which can be known but not changed. But it also prompts questions pertinent for us all: Does trauma need an event? Is a traumatic experience of life in late capitalism pathological or indicative of some greater, imminent crisis? What do our various madnesses tell us about our present and what warnings do they contain for our future?

While Sontag argues against the construction of metaphor around illness due to its detrimental effects on those suffering from diseases for which they are not responsible, the metaphors used in *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* seek rather to vindicate what are generally considered the inauthentic or somehow incorrect experiences of mentally ill persons and restore them as a form of knowledge intimately linked with cosmic forces beyond the sufferers comprehension as well as a sensitivity to the present moment, which is in fact the opposite of delusion. Sontag notes how metaphors, and the imagery of illness, have traditionally been used to illustrate the injustice of society. In *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia*, mental illness becomes a metaphor for the unsustainable continuity of everyday life in late capitalism and the cognitive dissonance caused by the necessity of ignoring the 'signs' that the future is catastrophic. In these films, individuals are exhumed from reductive pathologies to become complex emotional beings with synergistic knowledge of the universe and of the future.



Figure 3
Source: Stills from *Melancholia* (Von Trier, 2011)



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