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An Allegory of a 'Therapeutic' Reading of a Film: Of MELANCHOLIA

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Wittgenstein, Tractatus *Logico-Philosophicus*:

> 6.43 If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language. // In brief, the world must thereby become quite another, it must so to speak wax or wane as a whole. // The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.
>
> 6.431 As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases.
>
> 6.4311 Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through. // If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. // Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.

Heidegger, *Being and Time*:

> If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself.

Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the philosophy of psychology I: 20*:

> [A]n interpretation becomes an expression of experience. And the interpretation is not an indirect description; no, it is the primary expression of the experience.

1. This essay is a (more or less philosophical) account or allegory of my viewing(s) of Lars von Trier's remarkable film, *Melancholia* (2011).[1] It is personal, and philosophical. (The personal here turns out, potentially, to be philosophical.) Von Trier's film in turn is clearly among other things a (brilliantly accurate) allegory of (his) depression; and it is also clearly (though at the very same time) much more than that. In expressing my experience of the film and the world (and my experience as a part time mega-melancholic – which is part of my basis for using the adjective "brilliantly accurate" in the previous sentence), my essay is *inevitably* personal, 'person-relative'. Furthermore: This is an inevitable feature of therapeutic philosophy, the philosophy practiced most famously by Ludwig Wittgenstein. As the later Gordon Baker for example explained clearly[2] : such philosophy responds to the individual reader (/ viewer). And vice versa. In a kind of dialogue or (to use the term that *Melancholia* prefers) dance. . .[i]

2. Why do I call my take on *Melancholia a philosophical* one? Well, let me seek to explain. Let's start with one of the apparently-odd plot-features of the film. The entire action takes place within the grounds of a family home, a chateau: in part, because Justine (Kirsten Dunst) – and in fact, later, both the two main protagonists – apparently cannot leave the chateau. Each time that Justine attempts to take her horse across the little bridge, she fails. And near the end, the same uncanny failure hits Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), in her golf-buggy, the last vehicle able to move (albeit with the risible speed and style of a golf-buggy) in their little world. …I believe that this uncanny trappedness is a key to the film. What does it mean?[ii]

3. We can (and should) think here of *Last Year at Marienbad*,[3] so clearly inter-textually telegraphed in the opening images of the sculpted plants which have two shadows (In Marienbad, they cast just one – but the people there cast none at all).[iii] In Marienbad too, it is impossible to escape the chateau. One is trapped, on my reading of that marvellous, puzzling film, in one's own Reason. In

i. Throughout this paper, I dance in a 'dialogue' with – am in 'conversation' with – Steven Shaviro's fascinating paper, "*Melancholia* or, the romantic anti-sublime": http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/sequence1/1-1-MELANCHOLIA-or-The-Romantic-Anti-Sublime/ (The page references that I give to his work in these notes are to this webpage as it prints out). Shaviro's paper, with which this paper is *in sequence*, I engage with explicitly through this apparatus of 33 sidenotes (signalled by the use of roman-numerals). There are also 33 endnotes for other references (signalled by decimal numerals). My aim in these sidenotes is to show how my interpretation of the film, as I see it, complements and ultimately contradicts Shaviro's. *{sidenote i}*

ii. Shaviro suggests repeatedly and intelligently that one thing it means is that the world of the 1% is largely closed to the rest of us (Cf. also n.iv, below). But I will argue below that (as Shaviro perhaps implies on p.6 of his essay) there is a deeper 'existential' meaning to it, a meaning that connects for instance with the therapy present in Buddhism (to the effect that the greatest suffering comes from the sense of continuing self/ego, a suffering that peaks in the condemnedness-to-self of the inveterate melancholic), and with the words of Bob Marley's great song, *Running Away*. (Other obvious possible meanings would be: that it allegorises death (this was pointed out to me by Kristof Bodnar), or Hell, which are also of course states, relevant to the film's theme, that cannot be escaped.) *{sidenote ii}*

one's – in the film's 'character's – own half-dead hyper-rational minds. In psychosis as understood roughly along the lines envisaged by Louis Sass in his *Madness and Modernism*.[4] In the case of *Melancholia*, we are dealing primarily, it would seem, with neurosis: with 'affective disorders'. The trap in this (similar and dissimilar) case is simply (in) one's life. The trap is one's mind. (Neurosis is: being trapped in one's own mind, and hating it. Psychosis is: being trapped in and by one's own mind without even realising that one is.) The chateau is a lived world. The chateau is your mind. You can't escape it.[iv]

4. The magnificently-depicted utter futility of Claire's effort to run away, by getting into a big strong car – a 4×4 – and then a golf-buggy, and then just running… Where? The interaction at that point between her and Justine here is startlingly reminiscent of the interaction between Deckard and Roy at the climactic moments of the famous chase in *Blade Runner*, as the latter asks the former, as Deckard seeks pointlessly to escape his fate, his being-toward-death: "Where are you going?"… Justine uses the exact same verbal formulation, to Claire.

5. The point: there is nowhere to run to. Nowhere to go. There is no escape. You can't run away from your own most death, nor from the present moment. (As Leo (Cameron Spurr) later puts it: "Dad says there's nothing to do then. Nowhere to hide.") The only 'escape' from what Freud called "ordinary unhappiness" / anxiety, and, still more so, from melancholia, is (as Buddhism has long indicated) *acceptance*. To 'escape', paradoxically, you have to embrace. To accept what is happening right now, to embrace it; and to embrace others. (And this, as I will discuss below, is what Justine at this point in the film is managing, for the first time, to do, in both a very direct and a symbolically-rich way.) There is no (other) escape. This existential point is starkly literalised in *Melancholia* by the whole *planet* being about to be wiped out.

6. *Melancholia* has a way of bashing the viewer over the head with a number of stark, heavily-

iii. The rich intertextuality of *Melancholia* is not sufficiently appreciated, in Shaviro's essay (see especially p.2). For instance: it isn't just that the Breughel painting "Hunters in the snow" appears in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* as well as in *Melancholia* – it plays a pivotal role in that film, a film that clearly that *Melancholia* is clearly 'in sequence' with. As for *Marienbad*: *Melancholia* is clearly a rich re-writing of it. It shows us psychopathological trappedness, as *Marienbad* does (it plays the neurotic to Resnais's psychotic); but, unlike Resnais's film, in the final seven minutes it actually offers a genuine escape-route. Crucially, as I remark in section 3, above, Shaviro doesn't mention that the second shot of *Melancholia*'s prelude, which remembers *Marienbad*, shows us every object casting two shadows, whereas in *Marienbad* the objects didn't cast any shadows at all; only the people did. *Marienbad* was a world of ghosts, a world where mind or spirit was real and matter not; *Melancholia* by contrast sees, in Justine, the midwifing of a return from a life of being 'stuck' in the mind to the actual world, just in time (i.e. before the world is obliterated). *{sidenote iii}*

iv. As Shaviro points out, it's not easy to get into this world, either: Think back to the struggle of the wedding limousine, which seemed a simple bit of fun at the start of the film, and which Shaviro decodes as echoing the failure to consummate of Justine and Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) ("How do I put it in?", Justine asks. In gear, that is…). But now (i.e. in connection with the point I am making about the existential and psychical meaning of the closed world of the chateau) it takes on a different hue: as connoting

signalled symbols. The most obvious of which is calling the blue planet about to crash into Earth 'Melancholia'; a metaphor for Justine's condition. (Similarly, the music is gloriously extreme;[v] the whole ghastly-wedding scenario is way over-the-top; etc.)

7. However, look for example at that remarkable opening sequence.[5] When one thinks back to this 'prelude', from the end of the film, one notices that virtually none of the scenes presented there are present anywhere in the body of the film. For instance, the scene showing the final trio of the film: but standing, facing the camera, *separate*, on the lawn at night, dressed up in their wedding gear, but with the two 'moons' behind them (as was not yet the case, during the wedding). It almost looks like a publicity-still for the film. My take on this shot: This is how the three of them would have been, had *Melancholia* come to hit on the night of the wedding. Apart. Before the journey on which Justine leads herself and them, through rock-bottom, to mutuality and an affirmation of life made directly in the face of mortality.

8. Or again, the little scene of Justine walking through the forest in her wedding dress, so, so, so slowly, held back by the creepers (this scene, we later discover, is a direct 'representation' of Justine's experience, as she attempts to explain it to Claire); and the parallel scene of Claire, seeking desperately to carry her boy 'to safety' across the 19th green, but sinking in so deep with each infinitely-slow step; these are visual metaphors of/for the mental states from which the sisters are, hopelessly, seeking to flee from (and thus inadvertently entrenching – see below).

9. It might still be said that, once one notices them and thinks about them, these 'visual metaphors' at least are rather obvious. Turn then instead to the question of *why* Part 1 of the film is called 'Justine', Part 2 'Claire'. And to the question of why (for instance) the wedding scenario in Part 1 is so madly over-the-top. If one does so, then I think one will start to understand the subtlety lying behind

part of the limit-conditions of this lived world. *{sidenote iv}*

v. Shaviro understands the importance of the music in the film better than most critics, though his take on the music still isn't quite right, and isn't (for my money) sufficiently generous. He doesn't mention, for instance, that the tune and themes of the Prelude recur insistently during *Tristan and Isolde* – much as they do during Melancholia (see p.3-4 of his text). *{sidenote v}*

vi. As elaborated in section 17 of my paper here: Depression is a solution, a preferred way of life; for it offers an illusory safety (illusory, because there is no limit to how bad it can get, as we get a sense of at the opening of Part 2 of the film. Contrast the true safety discussed in my section 23). A semi-willed separateness/retreat. (Shaviro's discussions of willing need I think to be complicated by the difficulty, in psychopathology, including some of the self-deceptive psychopathology of everyday life, in setting out the extent to which what is in play is an act (i.e. willed) or an affliction. For discussion, see e.g. pp.73-4 of Louis Sass's *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought*, Harvard University Press, 1994.) *{sidenote vi}*

vii. Depression, Wilkinson and Pickett have taught us (see Wilkinson, Richard and Pickett, Kate, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Allen Lane, 2009) is probabilified by inequality. This point neatly buttresses Shaviro's helpful critique of the sad world of the 1% as this film shows it to us (see n.ii, above). *Why* does inequality probabilify higher

some surface unsubtleties.

10. For the deliberately plodding telegraphing of one or two of the film's central metaphors is the counterpart of a much-subtler, sinuously-delicate way in which metaphors that are not merely literalised, not straightforwardly paraphrasable, enter repeatedly into the film. Precisely because of the blatancy of some of the basic symbols/metaphors of the film, these are by contrast easy to miss (and have been missed by the plodding reviewers of the film – when has such a fine film last been so almost-universally under-appreciated by its reviewers?[6]

11. So for instance, as I said earlier: the chateau is a world. But more than that: what we are given in Part 1 is *Justine's world*. This world is very like the world that all of us live in (They fuck you up, your Mum and Dad; and rampant capitalism does, too); and yet unlike it (except for those of us who are personally familiar with a serious amount of melancholia). One can sympathise with why she would be so troubled, when one meets the crazy, 'normal' people in and governing her life. But it's more complicated than that:

12. The arc of the journey the film takes one on is closely tied to a complex *sequence* of one's identifications and dis-identifications with Justine, and then with Claire. As outlined in (11), above: This leads in effect to a delicate play with the meaning of 'world' in the film that is the direct counterpart of or complement to the deliberate plodding in the Melancholia-as-a-world-perhaps-about-to-smash-into-our-world metaphor. Here is an outline very rough, massively over-crude sketch of the main elements of this sequence (abstracting again from person-sensitive issues such as one's experience or otherwise with melancholia):

> A. From the start of the prelude, Justine is an Other, a haunted figure.
>
> B. Then, from the start of Part 1, she seems perhaps just a normal gal, a normal bride. (Look at her giggling in the car at the failure

societal levels of depression? A key reason, Wilkinson and Pickett suggest, is because it 'forces' one into seeking status by means of one's capacity to obtain material 'goods' / consumables (e.g. luxury houses, orchards, big cars). This connects directly with the point under discussion in n.7, above. *{sidenote vii}*

viii. Shaviro suggests (p.5) that Justine's naked planet-bathing manifests her finding "her depression confirmed by the prospect of imminent doom." Compare and contrast the following interesting interpretation, offered by my student, Alex White, in a draft of his "*Melancholia*: a philosophical interpretation" (unpublished): "Neither rejecting nor attempting to escape, we see Justine beautifully strewn naked, illuminated only by the blue rays of the looming planet, Melancholia, in the middle of the night – no longer trying to run away from her demons, we see her wildly confronting melancholia in the most dramatic and emotionally powerful fashion. From this moment, we begin to see a transformation in Justine becoming more self-dependent on the help [*sic*.] from her sister and gradually coming to grasp with [*sic*.] her melancholia. Although this is not an instant fix, the crucial thing to note is that Justine ceases to resist her feelings and enters a gradual phase of untangling her condition. Depicted by her increased overt affection and care for [Claire's] young child, we can see Justine making genuine attempts to, not reject her fate but, accept melancholia… The result of this is that for the first time in the film, we see her transform from metaphorically already living in death – consumed by melancholia – to her entering the

of the chauffeur to get the limousine to penetrate its way up the chateau's winding road.)

C. But we come to see gradually that she is haunted. That she has been putting a brave face on things. That her smiles are largely a (sometimes bravura) performance. As already mentioned, it's understandable perhaps that she should be so, when one starts to appreciate her (largely dreadful) place within her family (Her depressed mood is first brought out by her parents' truly-terrible 'wedding speeches'), job, life. The film explores the reasons for[vi] as well as the unreasoned-ness of depression (It is not as if Justine's (dismal) life is enough reason to be permanently melancholic. On the contrary, we eventually realise with her that even in the valley of the shadow of death there is every reason to feel love and even joy. To escape the confines of one's mind as it has been… The film is an increasingly convincing (as one watches it, as it goes into depth) portrayal of melancholia (of 'depression'). Of how it is based on something – and based on nothing. And of how it can be accepted – and thus overcome.). The film undercuts the absurdity – the widespread, ghastly illusion – of the idea that one can be 'made' happy by things (especially, by *things*).[7] Over and over, even into Part 2 of the film, characters insist that Justine ought to be happy; and there is endless talk of Justine (and eventually Claire, too, talks this way about herself) being made to be happy. The skin-crawling ghastliness of the scene where the bride is supposed to toss her bouquet, the uncomprehending smiling faces of those staring up at her at this point, is a lovely visual version of this. The *point*, we eventually understand (and experience?), is that, when one really lets go of the counter-productive effort to project a state that is not one's present state, only then can one start to attain a kind of contentment, a joy in the moment.

living and embracing powerful moments of love for her family and acceptance of her melancholic disposition which cannot be escaped. …Justine…has to stop denying [melancholia] to herself and wallowing in the vast comforts of self-pity. This is the metaphor [...] which Von Trier encapsulates so well in the stunning sequence of Justine lying naked before Melancholia. This is the first time in the film that we see her stop running." This intriguing take – on what (if interpreted-) otherwise (see endnote 11) I find the least impressive scene in the film – actually fits pretty neatly with the 'sequence' of psychological turns that I depict in section 12, above. Its main defect it seems to me is that it does not account for why she is naked, and why she seems to be erotically aroused, or a seductress, at this moment. *{sidenote viii}*

ix. Very unfortunately, as I detail in *sidenotes xiii-xvii*, below, Shaviro rejects this element of Justine's journey. He speaks (p.12) of Justine implicitly gesturing at a "'fantasy of the future' when she cares for Leo". No: she is mourning a sense of lostness and a lost future; and we should all mourn for such loss when it affects (those who are collectively) our children, especially when we bear some responsibility for the loss (as, in the real world, we (often) do). *{sidenote ix}*

x. Mark Fisher (cited by Shaviro, on p.1), writes that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism". Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World* (Zed Books, 2007, 2nd Edition) is actually the key

D. She is othered, then, in her depression; *and* we keep veering back to her, in our recognition of the madness of her (our) world.[8]

E. But we gradually come to appreciate that the wedding party is a hyperbole; it is not even *meant* to be realistic. This is most stark in the behaviour of the the character of Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), Justine's boss (as grotesque and cruel as anything out of de Sade – and he is the 'best man'!) and his minion, Tim (Brady Corbet). This is a kind of Kafkaesque absurdist extreme of no-escape: The profit-motive and a rigorously utilitarian attitude to other people won't leave you alone for even one moment, not even at your wedding. This gives us some insight into our market-mad world, by touching uncomfortably on what might well be claimed to be its contemporary essence; *and it gives us some insight into Justine's world*. In a world of depression-retreat, of being locked in one's own ego, and of times of high anxiety, everything can seem extreme: too much trouble, such that one cannot even lift one's leg into the bathtub; Or everything a tremendous *threat* that can't be overcome. The wedding party gives us Justine's world: we eventually inhabit that world (as if) from the inside. We realise something about the world of the unhappy; just how deeply it differs from the world of the happy. The only way to come to see something like that is some kind of extreme vicarious experience: such as that of a wedding-from-hell which is really a wedding in hell (Hell being not, as one of Sartre's characters said, other people, but rather, contrariwise, the felt *absence*, the unreachability, of other people, even in their presence, and their deep failure too to reach oneself).

F. Thus Part 1: Justine's world. Part 2 adds into Justine's world – which now, from a complicated dance of outside and inside, of actuality and possibility and impossibility

text here. Shaviro's remark (p.1) that "*Melancholia* affords us a truly depressing realisation. It shows us that these well-to-do people would rather see the whole world come to an end, than give up even the tiniest fraction of their wealth, power and privilege", his accurate dissection of the hubris of property, connects in my view with his remark (p.4) that "We are given the prospect – or better, the tableau – of the end of the world as paralysis and impossibility", in the following sense: It is not just that the rich are destroying the world. It is that we aren't doing nearly enough to stop them. We are by and large willingly depressed into stasis. It is in this context that the film ought to be heard (as I press in sections 20-33) as a call to 'arms'. While the rich play, the planet burns; we need to start to burn with anger that this be so, and find some way to stop it being so. *{sidenote x}*

xi. As Shaviro helpfully puts it (p.6), "…for [Justine] the catastrophe has already happened. The end of existence holds no additional terrors; there is literally nothing left to worry about." Though we should note that there can of course be something worse than death, certainly for the individual: namely, endless torture. Roughly this is thus another major feared end-point of psychopathology, shared by many anxiety-depression scenarios of neurosis and delusions of psychosis (and of course by superstitious religions). *{sidenote xi}*

xii. As I explicate in sections 22-6, the worst happening in fact literally starts to set the scene for Justine to emerge from the potentially-endless retreat that is severe depression (For

(No-one could be quite as bad as Justine's boss), we know, and come to know better still in the same way, as we see her (Justine) in her fuller abjection – Claire's world. In Part 1, we probably didn't like Claire terribly much. In Part 2, we come to appreciate the terrible difficulty of living with someone like Justine (and with someone like John (Kiefer Sutherland)!). We come to appreciate Claire. Her patience, her love. We come to know and to be touched by her self, her world. Her ordinary unhappiness and happinesses, the ordinary anxieties of life (Claire, John tells us, "gets anxious so easily"…). She is closer probably for many viewers to being a natural avatar for oneself.

G. We also gradually come to understand how inadequate she is to the threat of death. Two worlds may be about to collide. Her's and Justine's; Earth's and Melancholia's. The second Part of the film is no more (and no less) realistic than the first Part. It is a deep engagement with 'the reality principle', in the shape of utter vulnerability, death and its denial. This blue planet, our double, which *shows* us (from the prelude sequence onwards) the *arbitrariness* of our placedness and 'security' in the universe, and which crashes into us in spite of our best science, is in this sense no less (but also no more) unrealistic than the wedding party of Part 1. And, just as Justine struggles with the latter, so Claire, in all her caringness, cannot cope with the former.

H. We pitied Justine earlier, and tried to empathise with her. But our position was no more secure (than hers). This is what Claire's arc tells us. Facing death, being-towards-death, is a near-impossible challenge.

I. But we want to rise to that challenge. We want not to be Claire. Gradually, in Part 2, there is something to fear (Which there wasn't, in Part 1, and yet angst was there, uncanny, massive). Claire majors on

discussion, see 2.3 of my *Wittgenstein Among the Sciences*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, edited by Simon Summers. Cf. also section 4 of Shaviro.). *{sidenote xii}*

xiii. Shaviro (p.13) writes of Leo "standing in for what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism". Edelman shows how the figure of the Child "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust"". I confess to finding it profoundly depressing that Shaviro and Edelman despise this idea, which to many previous generations would have appeared what it is: the most elementary common-sense. As I argue in my talk "Love or justice?" (Conference: Changing the Climate: Utopia, Dystopia and Catastrophe, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, 30 August – 1 September 2010, http://rupertsread.blogspot.co.uk/2010/-10/utopias-changing-climate-conference.html), and in my "Care, Love and Our Responsibility to the Future" (Arena 35/36, 2011, pp.115-123), the appalling way in which we are currently complicit in the slow-motion destruction of that order speaks volumes about our values. Rather than placing 'freedom' and material gratification centrally, any sane society will place centrally what it can pass on to its most vulnerable members, who are its future: its children. See also *sidenote xv*, below.*{sidenote xiii}*

xiv. For without this gift, Leo lacks resources to cope with his situation. As his essay comes to a climax, Shaviro claims (p.13) that the figure of the child as the film comes towards its

(ordinary) anxiety, ordinary unhappiness, rather than on depression. But these are not so far from being two sides of the same coin. Two worlds that can be seen clearer in the reflection of each other's image. In the situation now unfolding, in the "dance of death", without undue attachment to life and to desire, in the dance of Claire and Justine, the depressive sister is the better off. (This is the film's distinctive contribution to investigating *the ecology of depression*; in a certain 'niche', depression is adaptive.[vii] We will return more than once to this point.) As Melancholia approaches, melancholia ebbs. The planet is (of course) not literally melancholia;[9] it was just what occasioned the bringing of something to a head: The proper awareness of the preciousness of this timeless moment.

J. Thus as Part 2 proceeds further, we avert from Claire[10] and swing towards Justine again. She becomes the well-adapted one, in this new environment, this new world-with-a-deadline.

K. But this too needs to be interrupted. For Justine is caught up still in an unhealthy state of mind. She wants life to end.[11] She is relieved by the prospect of the world coming to an end;[viii] now she is – at last – able to live! Our attraction to her hatred for the Earth / for life is of a kind with our attraction to *her very state of mind*. (I return to this point, below.)

L. This isn't what we sought yet; this isn't yet a truly authentic life; this is far from being freedom from the confines, the iron cage, of the ego. Justine's nihilistic words to Claire may attract us, but then on reflection repel us from her again; and appropriately so. The repulsion is accentuated by her brutality toward Abraham, the film's Turin horse; and we should note that it is at this moment in the film, as she realises perhaps that there is no escape, that, significantly, she (and we) see the effects of Melancholia for the first

climax is "deeply problematic". I don't accept this. On the contrary: Justine's relationship with Leo at this point models the sanity that could enable us to avert climate-apocalypse (see the notes immediately preceding and following this one). What enables her at last to come to life is the realisation that this child is connected to her, without any other parent (Claire at this point being incapable, and John dead), and that her caring for him is long overdue (the long-delayed building-caves together). He is afraid and about to be extinguished. She can do something, in the time remaining. She can care for the future; she can *be present* for and to the child. The child's future – precisely the figure that as a species we need to defend from ourselves (and especially from the 1%) – breaks through to her, now. And she breaks, and emerges from her 'sleep', her excessive retreat. *{sidenote xiv}*

xv. Shaviro (p.13) castigates Justine (!) for caring for Leo more than for Claire. Justine does care profoundly and directly for Claire, at the death: see the remainder of section 22, supra. But it is also appropriate for her to offer more care to Leo: because children are not able to care for themselves, to protect themselves, as adults are.*{sidenote xv}*

xvi. Shaviro helpfully calls it "a beautiful semblance" (p.12), and likens it in that specific connection to von Trier's own film. I find less helpful his remark (p.13) that the 'cave', which is actually a kind of *outline* 'teepee', is "a self-consciously exotic image". The 'teepee', made of natural materials, treading lightly on the earth, might suggest a greater sense of 'oneness' with nature than is to be found in 4x4s, limousines, etc – i.e. than is to be

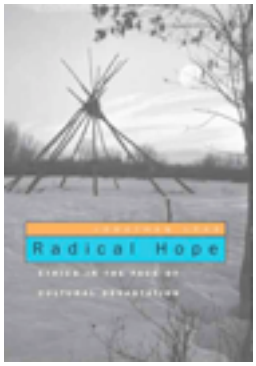
time.

M. We are attracted by Justine's nihilism; but this is a dangerous seduction that tells us something about ourselves, and thankfully we come to see this as we see that she is not a reliable moral 'narrator'.[12] We were in denial about her, about our attraction to her – which is the attraction of melancholia. We needed shaking out of it.

N. At this point, we can perhaps start to dialectically synthesise what is needed. Claire's caring nature, her passion for life to go on, for her child to have a future; with Justine's calm, her refusal to pretend, her presentness. The sisters are together, perhaps, one person waiting to be born, waiting to be the child, the future. This is where you (the viewer) come in.

O. …The journey is not yet over, though. As I describe shortly (from section 19 onward of this paper), there is a rapid sequence of further shifts in the very final stages of the film, crucially tied up into Justine's emergence as a brave and heroic, loving, feeling, quasi-maternal figure,[ix] when tested to the limit…

13. This then is the real subtle meaning of the apparently-overly-literal-metaphor of Melancholia as another world, another blue world coming to meet ours. In the meeting, we (the film's necessary other: its audience) find ourselves, find what kind of world we have, *triangulate* our world beside Justine's and Claire's. We christen our world, or let it start to grow up. (That's us, sitting in a trio (with them) in the magic cave at the end.) We could imagine a Part 3 to the film, about another character in it, and then a Part 4, and so on and on until every human being in the world had had their world added in… But we don't get to experience this, because there isn't time in life to get to know everyone in the world. Our lives dance an arc, that ends with death. And sometimes this death comes much sooner than we hope. This is what we have found in the artefacts (especially of the 1%) that are at present committing us to climate-holocaust. Why ought the movement away from modernist Promethean hubris back toward ecological sanity be sneered at? See on this the cover and the content of Jonathan Lear's splendid book, *Radical Hope*, a book detailing and discussing how the Crow people managed to cope with the dismantling of their conditions for survival:



Compare:

The image of the so-called 'teepee' is not an 'exotic' image: it is an image of extreme fragility in the face of forces bringing asymptotically total cultural destruction. Of a hope (an optimism of the will) that has nothing but its groundlessness and itself to sustain it. Liberalism, economic growth and the behaviour of the rich – in short, ecological crisis — raises for us just this spectre. The culture about whose destruction Lear wrote, and about the ability to maintain humanity and to feel and live even in the face of such

to live in authentic relation to. There is no Part 3 to the film, because, suddenly, the(ir) world ends. As yours and mine of course will, much as we are too often in denial about the fact.

14. It is difficult to understand another's world. But it can be done. But sometimes, in order to do it, one has to take a circuitous, 'indirect' route. When it is very difficult, then[13] one has to (try to) take a deeply circuitous route that may even take one on a journey through nonsense,[14] a journey through trying imaginatively to inhabit positions that are not even inhabitable. (As Rush Rhees had it: language makes sense only if living makes sense.) This is Wittgenstein's method in philosophy, and it is also the method of some fine 'philosophical' films.[15]

15. A key case of something difficult to understand of this nature, even though probably there is some of it in the world of *every one* of us (especially around the question of death), is denial. The film helps us to understand and work through our own tendencies to denial, and those of others. It brilliantly expresses those tendencies, those temptations, *and* finds and offers a way through and beyond them, back to life. In short: it *exposes* them (on film). Such that we may be better placed to enjoy life while it lasts – and to be clearer about how precious and glorious it truly is, and thus, I would add, about how we ought to strive to make the human adventure and the existence of our non-human kin last longer than we are currently threatening to let it.

16. The scenario in the film is a neat inversion of the situation *vis-à-vis* climate-denial. (And what is climate-denial based in, if not: denial of death?[16] A refusal to look in the face that we are at present, as a species, committing slow ecocide/suicide, in our 4x4s, in our industrial-growth-capitalism, and so forth….) This time – in *Melancholia* – it is the loons and conspiracy-theorists who are right, and the scientists who err. In both the film and the real world, it is the pessimists who need listening to (At least, if there is going to be a wake-up call that leads us to do something about our predicament.)

destruction, is precisely the culture that is (according to Shaviro) allegedly 'Orientalised' and exoticised in *Melancholia*. But on the contrary: we must learn from just such indigenous people, if we are to have a chance of surviving culturally and ecologically the onslaught of climate-destructive capitalism. (As I argue also in my writings on *Avatar*: see endnote 6.) Thus it makes perfect sense that the 'magic cave' is the fragile framework of (a) native-American dwelling. The outline of the cure that our culture is currently missing. *{sidenote xvi}*

xvii. This is an important connection; Justine shows Leo care/love from the start. A child doesn't need, of course, to be one's own, in order to be loved: cf. *sidenote xviii.* See also my article on this point, "Our responsibility to the future: justice or love?", One World Column, 12 June 2010, http://oneworldcolumn.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/our-responsibility-to-future-justice-or.html. *{sidenote xvii}*

xviii. Remember Claire asking Justine, "But where would Leo grow up?" Where Shaviro fails to see the point of this question, Justine responds to it, when she 'breaks', cries, emerges, and cares.*{sidenote xviii}*

xix. Shaviro (p.6) writes, perhaps riffing on what I've taken as my first epigraph from Wittgenstein above, that "The end of the world cannot be understood, or experienced, as an event that happens within the world." But the fact remains that Claire could potentially authentically *face* this, and life. We know this, because Justine does. On p.11, Shaviro argues further, following Ray Brassier, that "Life and

For: Back in the real world, back outside the movie-theatre, there is in effect another planet smashing into us. Just very, very slowly… What anthropogenic climate change threatens is the (gradual) equivalent of the comet that extinguished the dinosaurs. We have to perceive this, *our* clear-and-present long-emergency, as an emergency even though it doesn't feel like one….[17] Part of the achievement of *Melancholia* is to depict the looming destruction of human life on Earth – the risk that life on Earth is (as Justine memorably puts it) "not for long" – *as* an emergency (as urgent; indeed, as rapid!), and yet, *not* as an emergency. The feel of so much of the film and of the discourse that occupies it is far from any emergency-talk.[18] From the partying of the first half of the film to the distantiated feel of some of the second half, *Melancholia* actively reflects and thereby problematises inaction in the face of impending disaster. As part of its call to authentic affirmation of life in the present moment, *Melancholia* calls us to fight to prevent the rich destroying the Earth as a liveable planet,[x] by saving its atmosphere, keeping it life-giving (Note the way in which, in the film, the 'fly-by' makes the atmosphere less life-giving (less breathe-able)… The same move, notably, is made in *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), where humans are unable to breathe the CO_2-heavy atmosphere of the extra planet in that film, Pandora.).

17. "What's the worst thing that can happen?" This ordinary, helpful question, very necessary for those (which includes us all) seeking to head off uncertain risks that may destroy us all, becomes less helpful – precisely through seeming to offer deep help – to the person inclined to depression / severe anxiety. What such depression/anxiety is is the imagining, over and over again, of what the worst thing is that can happen.[19] It is a would-be self-protective race to the bottom. One seeks to immunise oneself against the future by giving up hope for anything good; one seeks to protect oneself against other people by imagining that they think the worst of one; one seeks to protect oneself against hope for oneself by imagining oneself hopeless/useless/evil… These stratagems sentience have already been emptied out by the prospect of their own inevitable obliteration." This seems to me profoundly wrong, and profoundly dangerous, for the very reason that is implicit in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. To re-write just-very-slightly the relevant portion thereof, in the current context: "As in death, too, the world, when it is extinguished, does not change, but ceases. Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through. But: If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then she lives eternally who lives in the present. Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit." Shaviro misses this, and thus misses *the central lesson of the film*, the great learning that Justine so painfully accomplishes at the death. The lesson that *it is not true that einmal ist keinmal*. No: Once is once, and once is forever. Nothing can actually take the present moment away from you. (This is on my understanding too the meaning of Nietzsche's wonderful mad myth, of 'eternal recurrence'.) *{sidenote xix}*

xx. To me, Justine's comportment in the final several minutes of the film is nothing *less than sublime*. Shaviro is interested in an anti-sublime trope in von Trier's film (cf. section 8 of his essay). But what is truly sublime is to realise that one is in a safe place, *even when one could be forgiven for believing that one was in the unsafest place imaginable*. The attitude of feeling absolutely safe, of taking refuge in the present moment (see sections 22-5, above), is a profound achievement, as it is in the scenario depicted to us in *Melancholia*. The ground has been prepared, by Justine's melancholia; this is what provides her with the 'transcendental'

are very, very attractive;[20] they are extraordinarily seductive; they are in the end disastrously self-defeating. One can't actually become safe by retreating away from others / from hope. One seeks to immunise oneself against disappointment by pre-emptively disappointing oneself (and others); but this only ups the ante, and takes one on a journey deeper into the morbid life-world of melancholia. The desire to be immunised against hope, the desire for disaster to absolve us of responsibility, and to prevent us pre-emptively from disappointment, *is the very same desire in politics as it is in psychopathology*. It is the desire that *Melancholia* explores. (I will begin in the coming sections to explain this point more.)

18. "What's the worst thing that can happen?" Followed perhaps by, "It's not the end of the world!" …Ah; but what if it is the end of the world? *Melancholia* splendidly literalises this central trope of depression/anxiety, which is also a very necessary trope of ecology. (See the end of section 16, above: No wonder Claire has an anxiety-attack / Melancholia makes our atmosphere less breathable, during the 'fly-by'…)

19. Claire says, diagnostically, to Justine, in a key scene in Part 2, "It's easy for you, isn't it? Just imagine the worst thing that can happen…". She sees the attraction of Justine's world now.[xi] The attraction, the would-be safety, of imagining the worst thing that can happen: 'for example', death. The death of everything, in fact.[xii] Geocide[21]/ecocide. We are tempted by this; this explains to a very considerable degree the attraction of disaster-movies, of apocalypse-movies[22] (also of most horror movies; and of the new unpleasant extreme-crime genre, post- *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*; and more besides). We imagine that if we can cope with these experiences fictively, then we can cope with them more easily in real life. Thus we half-*want* the world to be destroyed (in this film). We *want* it to go up in a shriek, and us with it. (And we half-half-want the worst thing that can happen to *happen* in the real world too. For then, we can be absolved of responsibility, of hope; we are given an indefinite

conditions of possibility of authenticity (these conditions can also be provided by meditation, by mysticism, or by philosophy). Nevertheless, it is awesome to watch the achievement. From one's own position of safety (But: you are alive, and that means you will die too, and so long as you are in anxiety then you are psychically and existentially unsafe) in the cinema… *{sidenote xx}*

xxi. See *sidenote xx*, above. What is truly, ultimately sublime is simply: life. Any life. But one can only understand this if one has 'awakened'. *{sidenote xxi}*

xxii. Sadly, Shaviro doesn't show an understanding of this. In the end (see endnote 29), in my view, he fails the challenge of the film / of Justine. He doesn't essentially disagree with the literally world-weary cynicism of its mainstream critics. He fails at the end, when it most matters, to love life / to take care of the children, as Justine does (and as the hero of *Children of Men* (2006) does: See Cummings, Alex Sayf, "Narratives of Collapse: Melancholia, Take Shelter, and Children of Men", *Tropics of Meta* (http://tropicsofmeta.wordpress.com), April 27 2012, and my piece on "(Popular) Films as philosophy" on http://thinkingfilmcollective.blogspot.co.uk/. *{sidenote xxii}*

xxiii. Cf. p.3-4 of Shaviro, and *sidenote v*, above. *{sidenote xxiii}*

xxiv. We are primates. Family, as Hegel rightly pointed out in *The phenomenology of spirit*, is literally the elementary community, the germ of society that liberalism and post-modernism alike fail to be able to take seriously. Shaviro (p.13) badly misses

reprieve from having to try to act, and can simply spectate[23]…)

20. But, thankfully, we pull back from this. We pull back from it, at the very end, in terror and horrified awe, with Melancholia bearing down remorselessly upon them / us. Only now, it is too late. And this is a crucial part of the film's therapy.[24] Crucially: at the final moments, at the death, one doesn't want ge(n)ocide any more, not even fictively. One wants life.[25]

21. What could be more depressing than the end of the world? Especially, by our own hand (And now I am following up the logic of section 16, above.). Depression given this situation could even be described as *rational*. I am thinking here of Theodore Roszak, Mary-Jayne Rust, etc. Their *ecopsychological* vision – that one's mental state may well be a reflection of the physical/biological state of the world that one is sensing – coheres well with the sense I have of von Trier's film. The terrible thing, as one might put it, is that so many of us aren't depressed (Think the people in Part 1 of the film. So much the worse for them, for us.). In *Melancholia*, the depressed one isn't depressed by the end of the world (On the contrary). Claire is the normal, who gets thrown into anxiety by it. By the time enough of us get anxious/depressed about what we are committing the ecosphere to, it may well be too late. People, like Justine, mostly get depressed individualistically. Collectively, we watch the build-up toward destruction of our planetary home as a spectacle, alarmingly undepressed. That's how it is, in *Melancholia* Part 1. It only changes in Part 2. It is almost as if we are *willing* the devastation of our home.

22. Thankfully, *Justine* too pulls back from this wanting death, at the death. For the wonderful thing that happens toward the end of the film is that, under the most extreme pressure, with the worst thing that can happen now (it would seem) utterly inevitable, with hope gone, now, at last, Justine manages to emerge into living in the present. The embryo of this emergence is born I think at least by the time of her authentic and clear

the point here, when he asserts that "By turning to Leo, and then by bringing Claire as well into the circle of the magic cave, Justine is able to share with them…her very sense of apartness…and disinterest." She is disinterested in death (See *sidenote xxxii* and *xxxi*, below); this is her basis for strength, in the circumstances she finds herself in in Part 2. This is the foundation for the capacity to love, and even enjoy. To be present. *Contra* Shaviro: She opens the possibility of communion with those she is with, at the death. (Having said this, Shaviro is of course right in thinking that it would be a mistake to claim that at the end of the action Justine is no longer depressed. Her achievement is even greater than that. One doesn't need to 'cure' oneself of depression, in order to take away its sting. One can be present and be-with-others, and be authentic, and care, and even enjoy life, even while being 'depressed'.) *{sidenote xxiv}*

xxv. At p.10, Shaviro asserts that, "Although the name "Justine" is taken from the Marquis de Sade's ever-naïve-and-innocent eternal victim, von Trier's Justine is [not] such a victim." This is right, on my reading; but only because of the transformative journey that Melancholia assists Justine on. That is the burden of my reading of the film: that we are asked to seek to follow Justine on a journey from profound partly-self-inflicted victimhood to its opposite. This is a journey that we all need to go on, politically, as well as some of us needing to go on, psychologically (just as she does*). {sidenote xxv}*

xxvi. Thus Shaviro is surely wrong to say

rejection of Claire's unconvincing plan for them to drink wine on the terrace as *Melancholia* hits.[26] It rapidly gathers pace with her embracing of the boy Leo, her decision to care for him in his fear; the crucial moment here – the film's turning-point – is her crying as she hugs him. She breaks – as one might put it, reversing Bob Dylan – like a woman, like a heroine, this time. (The whole *weight* of the film is in this scene and the next one, in these final seven minutes of its running-time.) He can't see this (but we can); she is feeling *for him*, grieving for someone other than herself: for the pain and the shortness of life of the child.[xiii]She has managed for the first time truly to escape the terrible confines of her own mind, the iron grey cage in which melancholia can hold one. She is back in empathy. Her finest hour is her last: She gives Leo[xiv] a blatant metaphor; she tells him a story (and they will then build visuals to go with it): of the 'magic cave'. Adults should face authentically what is happening; children should be protected.[xv] So she builds the flimsiest structure imaginable, [xvi] to symbolise the truth: that (see section 23, below), if one can only live in the present, one is perfectly safe. She makes the 'magic cave' with him, then beckons first him, and then Claire, inside (Note: she *supports* Claire in, visually-mirroring Claire's supporting her movements, in the opening portions of Part 2; this role-reversal is an iconic image of the teaching that the film offers one), and then joins them, having 'completed' the cave. This is very moving. They gradually hold hands, as the Wagner swells. The climactic moment is the wonderful – *wonderful* – smile that Justine gives Claire (at 2.02.25). The smile that tells that she is having, at last, what might be called a wonderful life, even amidst the real and psychical horror. It is a smile of love, of genuine connection, genuine being-with, at last. She looks authentically into another's face, for the first time able to do so and offer something authentic that isn't (only) sad.

23. This is – with the possible exception of her smile earlier at Leo[xvii] — the first smile she has given anyone in the whole movie that is full. I mean: this smile comes from the depth of her whole being, it is a smile in the awareness of life

(p.1) that "*Melancholia* is quite restrained, even as it literally depicts the end of everything". On the contrary, the end is devastating; the movie-theatre itself shakes. (Shaviro remarks on p.11 that "Von Trier's scenario of cosmic obliteration is not sublime, precisely because it is so determinedly literal. It works in such a way as to short-circuit all metaphor." With that remark, I agree. That is why it can feel – be – so shattering.) *{sidenote xxvi}*

xxvii. I think Shaviro is onto something when he says, in the final paragraph of his essay, that "Thinking back on *Melancholia*, I most vividly remember its moments of sheer, gratuitous beauty: the tableaux of the prologue, the shots of the planet Melancholia glistening in the sky [etc.]". Beauty: these, and the wonders of the world we actually live in, are what must be saved; what it would be the ultimate crime to destroy. (Cf. also n.xxxiii, below.) Thinking back to the Prelude from the perspective of Justine's transformation near the film's end, one can see its beautiful moments as moments of life, of experience; that should be savoured, not rushed through (as consumerism, hedonism etc. encourages us to rush through them). Moments that von Trier spreads out visually over time, for us to take in. *{sidenote xxvii}*

xxviii. All the prelude images, even those that seem as if they are or will be static (e.g. the Brueghel, and the sundial / chateau gardens) turn out to be depictions of change, impermanence. It is this with which Claire, in particular, has to come to terms (and: she doesn't succeed in doing so). This connects, I would suggest, with

and its preciousness and beauty, rather than (as her smiles early in the film were, at best) an isolated moment of relief, or (more often) a show. This, by contrast, is the smile that reconnects and, in a sense, reassures. She, and thus potentially those with her, including us, are now very close to what Wittgenstein is speaking of in the "Lecture on Ethics", when he speaks of "the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.'"[27] (See how far we have come now from the fake safety of withdrawal, perhaps of paranoia, of hopelessness, certainly of pre-emptive disappointment.) The feeling to be sought-for, to train for, for when all (else) fails. In short: The film is *about* one's desire to escape from one's mental state (a desire that forms the central mechanism of depression and anxiety), *about* one's desire for a reprieve from one's responsibility to face up to one's situation and act accordingly, and *about* the only genuine security there is: being present, no matter what.

24. What is critical about this re-emergence of Justine is that it gives the lie to her brutal negativity a little while earlier.[xviii] At the death, she overcomes the vast, horrific temptation to think that the Earth and all its life is evil, that it would be better if we weren't. She overcomes the great temptation that plagues Zarathustra: nausea at humankind. She reaches out, she lives and loves. She gives those she is-with, Leo and Claire, the ultimate gift: her *presence*, at last, *in extremis*.

25. This is authenticity. Being-towards-death. Being able to face death, and not to be taken by it, as Claire is.[xix] Living together, at the end. Hand in hand. Claire, with support, does her best, but at the very last, cannot continue; she withdraws, into herself, in highest anxiety, covers her ears. Justine and the boy, Leo, keep going. Truly, this was their finest hour. The rising climax, this, the very end of the film, if one watches it with one's eyes open, is staggeringly moving.[xx]

26. But also: to quote from much earlier in the film (from Justine's poor unconsummated husband, probably the only genuinely-beautiful moment in the ghastly wedding that we endured in Part 1 of the film: the sending of the balloons, symbols of hope *and of transience*, up and away into space. As Shaviro notes (p.3), this brave venture of the film into space itself is reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, another of the great transformative films in the entire history of cinema (see on this Peter Kramer's reading, in his *2001: A Space Odyssey*, British Film Institute, 2010); also of *The Tree of Life*, which was released almost simultaneously with *Melancholia*. There, the resemblances between the two films end, however. In particular: *Melancholia* is not only a bold but a deep and rich work, whereas The Tree of Life, is the only cinematic failure of Malick's career, an over-reaching whose closing portions in particular are as weak as *Melancholia*'s are strong. In particular: *The Tree of Life* is very fine until about the last 30 minutes, when it lets one down badly; whereas *Melancholia*'s closing couple of scenes are its greatest strength of all. (Thanks to Andrew Klevan for help with this note, and in fact at several other points in the paper. Though I should stress that Andrew's take on the film is radically discrepant with my own.) {*sidenote xxviii*}

xxix. Shaviro rightly points out (p.9) that the 'feminine' genre of melodrama has been unfairly disparaged by critics, in standardly sexist fashion. We should add, however, that *most* of von Trier's best films have elements of 'reclaiming' melodrama to them: not just *Melancholia*, but of course also *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, and (I would suggest) *Dogville* (2003), too. (I think Shaviro is mistaken

Michael): "It could have been very different, Justine". What we finally see is the possibility of living in the present, of overcoming the vast reasons to withdraw / to live in fear / to give up hope / to be a slave (thinking now of the famous last words of Leon (which are also Roy's words) to Deckard, in *Blade Runner*).[xxi] The sadness of Justine's life and of much of Claire's too, is that such living in the present could not be achieved beforehand. If only one could live one's whole life like that… That Wittgensteinian/Heideggerian/Buddhist ambition is what the film offers us as a possibility.[28] Death may come at any moment. Let us live in that moment, this moment, authentically, and smiling a full deep smile if we possibly can.[29] The viewer is invited to leave the auditorium ready to smile such a smile, and to live as Justine lived at the end.[xxii] There is no pseudo-Wagnerian love-death as such in *Melancholia*;[xxiii] because at the end, Justine is perhaps even a little in love with life. (It is helpful to note that in the final scene, as the big blue planet bears down on them, in one last great metaphor, Justine *turns her back* on Melancholia.) She loves her family,[xxiv] she loves human beings, at last, at (the time of) the death (of all things). She steps out of the victim-role.[xxv]

27. But is the film nevertheless dangerous in its dalliance with apocalypticism? I suggest not. Rather, the film is a *commentary* on apocalypticism,[30] just as (I argued near the start of my paper) it is a commentary on metaphor, a critical examination of it. It enters (us) into a therapeutic relation with our desire for the world to end, for the worst possible thing that can happen to happen, our desire, perhaps even, to 'cleanse'.[31] This desire is of course not even all bad: one wants an end to suffering, a quick release from the slow journey of news and torments that may be the human race's downgoing, perhaps even a cleansing from the Earth of excessive numbers of consumptive beings that are in effect consuming/destroying its life-bearing powers (the process of course turbo-charged by the very advertising industry that the Dunst and Skarsgård characters work in). But one comes to see that even to assert (p.9) that Bess (Emily Watson in Breaking the Waves) and Selma (Björk in *Dancer in the Dark*) are "utterly passive in their misery". On the contrary: they both take decisive action, successful action, to save their loved ones, towards the end of their stories. In that way – in the sense of being active arbiters of their own fate – they partially *anticipate* the heroine of *Dogville*, at the close of that film.) At the close of section 6 of his essay, Shaviro analyses appositely von Trier's own clear discomfort with this truth, a discomfort which is crystal clear in his own strangely negative reactions to *Melancholia*. (See http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/). Von Trier's own take on *Melancholia*, I want to stress, is undermined by the way the film ends, as I've read that ending, above. I heartily agree with Shaviro that *Melancholia* is "non-ironic, heartfelt, and sincere", in a way that von Trier doesn't want to be 'caught out' being. Because it makes one 'vulnerable' to 'post-modern' critics who are quick to condemn anything that is not ironic, and indeed cynical. My worry about Shaviro (see above) is that he too still falls too much into this category. By the end of his essay, he is complicit with the very nihilism that *Melancholia* overcomes. (Whereas my essay – seeking to take the reader on a 'therapeutic' journey mirroring Justine's, mirroring the very arc of the film itself as I read it – takes the risk of being criticisable as naïve, too direct, ingenuous. But such risks must be taken, if we are to respond to the demands that a film like this makes of us, as readers and (roughly) as activists who are (who should be) unwilling to ironise life to death.) *{sidenote xxix}*

if such destruction were rapid, it would still be terrible; and one comes to understand (as Justine does) just how precious and wonderful life is, and how bloodless it is to be ready to give up the human adventure.

28. But all the same: Isn't it wrong that the end of the world should be depicted as beautiful? It is indeed utterly awe-inspiring, *magnificent* in the true sense of that over-used word, when we see Melancholia bearing down on us in all its hugeness, in those final moments. But the right way to see what happens there also includes the sad but utterly understandable inability of Claire to stay with the trio in those final moments; the real fear evoked by that suddenly-rapidly-growing crescendo of noise – never have I felt in a cinema before like I was present at an earthquake; never has a fictional filmic disaster seemed more real; my mouth dropped open as the planet in all its hugeness bore down on them, on me[xxvi] – and, most important of all perhaps, the way in which, after the shock-waves, and before the enveloping blackness, comes a fire, burning up our loved and loving trio. *This* is not beautiful, it is just terrible, awful. (But in the end, the extreme beauty of much of the film is the beauty of our life. The wonder-ful life that finally Justine allows; the slow-motion (Think again of the prelude to the film[xxvii]) moment-after-moment life that we viewers still have the luxury of; the life that our decadent luxuries threaten to undermine the continuation of.)[xxviii]

29. And after that end, what then? Blackness. One hopes for a Part 3. Or at least an Epilogue, like in von Trier's magnificent melodrama *Breaking the Waves* (1996).[xxix] But, rather, as in the final lines of von Trier's first great film, *Zentropa*: "You want to wake up… But it is not possible." One only, after a pause, gets silent simple credits, still on black. This is the 'final' instalment of the therapy: Because now one really regrets what desire one had for the world to end. Your wish has been fulfilled: and it isn't what you had hoped for. You wish that the world could go on. You wish that their lives could go on, that there could be a Part 3, and 4, and on

xxx. Compare – and contrast – Shaviro's argument in section 9 of his essay, where he finds *Melancholia* a self-knowing mimesis. *{sidenote xxx}*

xxxi. Shaviro remarks (p.13) that "There is no question, in [von Trier's] films, of showing us *another* way of life [from that of annihilatory capitalism]." This is straightforwardly true of *Last Year in Marienbad* (cf. *sidenote iii*, above), and more or less true of *Melancholia*, though I would argue that the germ of that other way of life is present – its embers, its *embryo* – in the film's final seven minutes, in Justine's actions and her face. But mainly, the alternative implicit is for *us* to realise. The film functions as philosophy as therapy in the best sense of that word, in forcing upon us its viewers the responsibility to grow its truth beyond the point that it itself manifests. It offers us some conditions of possibility for what we might risk calling (see *sidenotes xix-xxii,* above) 'a political sublime': through offering us a vision of communion (see *sidenote xxiv*, above). *{sidenote xxxi}*

xxxii. Thus, on my reading, the film is not at all, as Shaviro takes it (p.12) to be, quasi-Schopenhauerian. *Melancholia* does not merely offer us a "seductively beautiful semblance" and free us "from the burden and tyranny of willing". *On the contrary!* We need to be freed from the burden and tyranny of willing to live no matter what (the cost). Disinterest *vis-à-vis* (our ownmost) death gives us sublime safety. This is Justine's gift to us, if we are ready to receive it. What we need to do is to seek to exist sublimely, *with the will* to seek to perpetuate the possibility of such existence (in our children and their children). We need

and on… But it is not possible.

30. Only, of course: it is. For here you are! Still alive. In a place of voluntary 'retreat', but waking up slowly to the world again. In this sense, *Melancholia* is in the end a film 'about' the experience of watching a film like this: it is self-reflexive,[xxx] as any major therapeutic work must be.[32]

31. The lights come on. Awareness grows that there is a world here / out there.[xxxi]How wonderful, that you can stand up, breathe, talk with or touch your friends with whom you came to see the film, go out into the wide world: you are not stuck forever in a ghastly dream of reason/unreason … The film delivers you back into life, with an enhanced capacity to live and feel, to be.[xxxii] Perhaps, albeit a little haunted, and woken-up, you will now take the chance not to live in ordinary unhappiness, nor in the fated but overcomeable land of melancholia, but will *savour* life. The way, finally, Justine could and did. The way the world is open to us always doing so, if only we can rise to the opportunity.

32. If only, that is, we can touch the springs within us and all around us of endless life, in its true (Wittgensteinian) sense…

33. The real Part 3 begins.[33] *Your* world. Including: A world to save.[xxxiii]

ENDNOTES

1. (See Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, Yale University Press, 1979.) That is, what follows is a personal, affective, account of the film. At the same time: I aim to bring out a/the *experience* which *anyone* could have who viewed the film with openness and some understanding. (For: I believe it is possible to write a very personal response to a film (which mine self-consciously is) while simultaneously precisely to will. But we will only do so with the right content if we are able to live (and die) authentically. For example: in climate-change-preventative-direct-action. *{sidenote xxxii}*

xxxiii. The final paragraph of Shaviro's essay focuses in helpfully on the small creatures of our world, that a memorable shot near the end of *Melancholia* suddenly shows us. Shaviro remarks (p.13) that "each of these creatures has its own needs, its own desires, its own values, and its own concerns." Yes. 'Man' is not the measure of all animals. It is they as well as us that need to be saved (from us). The saving power is in us. Retreat, cynicism, hopelessness, the wish for a reprieve: these are the danger. But Von Trier's and Dunst's Justine has shown us how that very danger can, wonderfully, morph into its very opposite. The saving power is in this, in her, and thus (if we are open) in us. *{sidenote xxxiii}*

making strong value-judgements about it and about other films. I shall in passing seek to show that this is an intelligible project, in what follows.) But: *that experience* will *of course* in reality inevitably vary to some extent, in part dependent upon the 'subject-position' which one has (e.g. one's degree of personal experience of melancholia; perhaps one's gender), in part dependent upon one's spiritual or existential starting-point, and so on. (This is an inevitable feature of Wittgensteinian / 'therapeutic' philosophy: see below for more detail on this.) So: the resolution of the apparent conflict between the personal nature of the account here and the 'objective' claims I make for it (as a sound reading of the film) is via a proper understanding of how I, following Wittgenstein, take the nature of *philosophy* to be. The term "philosophical" doesn't come down on the side of objectivity as against the personal: properly understood, *it bridges the gap* between the two. Films like *Melancholia* demand a personal response/involvement/continuation, as I shall describe. They are *incomplete* (without it). This means: not dominion of the film over us, nor dominion of the critic/theorist over the film, but rather: a dance. Watching *Melancholia* (and films relevantly similar to it, a number of which I refer to below) is in the best sense like going into psychotherapy (by 'in the best sense' I mean: not normalising, nor individual-ising, but rather individuating, joining in empathy, leading to growth and wisdom). It's an ethico-political experience. "Personal", as I am using the term, should thus not be equated with "subjective/subjectivistic". No: an authentic personal response is demanded: which will inevitably mean: one that joins one with others. Authentic: as Justine painfully becomes authentic: A 'role-model', by the film's end, I shall

argue. Thus the film teaches us in the only way true teaching occurs: through facilitating the student(s) to learn for themselves. The personal is political-philosophical. Strong value-judgements and interpretive judgements, judgements *of quality*, such as I make throughout this piece, are thus eminently compatible with the personal/allegorical nature of my/one's journey with the film, as it is presented here for the reader to follow and engage with (and grow beyond). 'Objectivity' hereabouts is only an appropriate standard if it is understood to arise *out of* a process like this. Such that we can then perhaps say, as I do, that *Melancholia* is a great work, greater even than von Trier intended. (Thanks to Peter Kramer for help working on this note.) ↩

2. See especially his *Wittgenstein's Method: Neglected Aspects* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, ed. Katherine J. Morris), for explication. ↩

3. One might also think of *The Exterminating Angel* (Luis Buñuel, 1962). Thanks to John Collins for this point. ↩

4. Harvard University Press, 1994. See especially Sass's reading of *The Invention of Morel* (by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Argentina 1940) therein, a text which helped inspire *Last Year at Marienbad*. ↩

5. The character of the images is somewhat reminiscent of the 7 'postcards' which preface each of the parts of *Breaking the Waves*. Justine, furthermore, is clearly worthy of comparison to the female protagonists of each of von Trier's wonderful '*Golden Heart'* trilogy of films. (Cf. on this point n.xxix, below.) ↩

6. And *why?* A speculation: Many of the reviewers are resisting the film. Resisting

its therapy. Because it boldly takes one on a therapeutic journey through despair to an almost transcendental affirmation of life. This is not the kind of journey most film-reviewers like to take. It doesn't fit well with the 'cool' self-image they like to cultivate; it doesn't fit with an easy cynicism, a knowingness and superiority to the films they aim to control, theorise, criticise, or even praise. One has rather to be ready to be in some awe of a film like this, and ready (as one might even put it) to let its magic work on one. One has to renounce the knowing 'left-brain' stance, the voice of cool Reason. There are few film-reviewers willing to renounce in this way, willing humbly to enter into the therapeutic, transformative space of a film like this. (My argument here is somewhat similar to my argument for why an apparently much less 'high-brow' (though equally transformative) film, *Avatar*, was disliked by as many critics as it was: see my paper thereon in *Radical Anthropology* 4 (2010), "The call of *Avatar*" (at http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org/old/journal_04.pdf), and also my piece at http://thinkingfilmcollective.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/avatar-transformed-cinema.html. Cf. endnote 30, below.) ↩

7. Think here of the opening of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which famously states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all…are created equal, that they are endowed…with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the *pursuit* of Happiness" (italics added). It would be ludicrous if it read "…life, liberty and the attainment/full-realisation of happiness". One might well have a right to life or to liberty. One certainly has no right to happiness (Think of Todd Solondz's 1998 film *Happiness*, for amplification…). This, I think, is a key point that the film is

making: The idea that there is either a right or a responsibility to be happy (or both), a kind of psychologising of liberal ideals in the context of a consumerist society (the kind of society America has become), is itself, von Trier is suggesting, a central cause of our unhappiness. *The fantasy that we ought to be able to guarantee the avoidance of melancholia is* itself *a central* cause of *melancholia*.… The arc of the film depicts eventually, at the very end, a chance for well-being, in the very acceptance – if it can, through great difficulty, be attained – of mortality and morbidity (including mental ill-health). But to attain this, one has to recognise that anti-melancholic stratagems (e.g. rumination) are frequently the very disease of which they take themselves to be the cure… (And Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) works by riffing on these failed stratagems, much as Wittgenstein encourages one to vocalise (in order to see the absurdity of them) one's metaphysical impulses: we might put it by saying that CBT creatively mimics the repeated thought-processes of anxiety/depression, in order to overcome them.) ↩

8. The brutal way she behaves as Part 1 unfolds is partly forgivable, against the background of that world, a world of forced appearances of happiness (see above), of horrendous parents, of mythically-bad employers: of uncaring capitalism and inequality-rampant. The way her family (her mother in particular) 'do her (head) in' leads her to 'express herself' in ways that are not productive – as the ways she expresses herself toward the end of the film *are* – of any kind of accommodation with life. Before that, the film also shows intelligently how difficult it can be to be around someone with depression. ↩

9. If one thinks of Melancholia as a world coming to strike one with devastating power, one is in a way thinking quite accurately (Depression as being knocked sideways, brutally, for no reason (or for 'good' reason), *and* in a way thinking in terms of an unbelievably crude metaphor. "Melancholia" as the name of a planet is itself thereby an alienating effect (cf. n.xxx, below), of the kind that we repeatedly find in this film, as in many of von Trier's films. To force us into what I call therapy, by means of our noticing the way in which this film (for that is what it is) is working on us, and forcing us to reflect – *and* to mirror the state of alienation of the characters, starting with (but not finishing with!) Justine. ↩

10. Though we need to acknowledge already how far ahead she is of John! As the return of Melancholia shatters his scientific confidence, we see how thin was the veneer of *his* faith in life; he can't bear the situation, his failure, doom impending; he actually *does* kill himself, when one had thought that it would be Justine or Claire, if anyone, who did so. ↩

11. This may be the best explanation (though see also *sidenote viii*) of the otherwise-weak 'soft-porn' scene in which she bathes naked in the night-light, perhaps, as it were, inviting Melancholia to come and destroy the Earth. The point about this scene, and about this temptation, this attraction – the thought that she *brings on* Melancholia, that she helps to *bring it* to crash into Earth (just as one actually bears some responsibility for one's depression, for depression is attractive and one can give all too easily into temptation) – is I think this: that this is a temptation and attraction *that the film itself offers the viewer*, and perhaps

brings out in the viewer. This is one of the film's last temptations, in the dizzying emotional-thoughtful journey that one goes on as the end becomes nigh. The desire to have Melancholia crash into Earth is a desire that the film brings to consciousness in the viewer. But, as I will explain shortly: this desire too needs to be – *and is* – overcome. ↩

12. There is a parallel here with the (it turns out) unreliable 'chorus' of the native onlooker in *The King Is Alive* (2000), one of the greatest of the *Dogme 95* films (And we should note in passing that the *Dogme 95* films invariably, like most of von Trier's *oeuvre*, share with *Melancholia* a profound interest in altered mental states / in deep psychical pain / in psychopathology). That film plays cleverly and therapeutically with one's desire to believe the exotic indigenous 'narratorial' voice, which literally looks down on the petty activities of the increasingly-desperate westerners as they struggle to survive; for gradually, as their 'journey' takes them to a new reconciled mutuality, through the vehicle of their efforts to learn and play Shakespeare in the midst of their crisis, they outflank his nihilistic words, and the words that they speak come to have a great deeper meaning and role, binding them together, healing, acting as a deep group-therapy. In the case of *Melancholia*, it is Justine herself who eventually comes to overcome her nihilistic words: as I describe below. (The case of *Memento* (2000) is similar too: the morally unreliable narrator turns out to be Leonard, the protagonist-narrator himself. For detail, see Hutchinson's and my reading of this great philosophical film, in my and Goodenough's *Film as Philosophy: Essays on cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.) ↩

13. Like Winch with the Azande; like Kuhn with Aristotle; like Sass with 'the schizophrenic mind'. ↩

14. On this, see the closing passages of my Introduction to *Film as Philosophy*. See also Cora Diamond's work on Wittgenstein. ↩

15. Besides the films that I refer to in my Introduction to *Film as Philosophy* (including, notably, Peter Greenaway's greatest films), other films in this category include, I believe, *Never Let Me Go* (2010), *The Road* (2009), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Donnie Darko* (2001) and Bergman's *Persona* (1966). See the case made for some of these films, and more, over at http://www.thinkingfilmcollective.blogspot.co.uk/ ↩

16. See my "Growth and Death", *One World Column* (http://oneworldcolumn.blogspot.com), 17 July 2010: at http://oneworldcolumn.blogspot.com/2010/07/growth-and-death.html. (*Melancholia* might be profitably read alongside a film which also appeared in 2011 and with which it has sometimes been compared: *Take Shelter*. The latter, like *Melancholia*, might appear superficially to support climate-denialism; read more deeply, the opposite is true: See Sam Earle's "A Voice Crying in the Bewilderness", *Sam Earle's Blog*, February 28 2013, http://samearlesblog.wordpress.com/2013/02/28/a-voice-crying-in-the-bewilderness/. Rather, they accustom us painfully to come to terms with the unbelievable truth, a truth as hard to listen to as the truth that we as individuals are going to die: the truth of the very real possibility of climate-

apocalypse destroying even our collective existence.) ↩

17. I attempt to rise to this challenge in my paper, joint with Phil Hutchinson, "Wittgenstein and Pragmatism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism* (Malachowski, A. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.) Hutchinson and I argue in this piece that we humans should feel shame at the future we are currently co-creating, and even perhaps experience pre-emptively a hypothetical '*grief*' for the children and future people we are threatening – for these might well be just the emotions needed, to prompt us collectively to stop the extinction of civilisation… ↩

18. See my article on this, "Emergency Talk", *The Guardian*, Tuesday 13 November 2007, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/nov/13/emergencytalk. ↩

19. It may seem that the extreme deadening characteristic of much depression is a counter-example to this. (As for instance in the partial-derealisation Justine suffers on eating the meat-loaf that "tastes like ashes".) But actually I think it is a defence against it. In other words: one avoids the thinking of what the worst thing is that can happen only by deadening oneself to it (and to everything else). By deadening, flattening out life to nothing. ↩

20. I explore their attractions in detail in the chapter of my *Philosophy for Life* (London: Continuum, 2007) that gives a reading of *The Lord of the Rings* accordingly, and in section 2.3 of my *Wittgenstein Among the Sciences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, edited by Simon Summers). ↩

21. Cf: "How to destroy the Earth", *Geocide*, http://qntm.org/destroy! (More seriously, think of the not-untempting (if unappetising) challenges posed by Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford University Press, 2006), and the *Voluntary Human Extinction Movement* (http://vhemt.org/). Thanks to Kristof Bodnar for these references.) ↩

22. And of eschatology: the not-un-widespread emotional attachment to apocalypse-narratives can of course be traced back to the medieval world and further. ↩

23. Which is what the film seemingly encourages us to do: and (as I describe below) also pulls us through and beyond such encouragement, to a turn to activism, away from a melancholic state of powerlessness or from a more or less evil attraction to inaction and cynicism. ↩

24. The movement of thought and feeling here *mirrors* (and *inverts*) closely that depicted in Kazantzakis's/Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988): As Christ overcomes the temptation to want his life to go on, to renounce the cross. (Cf. n.33, below.) ↩

25. The rhythm of the rise and fall of the heavenly bodies in this film reminds one at this point of the extraordinary idea present at the end of Native American vision/wilderness quests: that, on the last night of one's quest, one has to want the Sun to come up again, for it to do so. One has to stay up all night, and will it to come up. You have to will life to go on. This idea seems completely absurd until one has actually experienced it, when suddenly it is alarmingly, breathtakingly, affirmingly real to one. This is the effect of this film, too: It is now up to you, up to us, to ensure that life goes on.↩

26. Such moments of starting to come to life again are sometimes the most dangerous, for a seriously-depressed person. Why? That's the point at which some depressed people kill themselves, because they cannot bear it when they find themselves *starting to hope again* (because then they risk being disappointed; they are no longer 'in control'). On the possible reading of the film in which the second Part is Justine's (or Claire's) *fantasy* of world-catastrophe, of one's / the world ending, then, it would not be surprising that her (and everyone's) death comes soon after such a moment. (Our sharing of Justine's will-to-the-death-of-all, our wanting Melancholia to hit, is our own yielding to the attractions of the depressive vision. If only we end the struggle, if only we giving up seeking to save our planet's threatened ecology, then, we fantasise, we won't hurt so much. Cf. endnote 30, below.)↩

27. See p.42 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Occasions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). ↩

28. Heideggerian being-towards-death authentically is sometimes referred to by Heidegger as 'resoluteness' or 'resolution'. The reader may notice an interesting connection, perhaps more than merely verbal, between this and the 'resolute' reading of Wittgenstein (aka the 'therapeutic' reading). This connection might be explored for instance with regard to the broadly-Heideggerian kind of reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that has been essayed by Eli Friedlander. ↩

29. Thus in the end the problem deliberately offered to one by this film, like so much in philosophy, is, just as Wittgenstein held,

a problem of the will much more than of the intellect. Resistances of the will need to be overcome. The real problem with *Melancholia*'s critics is that they don't *want* to understand what the film is calling us to. Because to hear that call would open them to the need to act, and to the risk of disappointment. In other words, and in a savage but unavoidable irony: the film's critics are *willing* themselves to remain in the depressive position. They deliberately reject the transformation that the film offers one, in its final 30 minutes or so. ↩

30. As outlined in section 21, above: Our calmness in the face of impending catastrophe – our ability, most of us, most of the time, to somehow be calm as we gradually commit the planet to very dangerous climate change, and perhaps to the Venusian scenario which James Hansen now fears (See e.g. Hansen, James, "Making Things Clearer: Exaggeration, Jumping the Gun and The Venus Syndrome", 15 April 2013, http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2013/20130415_Exaggerations.pdf) – is terrible. Given that this apocalypse is one we could stop. *Melancholia*, like *Avatar*, is literally a call to us to awaken (The two films share for instance a deep interest in waking-up, in eyes opening (or closing): see the very start and end of both). Calmness is only an appropriate attitude in the face of inevitable catastrophe – such as the characters in *Melancholia* face, at the end. *Melancholia* models how to act in the most extreme of circumstances (In this respect, by the way, it connects very closely with Malick's masterful *The Thin Red Line* (1999), especially as read by Simon Critchley in his essay thereon that was published in my and Goodenough's *Film As Philosophy* collection). *And* it leads, if one actually hears it, to a will to seek to

prevent the catastrophe that humans are currently building, which could create just such circumstances, globally. ↩

31. In this way, it bears a close family-resemblance to *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Which was a masterful anti-musical; a musical offering a very critical reading of the genre of musicals. *Melancholia* is a disaster-film that critically reads the desires of the viewer of a disaster-film. The resemblance between the two films is close, because *Dancer in the Dark* too played directly with the question of just how bad things could get. Each song *resulted* in things reaching a new low. ↩

32. Any reader in doubt as to von Trier's own strong interest in film as a therapeutic experience should watch or re-watch his *The Five Obstructions*.↩

33. The resurrection, as one might put it. (Look again at the Christ-on-the-cross-like image of Justine in the film's Prelude. In this vein, we should note that Justine is an inheritor of Bess, von Trier's Christ-meets-Mary-Magdalen figure from *Breaking the Waves*. As Bess pushes her bike up the hill like a cross, having been forsaken by her mother, in this tremendous scene therefrom, the phrase "Christ on a bike" takes on for the first time ever a serious meaning: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDZQspZ5PBc .) ↩

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FILMOGRAPHY

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)
Avatar (James Cameron, 2009)
Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)
Breaking the Waves (Lars von Trier, 1996)
Children of Men (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)
Dancer in the Dark (Lars von Trier, 2000)
Dogville (Lars von Trier, 2003)
Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001)
The Exterminating Angel (original title: El ángel exterminador; Luis Buñuel, 1962)
The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (original title: Män som hatar kvinnor; Niels Arden Oplev, 2009)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)
Hiroshima Mon Amour (Alain Renais, 1959)
The King Is Alive (Kristian Levring, 2000)
The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorsese, 1988)
Last Year at Marienbad (original title: L'Année dernière à Marienbad; Alain Resnais, 1961)
Melancholia (Lars von Trier, 2011)
Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000)
Never Let Me Go (Mark Romanek, 2010)
Persona (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)
Solaris (original title: Solyaris; Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972)
Take Shelter (Jeff Nichols, 2011)
The Five Obstructions (original title: De fem benspænd; Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, 2003)
The Road (John Hillcoat, 2009)
The Thin Red Line (Terrence Malick, 1999)
The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, 2011)
Zentropa (Lars von Trier, 1992)