

**The Dialectics of Crisis: The Romanticised Apocalypse in
J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and Lars von Trier's
*Melancholia***

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Abstract | The theme of the apocalyptic is often portrayed through films and literature in a pessimistic manner. The crisis of the end of the world, unsurprisingly, is culturally and societally deemed as the ultimate manifestation of catastrophe. Science fiction and experimental films have often reflected this cultural trend, depicting the end of days according to normative behaviours and reactions to death and crisis. However, the optimistic portrayal of the apocalypse is a rarely explored narrative, and its implications for the cultural approach to crisis are of critical interest to studies in culture and crisis. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) are two forms of art that exhibit the more positive portrayal of the crisis of apocalypse. Through their literary and visual creation of the apocalypse, they communicate an often neglected narrative of the optimistic outlook to crisis and apocalypse. This view of the ultimate crisis is, therefore, a unique and rare narrative, here explored through the protagonists of Ballard's and Trier's works, who invert the stereotypical and generic reception of catastrophe and crisis and instead posit a theme of the optimistic apocalypse.

Keywords | crisis, apocalypse, post-apocalypse, J.G. Ballard, The Drowned World, Lars von Trier, Melancholia

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As the Mayan Calendar was coming to an end on December 21, 2012, people around the world prepared for what they believed to be the end of the world. Various rituals and, oddly enough, celebrations were held both in honour and fear of the apocalypse. Hundreds of spiritualists gathered in Merida, Mexico, while in Guatemala, thousands of people assembled at the Mayan ruins of Tikal. Areas of biblical significance in Turkey and France also reported a record number of visitors, and various 'apocalypse parties' were held around the world. The cultural reception of the apocalypse, therefore, is divided and diverse, and provokes strange and conflicting reactions in different people and societies.

In popular culture, the apocalypse is characterised as the ultimate cultural crisis, not only destroying life on earth but devastating historical existence. As a result of this, the apocalyptic motif is often portrayed negatively, where survival and salvation are perceived as the unquestionable goals of humanity, and rarely do we expect people to harbour or exhibit a death-wish. However, in certain cultural artefacts the crisis of the end of the world is depicted, through their protagonists, not only as a favourable scenario but even rendered artistically beautiful. Two mediums reflect on this more optimistic perception of the cultural crisis of the apocalypse: J.G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World* (1962) and Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011). Both texts are pivotal examples of the metaphysical engagement with the apocalypse; significantly, these texts were created in separate though integral moments in history—Ballard's during the Cold War, and Von Trier's in a post 9/11 society. In this respect both texts critically engage with separate though linked events

that force society to comprehend the end of civilisation. Both of these artefacts, moreover, depict characters who are not only seemingly comfortable with the apocalypse but prefer this catastrophic course of events, for whatever cultural, philosophical or psychological reasons. In these circumstances, tragedy and catastrophe are shown only as normative reactions, that is, reactions that are assumed to be experienced for such an event. Something that is normative is, after all, an assumed, standard behavioural model. The presence of a characters' death-wish, therefore, is viewed as an inhuman characteristic and one that is at odds with that of more normative trends in experiences of crisis. Claire Colebrook addresses this concept of how refuting survival has been received as 'unacceptable'. Human salvation is the automatic narrative played throughout cinema and in fiction, yet Colebrook argues that what disturbs us is not how "human life can live with the violence of its milieu, but anthropodicy, or how human life can avoid asking how it might justify itself (...) What we do not ask, and herein would lie a possible acceptance of the future, is not whether man ought to survive, but why this question is so unacceptable as to be constantly displaced and disfigured" (2013: 219-221). Thus not only is this narrative of redemption and salvation constantly repeated throughout society, but by its very nature the question of whether society ought to be saved, or save itself, intrudes on very sensitive and political issues of ethics and morality. To conceive of its alternative is rendered deplorable. As a result, the characteristic and 'normal' portrayal of the crisis of apocalypse is typically accomplished through pessimistic and overtly dystopian methods of conveyance. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and others present a reality of both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds in which the destruction of the planet is the worst possible outcome. These films and works often present the end of the world motif in the standard model of tragic devastation and misery. The characters, moreover, struggle to survive in post-apocalyptic conditions as a potential cure to their misery, conveying the message that survival is preferential to crisis. As David Seed writes in his *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis* (2000), "[i]f apocalypse underpins the modern sense of crisis, it is clear that sudden or cataclysmic events can be perceived as ruptures in the order of history" (2000: 4). Moreover, Seed asserts that the politics of representing crisis follows a distinct pattern of reaffirming the salvation of humanity: "The holocaust of destruction at the end of Bond films routinely celebrates the purging of the evil genius's machinations and symbolises the restoration of the status quo. And so the examples could be

multiplied. Again and again destruction functions as a prelude to restoration” (2000: 8). The politics of representing crisis foregrounds discussions of the complexities encountered in apocalyptic interpretation. It is the way in which crisis—in all forms—has been historically represented that illuminates societal norms and the status quo, but also exposes political values. As Goldsmith argues, “[r]epresentation does its political work precisely by blocking apocalypse... In the late eighteenth century, with the formation of modern democratic politics, matters of literary representation and political representation were often inseparable” (1993: 138, Goldsmith’s emphasis). Therefore, the representation of crisis is grounded, for Goldsmith, in both ideological and political motives, and moreover this representation thereby deconstructs and obscures the apocalypse.

The apocalypse is of great interest to Jacques Derrida, as exemplified in two of his works, his *No Apocalypse, Not Now* (1984) and his *On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy* (1992), as well as to Frank Kermode who addresses the politics of apocalyptic representation in his *The Sense of an Ending* (2000). Both authors identify the importance in the meaning of the term ‘apocalypse’, specifying its capacity for un-veiling, for truth. Films and books traditionally characterising or dramatizing the apocalypse as society’s downfall, therefore, are not useful in critically engaging with the true nature of crisis. As Derrida writes in his *No Apolcayse, Not Now* (1984), “[l]iterature belongs to this nuclear epoch, that of the crisis and of nuclear criticism, at least if we mean by this the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge” (1984: 27). In his *On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy* (1992), Derrida reiterates this capacity for the apocalypse to be a catalyst for unveiling. Derrida discusses how the Greek word *apokalupis* is translated from the Hebrew verb *gala*. He elaborates: “the word *gala* recurs more than one hundred times in the Hebrew Bible and seems in effect to say *apokalupis*, disclosure, uncovering, unveiling, the veil lifted from about the thing” (1992: 119). Thus Derrida posits a link between the literature of crisis and apocalypse and the revelation of truth. Kermode argues similarly that there is a myth of crisis that seeks to undo our understanding of the concept of the end. He argues that the apocalypse “is part of the modern Absurd (...) it is (...) an essential element in the arts, a permanent feature of a permanent literature of crisis” (2000: 123). Further, Kermode asserts that there is a “perpetual assumption of crisis” (124) that determines how apocalyptic fictions and realities are understood. We become confused between the myth and the reality, and

the myth is useful only insofar as it can show society's tendency toward stereotyping the apocalypse. For Kermode, this is to be undone by identifying and isolating the true nature within the fictions that society is eager to perceive only as myth. Thus the politics of representing crisis for Kermode are reductive if they assume a predictable, stereotypical representation. Yet Kermode asserts, similarly to Seed, that we are living in a time where society does indeed comprehend the end of existence, but it is a comprehension fraught with basic assumptions only:

And of course we have it now, the sense of an ending. It has not diminished, and is as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution. When we live in the mood of end-dominated crisis, certain now-familiar patterns of assumption become evident (...) but out of a desolate reality would come renewal (Kermode, 2000: 98).

These assumptions, for Kermode, as they are for us, are useful insofar as they reflect dominant themes of the apocalyptic paradigm, and therefore provide a basis on which to argue for a more tangible discussion of the crisis of apocalypse. The rising appeal of the apocalypse in all forms of art and social interest is such that it also goes beyond political implications and ties in with ethical and philosophical enquiries. As Borg attests, “[a]n enduring fascination with catastrophe underlies the last century’s foremost literary and philosophical expressions but also, perhaps more paradoxically, its key ethical debates” (2011: 188). The ethics associated in apocalyptic crisis focus not only on the behaviour of society *after* the fall of civilisation, but to a certain –and neglected– extent, on the behaviours prior to and during the impending chaos. The expectations of humanity are a central component to apocalyptic fiction, one that is often underrated, deemed secondary to the more sinister aspects of post-apocalyptic scenarios. Yet it is not simply the how and the why that is a crucial interrogation of this paper but also, as I will discuss, just what exactly constitutes an apocalypse in artistic interpretation and how this in turn aids discussion about crisis.

Ballard’s Apocalyptic Fiction

J.G. Ballard has used the end of the world motif more than once in his fiction, including *Hello America* (1981), *The Burning World* (1964), and *The Crystal World* (1966). But it is his *The Drowned World* that stands out as a more significant addition to the science fiction oeuvre. The key difference separating this work from

other apocalyptic literature is the novel's central character, Dr. Robert Kerans who, rather than adopting the typical reaction of despair and misery at the impending apocalypse, is instead rapturous with the environment that the devastation of the earth has created. As Westfahl writes, while many of Ballard's novels deal explicitly with the apocalyptic motif, *The Drowned World* "rapturously embrace[s] human extinction" (2005: 620). The cause of the apocalypse in *The Drowned World* is the dramatic rise in temperature, which has caused mass flooding, replacing the dry earth with a tropical jungle landscape. Stuck in the beginning in the Hotel Ritz, where the heat of the sun makes him hesitant to leave, Kerans reflects on the novelty of his situation with an eerie calm and attention to the aesthetic beauty of disaster:

Already [Kerans] accepted the lavish brocaded furniture and the bronze art nouveau statuary in the corridor niches as a natural background to his existence, savouring the subtle atmosphere of melancholy that surrounded these last vestiges of a level of civilisation now virtually vanished forever (...) the Ritz now stood in splendid isolation on the west shore, even the rich blue moulds sprouting from the carpets in the dark corridors adding to its 19th-century dignity (Ballard, 1962: 4).

Kerans views the state of the near-vanished world as a testament to his existential nature, moreover delighting, rather subtly, in what he identifies as the melancholy of a civilisation that has almost completely disappeared. Ballard uniquely mirrors the changing environment of earth with the changing psychic nature of his characters, tapping into the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious. This theory refers to a cognitive state experienced by all individuals. As Jung elaborates:

There exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents (Jung, 1996: 43).

Ballard "penetrates the heart of the apocalyptic experience by integrating the changing physical universe with the changing psychic one, as his characters progress to an intense new relationship with nature, derived partly from uterine fantasy and partly from the genetic unconscious" (Magill, 1979: 634). Furthermore, Magill notes how the story ends not in death, but "in a curiously optimistic assimilation" (635). Kerans and the numerous people he encounters, including the beautiful and eccentric Beatrice Dahl and Colonel Riggs, who is in control of the scientific and military teams' mission to pick up those people still attempting to

live within the forests and lagoons, all attempt to reconcile their places within the drastically altered environment. While many are content to stay in the now tropical London, such as Dahl, others search for safety in Greenland. It is with an overtly optimistic tone that many of these characters approach the altered state of the world. Despite the disaster that the floods have created, the novel reads less like a traditional apocalyptic work—in which, as Kermode argues, the essential truth of apocalypse is substituted for a generic representation and interpretation—and more like a statement on what Kermode, Berger and Heffernan identify as the essential truth of apocalypse that resists generic representation and illuminates what has hitherto been *unrepresentable* (Heffernan, 2008: 6; Berger, 1999: 15). The apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic narrative, therefore, demands a rejuvenation of chaotic events that exposes that which has previously been omitted from artistic renderings of the apocalyptic crisis. For instance, the crisis of drowned London does not lead Dahl, Kerans or his assistant, Bodkin, to panic, but rather to explore their surrealist dream-states, evidently induced by the tropical nature of their surrounds. Perhaps the rather passive way in which Kerans, a biologist, views the devastation is that the world appears to revert to its pre-human era, where the city is consumed organically by nature. What Ballard's novel therefore exemplifies in regards to the politics surrounding the theme of crisis and catastrophe is how the unspeakable nature of trauma and devastation is seen in such a way as to make it preferable to salvation, resisting generic interpretations in the process. Wherein most apocalyptic literature the crisis is deemed horrible and deadly, Ballard's city being conquered by the natural world registers less as a crisis and more along the natural order of things. The human world in *The Drowned World*, according to Rossi, is symbolised by the city, and is drowned "because it surrendered to the organic, living, non-human element, losing the natural vs. artificial opposition" (1994: 82). The primitive nature of Kerans' journey is exhibited through his return to the natural world: "[s]o he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun" (Ballard, 1962: 158). The theme of crisis is slightly alleviated by Kerans' supposed role as a second Adam, alluding to more paradisiacal imagery which exists in contrast to the crisis represented in most traditional forms of an apocalyptic world in which the apocalypse is bleak, dark and hopeless. In regards to Kerans' uncertain death-wish,

Firsching (1985) argues that the theme of death achieves its greatest sense of ambiguity in Ballard's *The Drowned World*, in contrast to the author's other apocalyptic works including *The Burning World* and *The Crystal World*. Rather than providing a new set of values in the wake of the death of old values, Firsching writes that even though conventional life is stripped away, that Ballard "does not offer any appealing set of substitute values. Ballard's world is not one of new meanings, but of meaninglessness" (1985: 302). Therefore Ballard's exploration of the apocalypse is one that follows through with the existential theme of Nihilism in regards to human values, a theme rarely visited to such an extent in much of apocalyptic literature. Ballard "produces a sense of ambiguity by frustrating the expectations of the reader, by refusing to create a world that is in any sense sympathetic or comprehensible" (302). This unsympathetic, ambiguous world is most notably seen toward the end of the novel when Kerans accepts that he might not survive his journey through the jungle: "[f]or some reason he knew that Hardman would soon die, and that his own life might not long survive the massive unbroken jungles to the south" (1962: 158). His journey into the jungle in spite of his impending death therefore shows how Kerans, according to Gomel, "wholeheartedly embrace[s] the apocalypse" (2010: 143). It is unsurprising that such an approach to an apocalyptic theme would be received as frustrating and confronting to readers' expectations; traditional apocalyptic narrative, at least in part, focuses on the motif of meaning and value in society. *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Road* (2006), *War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The Machine Stops* (1909), among others, demonstrate narratives in which survival is directly linked to meaningfulness. In this way Ballard's novel operates as an existential science fiction novel that sees the doom of mankind and, moreover, an acceptance of life as meaningless, as not wholly reprehensible. This theme of the uncertain death-wish is not confined to *The Drowned World*; in Ballard's *The Burning World*, the character Reverend Johnstone identifies "mankind's unconscious hopes for the end of their present world (...) They themselves should welcome the destruction of their homes and livelihoods" (1964: 36). Clearly Ballard wishes to express not an appraisal of the apocalypse but at least an alternate perception of the end of days.

In popular culture, human beings are depicted as having a metaphysical obligation to survive. The opposite action, that is, a refusal of survival is characteristically explained and understood, somewhat erroneously, as suicide, and as such provokes continuing debate. Philosopher Thomas Aquinas' claim

coincides with a traditionally theological viewpoint: “[i]t is altogether unlawful to kill oneself (...) Because life is god’s gift to man, and is subject to His power (...) Hence whoever takes [their] own life, sins against god” (Aquinas, 2007: 1463). The assumption is that a refusal of life and survival goes against the moral and ethical principles of humanity. This viewpoint is illustrative of Wager’s notion of the irrationalist world-view, which “encourages the questioning or abandonment of conventional values, raises fundamental and perhaps insoluble questions about the meaning of existence” (Firsching, 1985: 307). Conversely to the will to survive, and the extreme manifestation of Wager’s irrationalist world-view, is Freud’s concept of the death-drive, or death instinct. This heavily criticised theory follows an impulse to “return to an earlier state (...) into an inorganic state” (1999: 148). Freud’s postulation of the death-instinct carries with it distinct implications for the values of humanity. First explored in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud posits that “the sense of guilt [in the death-drive] is the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the unending struggle between Eros and the destructive drive, the death drive” (1920: 64). Moreover, Freud acknowledges the scepticism and controversy surrounding the theory of the death-drive, or the drive for destruction, claiming that the death drive has met with resistance:

Even in analytic circles (...) I recognise that we have always seen sadism and masochism as manifestations of the destructive drive, directed outwards or inwards (...) but I can no longer understand how we could have ignored the ubiquity of non-erotic aggression and destruction and failed to accord it its due place in the interpretation of life (1930: 32).

Freud writes that he himself was resistant to the notion of a death-drive when first developing the theory, and that its rejection by others he finds “less surprising” (32). Freud aligns the theory of the death-drive with an inborn tendency to wickedness, illuminating the apparent similarities between the death-drive and the existence of evil. That Freud places the death-drive in the same category of the existence of evil again illustrates the common assumption between a death instinct and an anti-social behavioural pattern existent in literature and film. The death instinct, moreover, has come to be misunderstood in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, in which the terms ‘Instinkt’ and ‘Trieb’ (instinct and drive respectively) are both translated simply as instinct. Freud posits that the death instinct is in fact a drive, one that provokes

ambivalence, as seen with Kerans in Ballard's novel. It correlates to Freud's other notion that the ultimate goal of all life is death, so that life and death then become indistinguishable from each other. The death instinct is explored in *The Drowned World* not through instinct itself but as a death-wish. Where, as previously noted, Firsching identified Kerans' death-wish as uncertain, McCarthy describes the notion as Kerans' "unconscious death-wish" (1997: 306, own emphasis), suggesting that Kerans does not, in fact, express ambivalence in regards to his death, or the worlds' for that matter, but that it is an engrained logic for Kerans, and a seeming eventuality. In the pivotal chapter in which Kerans follows Strangman to possibly loot the now submerged planetarium, Kerans performs a near-suicidal act by cutting off his oxygen: "[h]e had unconsciously locked the air-pipe, knowing that the tension in the cable would suffocate him, or had it been a complete accident, even, possibly, an attempt by Strangman to injure him?" (Ballard, 1962: 112). In analysing Kerans' position in terms of the existentialist philosophies of Kierkegaard and Camus, McCarthy posits that if Ballard does indeed evoke the life and death philosophy of Kierkegaard and Camus, whose focus is on the existential dilemma of suicide and the will to live, then "a reading of Kerans as a sort of absurd hero whose prime motivation is his passion for life supplants the alternative reading of the novel as a pessimistic rejection of life" (1997: 307). Thus the text is open to be interpreted either via a pessimistic reading or a more optimistic reading in which optimism suggests that the hero of the story does not reject life but embraces it. The point is that McCarthy posits that the alternative interpretation of the novel following Kerans' rejection of life is a *pessimistic* narrative, pessimistic since we are, perhaps unconsciously, taught through literature and art that the will to survive is the optimistic and, therefore accurate narrative. Where Kerans expresses a will to survive, he is classified as a hero, however absurd. In contrast, his characterisation is defined unfavourably and negatively when the reading focuses on his rejection of life, possibly even composing Kerans as the villain of the novel.

For Ballard, Matthew Gandy writes, environmental catastrophe offers the opportunity "to explore the fragility of modernity" (2006: 86), highlighting the politics associated with a drowned London through urbanised societies. It is also an opportunity to explore the ethical and existential nature of humanity, as I have previously argued. Few science fiction works, let alone works of any literary genre that turn to the apocalyptic motif, focus on the true and authentic politics of 'the

end'. As both Heffernan and Berger observe (2008; 1999), we are living firmly within a post-apocalyptic society, unable to contemplate finite endings, and instead continue to contemplate the rather oxymoronic state of a post-apocalyptic world. The phrase 'after the end', for Berger, is an apt though confusing description of the thought-process of contemporary society (1999: xi). It is not enough that we contemplate, rationally or not, the end of civilisation but replace this end with a continuance that defies an authentic end to life. Rarely, if ever, do apocalyptic novels actually feature the end not simply of civilisation, but of the world itself. It therefore becomes an argument of what constitutes an apocalypse: is it the complete dissolution or abandonment of civilisation and its values? If, as Hobbes would argue, civilisation is merely a human construct created to preserve decorum in the face of our savage instincts, then such a description would not only be inadequate, but would also invert the definition of apocalypse to be simply the natural state of things. Or, is the apocalypse, in its most authentic form, when the earth itself and all humanity are erased from existence? The very genre 'post-apocalyptic' would evidently tend to distinguish the apocalypse as the breakdown of society, rather than the destruction of the world. The exploration of the politics of the apocalypse are simply too generic. Moreover, another question which presents itself is not simply what the apocalypse is, but why the absolute devastation of the world is rarely depicted in film or literature as the absolute form of apocalyptic crisis. This is explored in Berger's work *After the End* (1999) in which Berger argues that we have difficulty rendering the apocalypse complete and conclusive. As the aforementioned quote attests to, artistic explorations of the end fail to deliver it and instead create a post-apocalyptic existence that defies true apocalypse. As Heffernan argues, faith in the apocalyptic model that underlined narratives of modernity slowly diminished by the end of the nineteenth century (2007: 7), and was replaced by a rhetoric and movement that failed to accept a conclusive end. As she explains, this failure "to resolve thus introduces the twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] sense of the apocalypse as exhausted as opposed to redemptive and the post-apocalyptic as being on the other side of offering up revelation" (2008: 23). Heffernan further explains that this inability to offer conclusions is seen as a failure for the modernists; while, the postmodernists understand this inability to construct ending as productive in its ability to escape death. This therefore shows the inherent complexities in the construction of an end.

Von Trier's Cinematic Apocalypse

Lars von Trier's experimental and haunting film *Melancholia* (2011) approaches the logic and politics of crisis in a much more sinister and unnerving manner than Ballard, though without Ballard's subtlety. Despite Ballard's exploration of the ethics of life and death, Von Trier's film offers its audience a rare glimpse at an artistic rendering of the complete destruction of the earth by means of a planet that is on a collision path with the earth. Rather than exploring, as many apocalyptic narratives do, the disintegration of civilisation, Von Trier's film captures the end of the world in which civilisation conversely remains the same, yet the entire planet is destroyed, rendering civilisation wiped out rather than collapsed. The name *Melancholia*, moreover, acts as a symbolic message as well as the name of the planet that is to collide with the earth. Similarly to Ballard's novel, the ethics of human values are here explored, only in this instance through the theme of depression and despair. The film is one of many in a boom of the apocalyptic genre in cinema. As society contends with Climate Change and predominant threats of nuclear holocaust and nuclear wars, artists' and directors' renditions of the apocalypse continue to appear in film, perhaps as a way to visualise and thereby cope with that which we may not be able to control. The increasing popularity of the apocalypse is linked, as Richard Landes claims, to society's rather existential prioritizing of itself:

Our love for the apocalypse is connected with our sense of our own importance. To live in apocalyptic expectation means that you are the chosen generation; that in your time the puzzle of existence will be solved. It appeals to our - by which I mean humanity's - megalomania: we all want to believe we're special ... The West is fundamentally an apocalyptic culture. It came with the first missionaries when they went north to convert the tribes in Europe. The old chronicles speak of 'glad tidings', which had to be news of Christ's impending return (...) If apocalyptic fervor seems more intense now it's because ever since the Industrial Revolution Western society has been built on the idea of constant change, and so we need to constantly be thinking about the future. Scenarios like the Millennium Bug or Global Warming thus have special appeal to secular minds because as they are situations we created ourselves, we think we can solve them (Landes, 2010: NP).

Melancholia's approach to the intense curiosity of apocalypse separates itself from the usual apocalyptic films that focus on humanity's desire for survival and drive for meaning. The film follows the protagonists Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), who are sisters. The film is broken into two parts, the first focusing on Justine's eerily indifferent approach to the doomed fate of the world, and the second dedicated to Claire's more anxious nature. Straight away the juxtaposition

is set up between the sisters' individual reactions: Claire's anxiety represents the expected reaction of humanity, while Justine's fatalism signifies the somewhat forbidden dialogue in regards to the apocalypse.

The opening scene is an operatic, visual ensemble that appears to be a vision of the world in apocalyptic disarray. Many reviews of this opening sequence praised it (as well as the entire film) for its cinematic beauty. Margaret Pomeranz from *At the Movies* (2012) claimed, *Melancholia* is "a sublimely beautiful film that begins with a ten minute sequence of astonishing images of horses falling, of a bride being weighed down by vegetation clinging to her wedding dress, of a woman carrying a child through what seems to be quicksand to the strains of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*" (2011: NP). Similarly, Scott describes the film as "an excursion from the sad to the sublime by way of the preposterous (...) it nonetheless leaves behind a glow of aesthetic satisfaction" (2011: NP). While the apocalypse is usually depicted in cinema as bleak, horrific or as a violent catastrophe - such as *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Maté, 1951), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) -, Von Trier's film directly contrasts with this usual method by presenting the fragility of humanity and playing with a more romantic visage for his version of the end of the world. That Von Trier has matched the story with such majestic cinematography (created by European Film award winning Manuel Alberto Claro in 2011) is not only rare but, as explored in *The Drowned World*, a narrative that eludes an ethically sound narrative of humanity. Like Kerans and his relationship to the Freudian death-instinct, Justine's melancholia is similarly linked to Freud's theories. In his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud describes the mental features of melancholia as:

A profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling's, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (Freud, 1917: 244).

It is important to note that there is a stark difference between melancholia and mourning: proper mourning, for Freud, involves the ability to work through grief, culminating in the successful liberation from the lost object. However, when this is unsuccessful, mourning is replaced by melancholia, a state of unhealthy, pathological attachment to a lost object, representing a continuous attachment to an object that is lost. In this respect *Melancholia* can be interpreted as a film that does, in fact, show

an attachment for the lost object—in this case, the world—felt by the characters, rather than a feeling of ambivalence or acceptance as in *The Drowned World*. Yet Freud acknowledges that melancholia is a failed attempt at moving past grief, an unhealthy attachment to something that is lost, and as such *Melancholia* can be seen to argue that an attachment to the world is in fact unhealthy, thereby reiterating the notion that we should not mourn the end of the world. When confronted with the eventuality that the world is going to be destroyed, Justine expresses her beliefs to her sister that the end of the world should not provoke sorrow or grief throughout humanity, saying things such as: “the earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it”, “nobody will miss it”, and “all I know is, life on earth is evil” (Trier, 2011), much to her sister, Claire’s, horror. Justine’s existential approach to the end of the world is not so straightforward. In fact, on the surface it appears that her depression and the impending destruction of the earth is the most important and obvious nexus in the film. Granted, she is not completely unperturbed by the ensuing crisis; her depression stands as testament to this. However, while she may not seem completely content about the scenario, neither is she wholly eclipsed by grief, adopting a more nonchalant exterior. As the aforementioned extract from the film suggests, Justine is more forgiving, understanding, and, ultimately, accepting of the course of events. Her assertion that life is evil and that therefore humans do not need to grieve for the destruction of the earth is at once reductive and brutal in its minimalism. It is almost with a child-like simplicity that Justine comes to this conclusion, in which her hypothesis is that the world is simply an evil place, and therefore there ought to be no grief at its destruction. Justine’s hypothesis therefore is reminiscent of the Epicurean theory of death, in which humans should feel no need to grieve or express fear over death. Moreover, her expressions are most evidently illustrative of the rhetoric of Nihilism—the belief that life is meaningless and has no intrinsic value. This theory has often been linked to the movement known as postmodernism, a period asserting the end of theory and grand meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984). For the postmodernists, particularly for Lyotard, cultural narratives that have defined periods of history—such as Enlightened Rationalism or Marxist Communism—have become obsolete, leaving in their place the absence of values or belief/knowledge systems. In this way it can be seen how postmodernism is often an expression of distinctly nihilistic tendencies, arguing for the cessation of human values. A more extreme interpretation than postmodernism, nihilism posits the meaninglessness of humanity. Though as theorist Jean Baudrillard asserts, postmodernism shares

starkly similar ideological traits with our understanding of nihilism. He explains that nihilism:

No longer wears the dark, Wagnerian, Spenglerian, fuliginous colours of the end of the century (...) Today's nihilism is one of transparency, and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms, because this transparency, this irresolution is indissolubly that of the system, and that of all the theory that still pretends to analyze it (Baudrillard, 1994: 159).

It is therefore quite poignant and significant then that Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is the dominant theme in Trier's apocalyptic film, conveying the overarching motif of nihilism. Friedrich Nietzsche writes of the pursuit of happiness as synonymous to animality, and instead privileges the suffering of humanity which, as Nietzsche argues, affirms the state of genius:

Yet let us reflect: where does the animal cease, where does man begin? —man, who is nature's sole concern! As long as anyone desires life as he desires happiness he has not yet raised his eyes above the horizon of the animal, for he only desires more consciously what the animal seeks through blind impulse. But that is what we all do for the greater part of our lives: usually we fail to emerge out of animality, we ourselves are the animals whose suffering seems to be senseless (Nietzsche, 1983: 157-158).

Thus the pursuit of happiness is rendered reprehensible as it reduces a human to an animal, and suffering moreover is erroneously posited as something to be avoided. Nietzsche thus posits that the human can only become a genius, or a true human, if she is to accept suffering. Furthermore, for Nietzsche, there are “those true men, those who are no longer animal, the philosophers, artists and saints” (1983: 159), whose existence is characterised and made authentic by their embracing of suffering over happiness. In this respect Trier's film can be seen as more than a mere exploration of the nihilistic elements of life and suffering, and more than a re-evaluation of apocalyptic narrative but in fact a *celebration* of these elements by turning tragedy, suffering and death into something sublime. Both Nietzsche and Trier render human suffering as poignant through an acceptance of suffering over happiness. As such, *Melancholia* emerges not simply as a philosophical study of apocalypse, crisis and depression, but of an acceptance of human suffering as necessary for humanity to rise above animality, thereby separating it from the usual films within the genre of apocalypse, by incorporating the sublime. Interestingly, for Lyotard the sublime is “a sudden blazing, and *without future*” (1994: 55, own emphasis), an observation that, in light of post-apocalyptic themes, particularly in

the futureless *Melancholia*, can be seen to show the sublime as that which possesses an ending. He further explains that “compared to the pleasure of the beautiful, the pleasure of the sublime is (so to speak) negative... It involves a recoil, as if thinking came up against what precisely attracts it” (68). Therefore there is a certain negativity inherent in the sublime that the merely beautiful lacks, and this is an important distinction to make when discussing apocalyptic literature and film. In Ballard and Von Trier the apocalypse is not merely rendered beautiful but with, aptly enough, a melancholic nature that resists the trite constraints of beauty and instead focuses on the subtle darkness of sublimeness. *Melancholia* is not merely beautiful, considering its overwhelmingly dark themes, but sublime in both its aesthetically moving cinematography and sorrowful nature. Yet it neither conforms to rendering the apocalypse purely beautiful nor does it become consumed by sorrow: it instead employs the sublime, that which possesses both darkness and beauty, an invaluable poignancy which distinguishes sublimeness from beauty alone, as it incorporates elements of both darkness and light. In his review of Trier’s film, Joshua Rothman identifies two different categories of apocalyptic fiction, in which he argues that apocalyptic stories, rather than post-apocalyptic stories, are fundamentally more enticing, metaphysically speaking:

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of apocalypse stories: post-apocalyptic ones, in which life goes on after the apocalypse, and finally apocalyptic stories, in which nothing else goes on ever again. The finally apocalyptic ones —Lars von Trier’s “*Melancholia*” is one of my recent favorites— tend to be better. The word “apocalypse” comes from Greek roots which mean something like “uncovering” or “revealing”, but in most post-apocalyptic stories, the only things that get revealed are familiar tales about brawny men leading women and children to safety —nothing, in other words, that we don’t already know. What you really want is the end of everything, full stop, because that reveals something more challenging and strange: nothingness (Rothman, 2011: NP).

What separates Trier’s film from other apocalyptic stories is that the end is irrevocably delivered, providing a non-Hollywood ending in which some solution, or *deus ex machina*, saves the audience from having to comprehend the complete and total absence of life. This is not to say that in popular culture the crisis of apocalypse is never actually depicted - for example, *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I learned to Stop Worrying and the Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) -, but that it is somewhat of a rarity to portray an authentic apocalyptic crisis in which the world is, in fact, destroyed beyond all measure of salvation. Moreover, this popular filmic technique

subtly engrains the message that society is incapable of comprehending an eventual crisis, further accentuating the notion that those characters who can withstand the scenario are, in fact, strange and against the norm of social crisis.

Given that such an ultimate scenario is bleak, to say the least, Trier's depiction of the end of the world mirrors Ballard's in its technique of making the apocalypse aesthetically compelling. Where, in Ballard's novel, the reader is thrust into a tropical sub-paradise, which has a psychological impact on the characters' minds, in Trier's film the audience has the benefit of the cinematography to embellish and enhance the apocalyptic experience. More than once is the film, classified as an apocalyptic film, described as one of visual beauty, as the aforementioned reviews attest to. Its sublimity is intriguing, to say the least, and even to the very end of the film are we treated with an apocalypse that is hauntingly beautiful. The final scene is perhaps the most pivotal in understanding the politics of apocalyptic catastrophe. With Justine and Claire now aware that *Melancholia* will collide with the earth, they and Claire's son are alone together in the penultimate moments before the planet hits the earth. In a poignant scene with Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* playing yet again, Justine, whose expression is more passive than her sister's, leads Claire's son Leo over to a crude, 'magic' shelter that she has built for them for protection. The three of them sit inside the shelter, made only of a few thick branches, and hold hands awaiting the collision. While Claire is in obvious despair, Justine is seemingly unaffected, expressing more grief for the sadness of her sister than her own emotions. Claire's anguish is juxtaposed to Justine's imperviousness to the impending events, as she sits with a calm but severe face, after telling her nephew to close his eyes. As the music soars, we see *Melancholia* approach the earth and dominate the atmosphere in a menacing yet eerily beautiful scene. Finally, *Melancholia* collides with the earth and the three of them die, and the earth is destroyed. Despite the grief etched on Claire's face, the pseudo-ritualistic manner in which the three of them sit in their shelter and hold hands suggests an acceptance of the end of the world, and a calming façade that conveys a narrative rarely explored in apocalyptic literature and film. Justine, who has experienced depression for most of the film, appears more capable in the end of the world than the others, if not seeing the end of the world as the natural and right course of events. As previously argued, the debates surrounding what constitutes the apocalypse are diverse and changing. In Sandhu's review of the film (2011), the author identifies the common rhetoric of hopefulness in apocalyptic movies: "*Melancholia* is definitely an apocalyptic movie. Yet, though the brilliantly

realised opening scenes show the end of our planet, you still watch what follows hoping against hope that it won't come true. In this age of hurricanes and tsunamis (...) there is a political dimension to this agonised waiting" (Sandhu, 2011: NP). This fight in vain against the end, as Sandhu describes it, is a common response to a common filmic and literary technique, that is, revealing the ending to the audience and readers before continuing with the events that lead to this ending. And yet, as Sandhu acknowledges, and as Berger attests, humanity cannot help but express hope in the face of crisis by prolonging the end. The characters of Dr. Kerans and Justine, Ballard's and Trier's anti-heroes respectively, are as rare as they are novel in terms of apocalyptic narrative. They are also, moreover, useful figures in their mutual ambivalence with the crisis of the end of the world.

As discussed through theorists Derrida, Kermode, Heffernan and Berger, society and those creative practitioners reproducing crisis in film and literature tend to adamantly avoid an alternative narrative that would offer a conclusive end to civilisation, and instead adhere to trite and routine depictions of apocalyptic disarray, for fear of actualising the end as an unalterable finale. There persists an unwillingness to accept the inevitable and thus human salvation is constantly reiterated, which, subsequently, allows for no ability to understand the true aspects of the end of civilisation, in which we might be able to comprehend our finite existence. In this respect Ballard and Von Trier's works emerge as artefacts that defy normative conventions in reproducing the apocalypse in literature and film; they offer something of a rarity in intellectual consideration, that of the serious and realistic interpretation of crisis that would allow for greater insight to the existence of human civilisation and its end. These artefacts are not only helpful in their depiction of the apocalypse but necessary in exploring that which remains an undesirable inevitability, thereby addressing an issue which is imperative in regards to existential thought. By reducing the apocalypse to conventional displays of heroism and salvation, traditional interpretations of crisis fail to illuminate the potential for humanity is attempting to understand the apocalypse not as a tyrannical crisis but as a potentially optimistic and liberating concept. Both *The Drowned World* and *Melancholia* explore the complexities associated with representing an optimistic apocalypse, or at the very least an apocalypse whose reality is less disconcerting than it is illuminating and novel. In both instances the world is rendered uninhabitable, either through the world's destruction or its environmental changes, and the characters, moreover, express views and beliefs

that are considered strange and inhuman given the politics surrounding chaos and crisis as a collective human fear. Yet as the theories presented in this paper attest to, the conventional representations of apocalypse undermine society's ability to coherently and effectively understand the end of civilisation and indeed the world itself, as seen with the entire post-apocalyptic genre that seeks to keep the end out of sight. In this way both *Melancholia* and *The Drowned World* offer useful insights into crisis by providing if not the end itself, as seen in *Melancholia*, then a penultimate state of existence before the world is rendered uninhabitable for humanity, as seen with Kerans at the end of *The Drowned World*. For Kermode, Berger and Heffernan, these texts would represent the true nature of apocalypse and crisis as they do not merely rely on standard representations and understandings of apocalypse by linking the end of the world with crisis itself. Instead they move away from resorting to portraying the end as myth and adequately explore how the apocalypse (and indeed crisis itself) can be understood in rational, favourable, and logical ways. Where the typical films and books surrounding the theme of the apocalypse act as somewhat of a coping mechanism for consumers against an unknown disaster, Ballard's and Trier's nihilistic creations are perhaps of greater use and insight for a society that interprets the end of the world as only a crisis, and nothing more. Without resorting to nihilism and without conversely glorifying the crisis of apocalypse, these interpretations of the apocalypse highlight the usefulness in portraying the apocalypse as that which we cannot control, offering humanity something more tangible in the face of what is constantly reiterated as the greatest threat of humanity. The status quo of apocalyptic narrative does little in the way of offering consumers definitive understanding of our finite existence on earth, and thus, perhaps these narratives are the most valuable in articulating our brief existence on earth. Crisis, therefore, becomes the most invaluable element in exploring existential thought.

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