

**Mourning in the Twilight:  
Locating Biogrief in Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia***

a thesis submitted by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts  
in  
Critical Theory and Creative Research

Pacific Northwest College of Art

2017

**Mourning in the Twilight:  
Locating Biogrief in Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia***

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to all of the more-than-human species that have been and will continue to be lost to anthropogenic climate change.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the following for sharing your wisdom, patience, and encouragement with me over the course of this project.

Mareika Glenn  
Kate Copeland  
Laura Gonce  
Gitti Salami  
Diane Gould  
Rachael Allen  
Marie-Pierre Hasne  
Debi Dewar  
Elie Charpentier  
Chris O’Kane

Thank you also to my favorite Portland baristas, whose generosity and friendliness greatly enhanced the comfort (and efficiency!) of my writing sessions.

Brittany  
Scott  
Alisha  
Jasmine  
Will  
Matt  
Dawn  
Leticia  
Chan  
Madeleine

Last but not least, thank you to Austin and Delphine. Your loving support has been a source of comfort throughout this trying process. Thank you for being so very, very... COZY.

*To open our hearts to the sad history of humanity and the devastated state of the Earth  
is the next step in our reclamation of our bodies, the body of our human community,  
and the body of the Earth.*  
Chellis Glendinning

*While life beats its red rhythms and human swarms dance to the compulsion of strife,  
the interrupter practices dying.*  
Roy Scranton

## PREFACE

For too long we have tarried without response to the truly inescapable fact of our sole culpability: we the human race are sabotaging the climate, diligently and persistently. The earth is comprised of animal, vegetable, and mineral species. We bear the responsibility for the health of a more-than-human world. The word *terricide* is an inclusive declaration of earth's destructibility as a total living organism. In this age of rapid climate change—with only partially foreseeable consequences—terricide is implicitly human-caused. Yet we deny interspeciesism in favor of our own material gains. The fate of Earth is in our hands and we are doing remarkably little to stem its passage into obliteration. Taking care not to mitigate our mission of capitalist self-entertainment, we make concerted efforts at remaining overwhelmingly unwitting—of the inevitable misery that will ensue further with each generation.

If economic growth is bound to arrive at a halt sooner rather than later; if our denial of the inevitable is tied to our merely semi-conscious recognition of the fact of terricide's unfolding at our hands; if the acceptance of this looming death is not forthcoming any time soon; if we reject sadness as an appropriate response to the ensuing destruction of our lifestyles that were created with an eye toward convenience; if our miserable undercurrents decline the company of others'; if terror is at the root of this particular depression-denial-escape; if anger fuels the discoveries

of endlessly more frivolous pastimes that effectively decimate the Earth; if we are systematically corrupting our potential to respond in favor of the planet's health...

If we possess the failure of integrity necessary to decide the destined outcome of the world; if we persistently interrupt our capacity for moral revelation by favoring sensorial pleasure over the remotely-felt task of planetary preservation; if we can take satisfaction in our power to enact the fate of our habitat; if this generates a temptation unto pleasure; if the tearing down of nature's imperfection inspires even the slightest childish glee; if we on any level idealize absolution; if striving toward forgiveness has devolved into contemporary techno-messianism; if time and time again our mission has proved to be one of negligence; if our egos smart from that embryonic sense of subordination to nature; if we virtually strive to appear terminally indignant...

If our denial persists in devolving toward picnolepsy; if we commit terricide via the majority of our waking actions; if we want to wash our hands and souls of any sense of ethical repugnance; if our collective picnolepsy has indeed reached the fever pitch necessary to destroy all things externally generative and good; if procrastination, at once celebratory and sullen, has yielded an inner world of trauma; if silencing the muscle-and-soul memories of our roots is now a priority, the means to an end...

If hope is now truly a distant figment of our past, a phantasmal emotion; if taking the time to honor the lands, seas, and skies has all but disappeared from our conscious imperative, our leaning, our instinct; if the only utopia available to us is not one of dreams, but nightmares; if cognizance is not enough to stem the terrible tide of adherence to the process of terricide; if we can slowly but surely suffer the

effects of our failure to prioritize the thriving of the planet; if great sadness is the eventual outcome of all this mess; if radical response is the only possibility for some modicum of moral redemption; if terrific methods must be deployed to initiate a mass conscious revelation regarding our eternal culpability...

If deep-held resistance to misery is indeed the culprit and the enemy; if emotional resonance is the salvation needed to somehow rectify our plight—then unmitigated grieving is in order.

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change is the most significant challenge of our time to the health and prosperity of human civilization. Even as global warming continues to accelerate at a rate exceeding the predictions of the best-trained climate scientists, blatant denial of climate change persists at political and personal levels. Among those who do acknowledge the fact of climate change, apathy stubbornly counters the much-needed drive toward action. But denial and apathy are not the only psychological effects of the climate crisis. Additionally, sorrow, a pervasive sense of loss, and other feelings related to grief are some of the emotional consequences of a changing Earth. In this thesis, I offer a reconsideration of the psychological dimension of climate change. Instead of focusing primarily on mental constructs like denial and apathy, I propose a theory of grief over the loss of the planet and its more-than-human elements.<sup>1</sup> I call this theory *biogrief*.

*Melancholia* (2011) is a film by Lars von Trier that uses an unconventional story arc to narrate one woman's journey from depression to courage in the face of planetary apocalypse. In this thesis, I elucidate my theory of biogrief by analyzing the characters of *Melancholia*; specifically, by analyzing their varying emotional responses to apocalypse. Using the work of contemporary psychologists studying the nexus of emotion, Western socioeconomics, and climate change, I explore the dominant social world of the film, which embodies the spirit of climate change denial and apathy. I describe how this culture punishes Justine, the film's protagonist, whose sensitivity to the transitory nature of life threatens what surrounds her: a reified worldview of economic excess and the illusion of capitalistic permanence. With support from the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva, I apply studies of *melancholia*, a type of grief that diverges from normal mourning, to an analysis of the film's protagonist. I use the theory of *geotrauma* to bolster my findings on melancholia. Further, Roger Caillois' theory of *mimicry and legendary psychasthenia* helps to delineate a potential path out of the more stultifying effects of melancholia. Applying this theory to a pivotal point in the story, I illustrate how both of those processes pave the way toward Justine's emotional restoration. I end the thesis by depicting the outcome of Justine's journey through biogrief: it results in newfound inner strength and resolve, which she uses to support others during their own biogrief.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996, philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram began to use the phrase "more-than-human world" to describe the Earth, inclusive of its animal, vegetal, and mineral constituents.

*Nothing seems more miserable and more dead than the stabilized thing,  
nothing is more desirable than what will soon disappear.*  
Georges Bataille

*Idleness has in view an unlimited duration.*  
Walter Benjamin

## INTRODUCTION · CHARTING BIOGRIEF

The reality and scope of climate change are not easily accepted. Some continue to stand in outright denial of climate change, while many others are so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem that they feel mired in depressive, anxious apathy, incapable of making even small lifestyle changes recommended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In order to tackle the changes brought on by the new reality of environmental loss, and not exacerbate them further, we must accept that they are happening and that we each have a role to play in the degree to which climate change events unfold. The protagonist of Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia*, Justine, embraces the reality of planetary disaster. She does so starting from a place of deep depression. Her voyage during the film, which takes her from feeling depressed by civilization's status quo to accepting the likelihood of planetary demise, can be considered a depiction of grief scaled to fit the loss of the environment. This thesis explores a theory of *biogrief*. I argue, basing my assertions on Sigmund Freud's and Julia Kristeva's work on melancholia as well as on contemporary grief research, that people find the truth of climate change difficult to confront because they are paralyzed by grief. Analysis of the film *Melancholia* through the lens of planetary loss reveals a variety of responses to climatic disaster, many of which are characterized by avoidance of reality. Focusing primarily on the response of the film's protagonist, Justine, a person who does eventually embrace the reality I describe, this thesis

suggests that the depths of her melancholy represent one step forward toward the ability to accept climatic events. In her embrace of impending catastrophe, Justine is able to act as a support to those finding acceptance more difficult.

Lars Von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia* may be considered, in ecocinema theorist Adrian J. Ivakhiv's words, to be *affectively generative* in its "capacity to elicit a heightened perception of or orientation toward the socio-ecological."<sup>2</sup> The best films, he says,

generate interpretive 'buzz,' eliciting contrasting interpretations or stances toward an issue even as they encourage an impulse to reconcile those conflicts by thinking about, exploring, debating, or pursuing something related to the set of socio-ecological themes in question.<sup>3</sup>

*Melancholia* fits Ivakhiv's definition of a work of ecophilosophical cinema in that it theorizes "the relationship between human life and earthly and cosmic nature."<sup>4</sup> Full of narrative and symbolic ambiguity, the film creates the opportunity for multiple interpretations. It is an artwork that provokes thought with its non-dogmatic symbolism, unconventional character trajectories, and thematic overtones that refuse to moralize or prescribe. These qualities trouble one's inclination to draw precise conclusions. But thorough and close investigation reward one with a perspectival richness that is more interesting and enduring than a neatly wrapped filmic lesson. The film's creative nuances thus become crucial to mapping the complexity of an uncharted grief—grief for the death of the Earth, an event that carries terrifying

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 300.

<sup>3</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 300.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 315.

implications for the history of human civilization as we have come to understand and rely on it.

In an interview with Nils Thorsen, director Lars von Trier expressed his belief that to “look inward” for solutions to senses of longing and meaninglessness is far more valuable to the psyche than looking for religious or technological salvation.<sup>5</sup> One potential interpretation of the film is that it functions as a sort of parable about the virtues of valuing personal intuition over social conformity, which von Trier describes as being the cause of a sense of meaninglessness. Part One of *Melancholia* revolves around the ritual of a wedding reception for the film’s protagonist, Justine. She seeks to align herself with her loved ones’ values and comply with their corresponding prescriptions for her lifestyle. But Justine is at her core a melancholiac, detached from life and actively “longing herself out of it.”<sup>6</sup> Despite her best attempts to embody the role of the happy bride, she soon becomes incapable of succumbing to the wishes of her family and wedding guests. Her resistance takes the form of a stultifying depression. This clash with her world presents a pivotal moment in the plot, setting the stage for Justine to eventually awaken from her immobility and to become a medium of change in Part Two of the film.

The parallel plot line of the film unfolds in Part Two. It concerns a rogue planet named Melancholia that appears in the sky and hovers there, visible day and night (figs. 1 and 2). However, Justine is the only character who acknowledges

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<sup>5</sup> Lars von Trier, “Longing for the End of All”, by Nils Thorsen, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com>, accessed December 5, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Von Trier, “Longing for the End of All.”

Melancholia's steady encroachment toward Earth early enough to be able to deal with the emotional consequences of this shocking event. Seemingly through a combination of surrendering to her melancholic state and caring to commune with the natural world, the protagonist develops an acceptance of the impending apocalypse that manifests in the end as personal strength and resolve. From the depths of despair, she blossoms into an inspiring force, an emotional bulwark her closest family members need to help them face the coming cataclysmic loss. These characters thus find awareness and acceptance by proxy and are finally able to meet an apocalyptic event willingly, and openly. The death of the Earth in *Melancholia* is a traumatic event requiring social recognition of a space for grief and the development of a ritual to fit that space. In the final scene, Justine assists her sister and nephew in preparing for their collective fate with a simple ritual. They create a small roughly hewn tepee—a “magic cave”—and sit within it, holding hands. Justine's intervention proves critical to a sense of closure before the end of the world. As the planet Melancholia approaches, the force of the imminent collision sends an atmospheric surge over the hill, toward the viewer. The screen goes white. Earthly life is annihilated.

This thesis seeks to analyze *Melancholia* as a narrative portrayal of a journey through biogrief. My analysis of the film charts the course of a fully realized artistic expression of biogrief. This map finds support in the plot points of the film. The protagonist's maturation contrasts heavily with that of most of her fellow characters. Their materialism, I argue, represents the industrialized standard of living responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, environmental pollution, and other means of systematically destroying the planet. Their unwillingness to recognize the validity of

Justine's emotional reality mimics the resistance many have to accepting the facts and scope of climate change. Metaphorically representing Western society, these characters accordingly render biogrief a form of grieving that, in Kenneth Doka's words, is *disenfranchised*—that is, grief for a loss that “is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.”<sup>7</sup> I propose a course of biogrief which entails that a sufferer experience a state of melancholy—a sort of aggravated, implosive mourning, differing from typical grief—as outlined by Sigmund Freud in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”<sup>8</sup> Freud explains that the cause of this difference between melancholy (what he calls “pathological mourning”<sup>9</sup>) and “normal mourning”<sup>10</sup> is an ambivalence that people afflicted with melancholy bear toward the grieved “love-object.”<sup>11</sup> The root cause of biogrief, I argue, is an ambivalent relationship borne by Western societies' paradoxical attitudes toward the planet: at the core of Western civilization lies a drive to flourish, but its dependence on natural resources is juxtaposed with an unquenched willingness to pollute those resources on which we all rely.

Beyond the work of Freud, this thesis also makes use of Roger Caillois' theory of “*depersonalization by assimilation to space*.”<sup>12</sup> Elucidated in his 1935 essay

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, “Disenfranchised Grief,” in Kenneth J. Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 201-218.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” *Generation Online*, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpcaillois.htm>. Previously published in *Minotoure* 7 (1935).

“Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” this theory proposes that the “magical hold... of night” initiates a phenomenon of *mimicry*. Caillois describes this mimicry as originating in a process of *legendary psychasthenia*, which an individual undergoes in the presence of nature. The sense of unique self retracts and is replaced by unification with the natural world. This theory can be applied to *Melancholia* to explain the crucial transition that Justine undergoes in Part Two of the film. Through experiences of communing with both Earthly nature and the planet Melancholia, the depths of Justine’s melancholy lift, and she comes to embody the strength and awareness necessary to meet her fate in a spirit of acceptance. Her recovery is profound, and profoundly encouraging: it inspires her family to also accept the collision. The potential lesson is that willingly engaging with nature can catalyze mental transformations that result in awakening to the truth of universal transience, a philosophical-spiritual level of acceptance that may deepen acceptance of climate change at a scientific level.

An additional layer to my discussion of biogrief comes in the form of the ecophilosophical theory of *geotrauma*. Initially conceived by Nick Land and developed further by Reza Negarestani, geotrauma theory builds on Freud’s study of trauma as well as philosophies of the sublime to offer a radical new approach to ecological thought. It posits:

. . . the geophilosophical synthesis (of the modern man qua citizen) is conditioned by a geocosmic concatenation of traumas or cuts. . . . Since there is no single or isolated psychic trauma (all traumas are nested), there is no psychic trauma without an organic trauma and no organic trauma without a terrestrial trauma that in turn is deepened into open cosmic vistas.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Reza Negarestani, “On the Revolutionary Earth: A Dialectic in Territopic Materialism” (conference presentation, *Dark Materialism*, Kingston University Flett Lecture Theatre, Natural History Museum, London, January 12, 2011).



Geotrauma theory thus supports a case in which personal trauma (loss, for example) is prefigured by organic trauma (such as ecology's debasement by pollution).

Theorists Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan relate geotrauma with the following words:

"Beneath every ground is a non-ground such that the earth cannot ultimately ground itself in itself. Every mental, material, or social territory is founded upon this global movement of ungrounding."<sup>14</sup> The theory further recognizes the environmental movement's insistence on placing Nature with a capital 'N'—presumed to be sublime and harmonious—on a figurative pedestal; it further acknowledges that movement's unwillingness to admit to the inherent violence of the natural world. This paradox in thinking results in conceptual distancing of humans from Earth and problematizes real-world efforts to combat climate change.

Both major plot lines of *Melancholia* benefit from a reading of this theory: the film depicts the struggle for emotional autonomy in the face of the literal geotrauma of planetary loss. Justine, as both a melancholiac and an allegorical representation of the Earth, is the medium for and embodiment of this geotrauma. While those around her insist on psychically removing themselves from the crisis at hand, Justine models acceptance by embracing the reality of geotrauma. She is able to access a sense of deep connection with the planets Earth and Melancholia through the processes of mimicry and legendary psychasthenia. This connection overcomes senses of othering inherent to grief for personal loss—blaming is implicit (and typically involves an other) in the "anger, rage, envy, and resentment" that

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<sup>14</sup> Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan, "The Melancholy of Extinction: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* as an Environmental Film," *M/C Journal* 15, no. 3 (2012), accessed December 8, 2015, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/491>.

psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross discussed as components of the five stages of grief. It is my hope that a geotraumatic exploration of *Melancholia* may enrich the biogrief argument on the level of ecological thought. Climate change is an unorthodox challenge that begs unorthodox solutions. Western society's relationships with both nature and grief are deeply problematic, and creatively rethinking their connection could improve how the Earth is treated in the future.

In the wake of the natural world already lost, grief has taken hold. Grief is an expressive journey through multiple stages of emotions that lead toward the acceptance of loss. Grief scaled to the loss of the environment—biogrief—is more complex than ordinary human loss in that the denial takes on, as Freud's work on melancholia describes, a power of self-destruction in the griever.<sup>15</sup> Biogrief originates in a state of melancholia. The walk through melancholia does not represent time lost, or energy wasted, but, if embraced fully, in fact facilitates the deeper, helpful transformation of the griever's worldview and self-view needed to combat climate change. Through the alienating egocentrism of melancholia, and the necessary struggle to escape those depths, one comes to profoundly understand one's role as a member of society, a potentially strong and capable agent of change, and is therefore less inclined to deny climate change or remain immobilized by the scale of its threat.

We are increasingly finding ourselves in a world that we do not recognize. Up to this point, it has been natural for each subsequent generation to take the Earth for granted, to assume it will exist as it always has beyond our lifetimes. But the

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<sup>15</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 204-212.

planet's atmosphere and ecosystems have been declining for decades, and the pace of decline is accelerating. As this happens, the quality of life for human and non-human bodies<sup>16</sup> suffers at levels anywhere from slight to utterly destructive. The image of a reliably fecund, life-supporting planet is becoming outdated. Taking its place is a frightening new reality, a warped Earth, irrevocably damaged and depleted by human consumption. It is a reality characterized by the loss of dependably mild weather cycles, natural resources, and species diversity, a cause for biogrief.

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, in her 2004 work *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, describes “grievability” as a societally allocated condition that deems some lives more “livable” than others. It operates to privilege the lives of normative groups and secure the disenfranchisement of minorities. Social science researcher and environmental advocate Ashlee Cunsolo Willox writes in her 2012 essay “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning” that animal, vegetal, and mineral, or “non-human,” bodies, have also been “disproportionately derealized from ethical and political consideration in global discourse” alongside the bodies of human minorities. To back her use of the word “bodies” to describe these non-human entities, she recounts how Canadian Inuit communities consider the land an “animate being with *whom* Inuit feel relational ties (the land is very often equated with the same language as people).”

*Right now, in the amazing moment that to us counts as the present, we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will be forever closed.*  
Elizabeth Kolbert

*Two things that seem distinct—human society and Nature—are two different angles of the same thing.*  
Timothy Morton

## SOME BACKGROUND NOTES

What follows is a summary of basic scientific insights into climate change and the behavior that contributes to it, plus some recent history of the global warming challenge as it involves governing nations. Further, I have included an outline of certain grief theories from the post-World War II period. Some awareness of this information is helpful to understanding how biogrief functions.

### ***Climate Science, Human Behavior, and Policy***

The grave truth about the state the environment is in today, and how the Earth is expected to fare in the foreseeable future, are bitter pills to swallow. Casual perusal of the news today yields an overwhelming stream of scientific discoveries and current events related to climate change. Glaciers are melting,<sup>17</sup> Arctic water temperature gains are setting precedents year-round,<sup>18</sup> and polar animals are dying as they voyage longer toward their disappearing sea ice habitats.<sup>19</sup> Underwater

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<sup>17</sup> “Glaciers and Climate Change,” *National Snow & Ice Data Center*, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/glaciers/questions/climate.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Mooney and Jason Samenow, “The North Pole is an Insane 36 Degrees Warmer than Normal as Winter Descends,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2016, accessed November 29, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/17/the-north-pole-is-an-insane-36-degrees-warmer-than-normal-as-winter-descends/?utm\\_term=.2b8c00d684ec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/17/the-north-pole-is-an-insane-36-degrees-warmer-than-normal-as-winter-descends/?utm_term=.2b8c00d684ec).

<sup>19</sup> Christine Dell’Amore, “7 Species Hit Hard by Climate Change—Including One That’s Already Extinct,” *National Geographic*, April 2, 2014, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/03/140331-global-warming-climate-change-ipcc-animals-science-environment/>.

ecosystems are collapsing: The Great Barrier Reef and other reefs around the world are suffering massive bleaching events<sup>20</sup> while populations of fish, their metabolisms overstimulated by warmer waters, consume sea kelp forests until the plants are erased.<sup>21</sup> Land mammals have begun to go extinct.<sup>22</sup> Storms are increasing in both intensity and frequency—hurricanes,<sup>23</sup> floods,<sup>24</sup> and polar vortices<sup>25</sup> devastate landscape, life, and human infrastructure. Whole regions are now victim to a “new wildfire regime,”<sup>26</sup> while droughts are occurring at exceptional levels.<sup>27</sup> Worldwide increased air pollution is causing millions of deaths yearly.<sup>28</sup> Entire islands, once-

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<sup>20</sup> Michelle Innis, “Great Barrier Reef Hit by Worst Coral Die-Off on Record, Scientists Say,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/australia/great-barrier-reef-coral-bleaching.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Mooney, “Scientists Say Climate Change Wiped Out An Entire Underwater Ecosystem. Again,” *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/15/scientists-just-found-another-case-of-climate-change-wiping-out-an-underwater-ecosystem/?utm\\_term=.95ad671ec2b3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/15/scientists-just-found-another-case-of-climate-change-wiping-out-an-underwater-ecosystem/?utm_term=.95ad671ec2b3).

<sup>22</sup> Brian Clark Howard, “First Mammal Species Goes Extinct Due to Climate Change,” *National Geographic*, June 14, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/06/first-mammal-extinct-climate-change-bramble-cay-melomys/>.

<sup>23</sup> John Roach, “Hurricanes Have Doubled Due to Global Warming, Study Says,” *National Geographic News*, July 30, 2007, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/07/070730-hurricane-warming.html>.

<sup>24</sup> John Upton, “Louisiana Floods Directly Linked to Climate Change,” Climate Central, September 7, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.climatecentral.org/news/louisiana-floods-directly-linked-to-climate-change-20671>.

<sup>25</sup> Alejandro Dávila Fragoso, “Brace Yourself for a Bitterly Cold Winter, as Climate Change Shifts the Polar Vortex,” Think Progress, October 28, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://thinkprogress.org/stronger-cold-spells-likely-in-north-america-as-the-polar-vortex-is-shifting-7225c56569c2#.b47xwdc76>.

<sup>26</sup> John Upton, “Climate Change Behind Surge in Western Wildfires,” Climate Central, October 10, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.climatecentral.org/news/climate-change-behind-surge-western-wildfires-20775>.

<sup>27</sup> “Drought and Climate Change,” Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.c2es.org/science-impacts/extreme-weather/drought>.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Reed, “Study Links 6.5 Million Deaths Each Year to Air Pollution,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/business/>

inhabited, have already sunk beneath rising sea levels,<sup>29</sup> and climate “refugeeism” is a real and pressing problem, even in the industrialized world.<sup>30</sup> The evidence of destruction of earthly life by global warming is tremendous in amount and in scope—yet denial and apathy persist, impeding the pursuit and implementation of viable solutions to the climate change problem.

The theory of global warming by greenhouse gases was first presented in 1896 by Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius, and was supported by an observation three years later by the American geologist Thomas Chamberlin.<sup>31</sup> As a result of overwhelming counter-theory and relatively crude measurement technologies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theory that human release of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere could heat the Earth remained unsubstantiated. Decades worth of technological advancements were needed to produce increasingly accurate computer models of the atmosphere. In 1979, a U.S. Academy of Sciences report pronounced that if CO<sub>2</sub> continued to be pumped into the atmosphere at increasing rates, the outcome would be devastating. “There is no doubt that climate change will result and no reason to believe that these changes will be negligible,” the report stated.<sup>32</sup> Only in the late

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[energy-environment/study-links-6-5-million-deaths-each-year-to-air-pollution.html](http://energy-environment/study-links-6-5-million-deaths-each-year-to-air-pollution.html).

<sup>29</sup> Reuters, “Five Pacific Islands Lost to Rising Seas as Climate Change Hits,” *The Guardian*, May 10, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/may/10/five-pacific-islands-lost-rising-seas-climate-change>.

<sup>30</sup> Coral Davenport and Campbell Robertson, “Resettling the First American ‘Climate Refugees,’” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Maslin, *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

<sup>32</sup> National Research Council 1979, viii. In Daniel Bodansky, “The History of the Global Climate Change Regime,” *International Relations and Global Climate Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 24.

1980s did climate change start to make the leap from the realm of strict science into policy.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded in 1988 by two UN associations: the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization. The IPCC has been the most ardent body of experts routinely reporting on climate change developments while urging societal awareness and mitigation of its accelerating progress. But aside from the IPCC, over ninety-seven percent of publishing climate scientists have reached consensus regarding climate change.<sup>33</sup> They agree that global warming is both a factual trend and that it is anthropogenic.<sup>34</sup> Climate scientists have unanimously expressed the conviction for decades that global warming is overwhelmingly a human-made phenomenon. Yet most of the industrialized world lags considerably on implementing policies to curb the fossil fuel emissions that accelerate global temperature spikes and glacial melting.

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<sup>33</sup> Analysis of nearly 12,000 climate-related articles from peer-reviewed scientific journals reflects the growth over time of the conviction that climate change is a verifiable, human-caused phenomenon. Source: John, et al., “Quantifying the Consensus on Anthropogenic Global Warming in the Scientific Literature,” in *Environmental Research Letters* 8 (2013) 024024: 1, accessed November 27, 2016, doi:10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024.

<sup>34</sup> The term *anthropogenic* refers to any effect on the environment that arises from human activity. Early usage of the term *Anthropocene* was made by Soviet scientists in the early 1960s to refer to the Quaternary geological period; the term was also used by biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the early 1980s to refer to the impact, and evidence for the impact, of human activity on the Earth. In 2000, Dutch Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist popularized the term “Anthropocene” to denote an epoch in which human activity results in measurable change to the Earth’s geology and ecosystems, and, consequently, its self-regulation capabilities. Since that time, the term has been more commonly used to refer to global warming brought about by pollutive greenhouse gas emissions. On August 29, 2016, the Working Group on the Anthropocene presented its recommendation to the International Geological Congress to formally designate the current division of geological time, which scientists propose as having begun with the Industrial Revolution. In fact, *The Open Atmospheric Science Journal*, published by the NASA/Goddard Institute for Space Studies, made professional reference to the current age as the Anthropocene Era in the 2008 science report, “Target Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>: Where Should Humanity Aim?”.

The fictional world of *Melancholia* is a domain in which economic materialism correlates with hollow behavior. This correlation effectively highlights the inherent vacancy of real-world consumerist pursuits and associated suppression of genuine self-expression. Economic materialism is a critical component of the existence and acceleration of climate change. America provides the worst example of materialism's destructive effects at work. As a "wealthy, individualistic, and capitalistic culture,"<sup>35</sup> the United States espouses the free-market system in such a way that it creates a deep psychological need to acquire objects in order to satisfy a sense of belonging.<sup>36</sup> Consumerism and consumption itself are bolstered by "lack of concern about the environment and lack of attention to addressing negative effects of global climate change."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast with the dominant social norms in the United States that connect consumption with happiness, research demonstrates a low level of positive correlation between consumption and subjective wellbeing.<sup>38</sup> It points to advantages for both society and the environment when individuals take part in "ecologically responsible behavior." Environmentally responsible lifestyles have been proven to heighten self-reported levels of happiness and contentment. They engender a shift in values that could further strengthen one's efforts to reduce consumption.<sup>39</sup> But

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<sup>35</sup> Janet K. Swim, Susan Clayton, and George S. Howard, "Human Behavioral Contributions to Climate Change: Psychological and Contextual Drivers," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 4 (2011): 254, doi:10.1037/a0023472.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



materialism is difficult to overcome, constructed as it is by a near-inescapable daily barrage of advertising. Through both overt and subtle messages that link product acquisition to “self-satisfaction, fun, and praise from others,” advertisement powerfully constructs social norms that condition individuals to believe that product acquisition can “satisfy a need for autonomy or competence [in order to] reach one’s individual potential.”<sup>40</sup> Environmentally responsible levels of consumption are seen as less desirable to many. The typical consumer is defensive of her existing lifestyle, effecting a negative orientation toward environmental protection that amounts to apathy and denial.

By promoting repetitive actions that destroy the Earth, consumer culture creates an attitude of denying the gravity and/or fact of climate change. Therefore, a system is in place that constructs unwillingness to change. High levels of energy consumption are required to produce and operate many sought-after belongings. The overwhelming trends in America of buying larger houses (which require more energy to heat and cool), using appliances more intensely, and consuming greater amounts of fuel with more and bigger cars continue to exert a considerable impact on the Earth. Over the next twenty years, the world’s largest increase in energy demand will come from developing countries, primarily China and India, but the United States will remain the world leader in terms of actual energy usage: just one US dweller will be consuming as much as every two to three Chinese residents.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 254.

The US climate projections, as long as global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase, are no longer grim. They are dire. The hottest summertime temperatures at the middle of the twentieth century, which occurred five percent of the time, will occur seventy percent of the time by the year 2035.<sup>42</sup> Policymakers have outlined a two-degree global temperature increase as a threshold that is safe (except in the case of island communities close to sea level<sup>43</sup>), but the average global temperature may increase by almost nine degrees by the year 2100.<sup>44</sup>

The course toward securing some sort of lasting action on climate change seems particularly fraught. As many scientists have asserted, the earth has passed a kind of tipping point. In the past few years, varying points on the globe have reported atmospheric levels of CO<sub>2</sub> over 400 parts per million (ppm).<sup>45</sup> The scientific community has long agreed that “if humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted,” the safe level of carbon in the atmosphere should be limited to “at most 350 ppm, but likely less than that.”<sup>46</sup>

On April 22, 2016, one hundred seventy-five nations signed the “Paris

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<sup>42</sup> Jerry M. Melillo, Terese (T.C.) Richmond, and Gary W. Yohe, Eds., *Climate Change Impacts in the United States: The Third National Climate Assessment*. U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Kahn, “The World Passes 400 PPM Threshold. Permanently,” Climate Central, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.climatecentral.org/news/world-passes-400-ppm-threshold-permanently-20738>.

<sup>44</sup> IPCC, *Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis*, contribution of Working Group I to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Adam Vaughan, “Global Carbon Dioxide Levels Break 400ppm Milestone,” *The Guardian*, May 6, 2015, accessed November 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/06/global-carbon-dioxide-levels-break-400ppm-milestone>.

<sup>46</sup> James Hansen, et al., “Target Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>: Where Should Humanity Aim?,” *The Open Atmospheric Science Journal*, 2 (2008): 217.

Agreement,” consenting to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions beginning in the year 2020. “The most compelling thing you can say about Paris is not that it saved the planet, but that it saved the chance of saving the planet,” said Bill McKibben, founder of the grassroots organization 350.org and an architect of the worldwide movement to divest from fossil fuel companies. Since the November 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the fate of US adherence to the Paris Agreement has been in flux. Announcements from the current administration have included threats of complete withdrawal from the groundbreaking climate accord. If Trump’s threat is realized, it would mean not just disgrace for America on the world stage. More importantly, the most powerful voice the world has on energy policy would be signaling looming climatic disaster.

### ***Modern Grief Studies***

Modern grief theory found its start with Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her 1969 study of terminally ill clinical patients, *On Death and Dying*, was revolutionary within a medical culture of doctors unwilling to discuss their patients’ illnesses or end-of-life options with them in candid, thoughtful ways. Instead, a doctor would typically decide what was best for the patient without regard to her wishes, and that would be that. Very often, specific prognoses were withheld from the patient, and family members would support the doctor by maintaining a cheery front in the face of mortality. *On Death and Dying*, a set of observations based largely on extended, personal interviews with the terminally ill, profoundly shifted the dominant narrative of end-of-life care. Its relation of the patient’s experience and the resulting portrait of the five stages of death—denial and isolation, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance—brought increased compassion and understanding to the dying within a medical industry that was in sore need of both.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the five stages of death later proved helpful in describing the experience of those in mourning—or even those experiencing anticipatory grief.<sup>48</sup>

British psychiatrists Colin Murray Parkes and John Bowlby, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, respectively, worked on approaches to grief that took the form of “phases” rather than “stages.” This was in part an effort to combat the literalism with which many people took Kübler-Ross’s work—many did not read her work closely enough, and so believed that one stage of death had to be completed before another could take place, and/or that the stages must necessarily take place in the order laid out in her book. The four phases of mourning are: numbness close to the time of loss, yearning for the lost one to return, disorganization and despair, and reorganized behavior.<sup>49</sup> Psychologist Catherine M. Sanders created her own set of five phases of mourning: shock, awareness of loss, conservation withdrawal, healing, and renewal.<sup>50</sup>

J. William Worden, a grief counselor and pioneer of the hospice movement, presents a third approach. His description of the course of mourning takes the form of “tasks” in an effort to be “more consonant with Freud’s concept of grief work

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<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families* (New York: Scribner, 2014), xi-xii.

<sup>48</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 2.

<sup>49</sup> J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2009), 37-38.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

and [imply] that the mourner needs to take action and can do something” rather than passively wait for acceptance and healing to occur post-loss.<sup>51</sup> His four tasks include: to accept the reality of the loss, to process the pain of grief, to adjust to a world without the deceased, and to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.<sup>52</sup> Worden sees his work as being particularly useful to clinicians and to mourners working through their grief with the help and guidance of counselors. He makes the point that grief can overwhelm an individual to the point of passivity; overcoming this state by taking healthy actions “can be a powerful antidote to the feelings of helplessness that most mourners experience.”<sup>53</sup>

American psychotherapist Francis Weller takes a radically different look at grief. Critical of Western culture, which he nicknames “ascension culture,”<sup>54</sup> he states in an interview, “we display a compulsive avoidance of difficult matters and an obsession with distraction.” These patterns, he says, make it difficult for us to “acknowledge our grief . . . [forcing us] to stay on the surface of life.”<sup>55</sup> Weller further discusses Western psychology elsewhere in his book. In a short passage on blame, he takes to task the therapists who have refused to look deeply and critically at the society that shaped us. Instead, these counselors choose to share a simple story in which our parents are to blame for our troubles as adults. In fact, our parents came from a culture that “failed to offer them what they needed in order to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 39-50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>54</sup> Francis Weller, “The Geography of Sorrow: Francis Weller on Navigating Our Losses,” by Tim McKee, *The Sun*, October 2015, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

become solid individuals and good parents.” Ideally, he says, we would have been raised by a village like our distant ancestors were. It is the memory and need of this village-rearing that still reside within our DNA and create a deep sense of lack, and grief, in us today.<sup>56</sup>

Weller’s points about blame and the West as “ascension culture” are relatable to the traditions of grief theory discussed earlier. For all the improvements that Kübler-Ross’s work brought to the medical customs of her time, it failed to discern a deeper, more complex narrative regarding that oppressive culture. Rather, her stages of grief, especially the anger and bargaining stages, focused on overcoming “anger, rage, envy, and resentment” of other people, institutions, and forces.<sup>57</sup> Such emotions imply blame, and with the distance granted by blame, “nothing is asked of us.”<sup>58</sup> From this effortless vantage one is free to write and believe in her own stories which may or may not be accurate. And to blame is to other—to separate and distance oneself from people as well as from the task of mining events for their significance and their power to teach. Further, the Kübler-Ross imperative is to solitarily—without community assistance or ritual—accept loss. This imperative may disable the mourner from a “downward journey” through which she can do “the essential work of transforming sorrow into something of value to the community.”<sup>59</sup> Parkes, Bowlby, Sanders, and Worden all propose similarly unidimensional charts of grief that render mourning a solitary activity without

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 41.

<sup>57</sup> Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Weller, “The Geography of Sorrow,” 5.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

deeper, broader implications for the evolution of culture.

In his work *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Weller specifically discusses the sense of loss we feel when we encounter evidence of or bear witness to pollution and other means of ravaging the Earth. He writes,

What we feel from the surrounding world is not a projection of our own minds outward into the environment. . . . Western psychology would most likely suggest that the grief we are feeling is related to our own experience of being diminished as a child. . . . In that moment, we would be left alone with our feelings of grief, wondering about how to heal this wound.

What if, however, the feelings we have when we pass through these zones of destruction are actually arising from the land itself? . . . What if we are not separate from the world at all?<sup>60</sup>

Weller here offers a picture of mourning that relates to the perspective provided by the geotraumatic argument. Geotrauma theory, favoring the burgeoning philosophical branch named “ecological thought,” posits that “environmentally conscious representations of ‘the planet’ or ‘nature’ as a sheer autonomous objectivity, a self-contained but endangered natural order, may ultimately be the greatest obstacle to genuine ecological thinking.”<sup>61</sup> Environmentalism, in its insistence on othering nature as an entity to be saved and protected, enforces the fallacy that the human world is somehow separate and divided from Earth. This fallacy dangerously implies that human will has the capacity to triumph over its own powers of destruction as well as the Earth itself. Imbuing human culture with such supremacy only reinforces the notion of human self-reliance—independence from the Earth; autonomy in a vacuum.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>61</sup> Matts and Tynan, “The Melancholy of Extinction,” *M/C Journal*.

Francis Weller's work offers several tools for encountering, understanding, and experiencing biogrief. These tools often take the form of group rituals that resurrect the lost sense of the village to bring guidance to sufferers of planetary mourning. On a communal journey, ritual participants find that they are both students and teachers of one another. It is a journey to eliminate the passivity that Worden works to counteract, yet it also brings a depth of focus that he and the other more conventional grief specialists do not approach. Ritual yields integration with ancestry and brings human life out of the autonomous vacuum and closer to Earth. I explore this topic further in Chapter Four when I discuss the conclusion of *Melancholia*.



*How many people, likewise, enjoy themselves not to enjoy themselves but in order to perform a species of rite...*  
 Michel Leiris

*Growth: it's the closest thing we have to a global deity.*  
 Naomi Klein

## ONE · EXCESS AND DENIAL

This chapter serves as an analysis of Part One of *Melancholia*. I interpret Part One as illustrating the conditions that initialize a state of grief over environmental loss. It can be seen to depict socioeconomic privilege and the latter's hand in producing denial. Here, primary elements from the setting and plot combine to thrust the protagonist into melancholy, a gateway to *biogrief*. Applying grief theory and sociological studies with notes on geotrauma, I explore this sequence of the film as a metaphorical portrayal of the material excesses of modern industrial civilization. The glut of modern society leads to a numbing of emotions, which can be read as the initiation of apathy toward environmental loss, a response that “prevents individuals from learning about the threat and creating a more informed reaction.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Part One can be viewed metaphorically as a representation of how climate change denial functions. Within the allegory of the film, material excess shapes social behavior with the effect of undermining the protagonist's efforts to communicate an innate sense of lack—lack of agency, and lack of purpose, within the society she feels disconnected from.

Part One of *Melancholia* is entitled “Justine.” It focuses narratively on the titular character's wedding reception. I interpret Justine as portraying a woman experiencing the melancholic onset of biogrief. The visual backdrop of this part of

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas J. Doherty and Susan Clayton, “The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change,” *American Psychologist* 66, no. 4 (2011): 270, doi: 10.1037/a0023141.

the film underscores the value system that the social norms in *Melancholia* are founded upon. The extravagant reception takes place on the lavish grounds of a castle-like estate, an opulent setting that reiterates a motif of material excess and its impact on social relations (fig. 3). The mansion sits on an 18-hole golf course bordered by a body of water that extends as far out as the eye can see. The distance of the estate from town lends it a privacy bespeaking exclusivity, the pinnacle of privilege. A private drive to the house, hidden from civilization by thick woods on either side, leads to multiple levels of stone patios. Further, the opulence of the castle interior is conspicuous, complete with marble flooring, ornately carved wooden walls extending to towering ceilings, an abundance of bedrooms with private baths, a library, and a ballroom with a balcony. This sumptuous estate lies beyond sight of any neighboring town or other property. Within its boundary, however, Western civilization functions at its presumed apex. Each detail of this luxurious locale suggests the worldly values borne by Justine's husband, family, and friends.

The reception begins as a celebration for Justine, which she meets with buoyance and delight. Here, she appears to enjoy the guests' attention, speeches, and revelry (fig. 4). The celebratory mood of the reception dissipates by the time the evening is halfway over, by which time it is evident that Justine seriously doubts the wedding's significance.<sup>63</sup> Her doubt is in part due to her initial motivation to marry; while she demonstrates fondness for her new husband, director Lars von Trier asserts in an interview that Justine does not base her decision to marry on love. Von Trier claims that she instead married out of a belief that the ritual would help her to "become normal": she yearned to put an end to her deep-seated "silliness and

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<sup>63</sup> Von Trier, "Longing for the End of All."

anxiety and doubt,” and felt she could access stability through the institution of marriage.<sup>64</sup>

The melancholic onset of Justine’s biogrief occurs in the face of societally inscribed extrinsic values of acquisition and possession. Employing a sumptuous visual backdrop and portraying Justine’s adverse interactions with a series of supporting characters, the film depicts the set of mores that guide Justine’s world. Systematically, the setting of this sequence and the people around Justine combine to take on the role of a conditioning force, a reified value system. Darcy Harris emphasizes how Western society, “death-denying and product-driven,” is founded upon capitalism and “patriarchal hierarchies in all significant social institutions.”<sup>65</sup> Within such a system, Justine finds it difficult to express herself; she faces a code of behavior that emotionally disenfranchises her. Justine’s initial blushing-bride persona fades into its antithesis as she utters surly words, drinks heavily, urinates publicly, commits adultery, and becomes a recluse at her own party. Confronted by conventions in which she sees no real value, yet pressured from every direction to conform to them, Justine’s sense of optimism and capacity to cope diminish. She develops a sense of futility with regard to life that plunges her into depression. From light-hearted beginnings, Justine is emotionally undone by her expanding perception of meaninglessness in the world.

Part One of the film adds an important layer of metaphor to the overarching narrative of *Melancholia*. The process of Justine’s emotional disenfranchisement at

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Darcy Harris, “Oppression of the Bereaved: A Critical Analysis of Grief in Western Society,” *OMEGA* 60, vol. 3 (2009-2010): 244, doi: 10.2190/OM.30.3.c.

the hands of society points to Justine as a symbol of the Earth itself. The civilization surrounding her systematically wrecks and degrades her, resulting in the biological dilemma of depression. This process of degradation acts as a metaphorical representation of the ecological dilemma of climate change, industrial civilization's degradation of Earth. Justine, confronted by a society that overwhelmingly denies her ailing condition, is a sensitively nuanced poetic depiction of our planet and the deep, accelerating effects that denial has on the process of climate change. The narrative of Part One can be examined as an allegory of how modern civilization's development has triumphed over concern for the Earth.

Over the course of the night, several of the guests' words and actions emphasize Justine's plight. She "cannot meet her own demands" in the face of the ritual's meaninglessness.<sup>66</sup> Her motivation to act out does not appear to be one of rebellion. Rather, it is incipient melancholy that divorces her from social conventions. We see her sinking uncontrollably into a fog of depression so totalizing that the new Justine is almost unrecognizable from the bride of the early evening (fig. 5). Indeed, the wedding degenerates into a landscape of loss. The seed of an imminent melancholy carries Justine into the second half of the film. Part One confirms Justine's sense of the wedding's inherent meaninglessness using both visual motifs and social drama to expose the hollowness at the celebration's core. The visual elements highlight material extravagance while emphasizing the motivations of the wedding party, whose myriad interactions with Justine essentially demonstrate their own flippancy, aloofness, self-righteousness, and blatant denial.

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<sup>66</sup> Von Trier, "Longing for the End of All."

The wedding guests gesture toward including Justine emotionally, but they fail to truly accept her. Family, friends, and acquaintances make overtures of accepting her, loving her, and caring about her wellbeing. Yet, each time Justine requests help in understanding the process of her emotional decline, she is met with a contorted perception of her struggle, or simply an unwillingness to listen. None of the guests in attendance, including Justine's dearest family members, seem to sympathize with her obvious undoing. Some characters are downright scorning and impatient with her for not measuring up to the image of the perfect bride. Some of the most painful scenes to watch occur when Justine pleads with her mother (Gaby), and then her father (Dexter), for understanding; she is shut down by her parents' self-interested responses. Gaby, who coldly opposes the institution of marriage, does not listen or offer tenderness. Instead, she encourages Justine to forfeit her wedding vows and strike out on her own. Dexter, promising to spend time with his daughter in her hour of need, quickly abandons her. He leaves Justine with nothing but an aloof apology note in which he goes so far as to address her by the name of his young second wife.

Justine here represents an injured planet, the victim of denial and apathy. These two mechanisms act as tools for "social justification and psychological defense" against the truth of climate change.<sup>67</sup> Psychologist Peter H. Kahn, Jr.'s term "environmental generational amnesia" applies to the example of Gaby and Dexter. Unlike the rest of Justine's family, who are at least aware that Justine is unhappy, both her mother and father seem oblivious to their daughter's suffering.

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<sup>67</sup> Doherty and Clayton, "The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change," 269.

In the condition Kahn describes, environmental generational amnesiacs “make their experience a baseline for environmental health and thus fail to recognize, over years and generations, the extent to which the environment has degraded.”<sup>68</sup> Gaby and Dexter have had decades to observe Justine’s emotional vicissitudes and try and help her, but they seem to have missed these opportunities. Their amnesia amounts to “denial that climate change is occurring, that it has any anthropogenic cause, or that one’s own actions play a role in climate change.”<sup>69</sup> Denial remains a special hurdle to climate change solutions because alterations to anticlimate behavior cannot be made unless the problem of global warming is acknowledged.<sup>70</sup>

The groom and wedding guests also obliquely exclude Justine over the course of the night. The extravagant celebration they indulge in is, in their world, a ritual that bears rules for appropriate behavior. These rules are an example of social norms that can manifest as “forces for regress” in environmental issues that result in “anticlimate behavior patterns.”<sup>71</sup> It is important to note that Justine’s family members, her employer, and even her new husband all speak to Justine as if true happiness is easily within her reach, something she could conjure if she simply chose to do so. The film’s audience observes something different: after each disheartening social interaction, Justine tries in earnest to pick herself back up. She is buckling to the pressure of Western society to grieve a certain way; she is thus caught within a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Gifford, “The Dragons of Inaction: Psychological Barriers that Limit Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation,” *American Psychologist* 66, no. 4 (2011): 295, doi: 10.1037/a0023566.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 294.

system of disenfranchised grief. Darcy Harris writes, “despite much research and anecdotal accounts that confirm the normalcy of many diverse responses to loss, social expectations of uniformity (and conformity) are still placed upon bereaved individuals in current Western society.”<sup>72</sup> Two of grief psychologist Kenneth Doka’s social rules of grieving—“a set of norms that attempt to determine who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve”<sup>73</sup>—are observable here. “How long grief can last” and “how grief can and should be manifest” are rules determined without Justine and used against her.<sup>74</sup> When Justine fails to play her prescribed role, the guests are unwilling or unable to meet her at her level, so she is expelled from the dominant social order. Eventually, the emotional injustices against Justine pile up to a point at which she cannot pretend to be even slightly happy. Colluded against, criticized for her shortfalls and endlessly pressured to conform, Justine’s earnest efforts to rise to the occasion of her wedding are eclipsed by the guests, whose societal privilege causes them to deny the authenticity of Justine’s emotional expression.

This dynamic can be encapsulated most simply in the character of John. John is the husband of Justine’s sister, Claire, and owner of the mansion. Arrogant about his wealth, and given to bragging about it, he is the owner of the estate. In addition to hosting the celebration, he proudly foots the bill. His conspicuous consumption represents “an unconscious reaction of denial in which individuals stave off anxiety by seeking gratification through continued or increased material

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<sup>72</sup> Harris, “Oppression of the Bereaved,” 242-3.

<sup>73</sup> Kenneth Doka, as cited in Harris, “Oppression of the Bereaved,” 244-5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-5.

acquisition and consumption.”<sup>75</sup> He makes a point of reminding Justine that he is hosting the party, insensitively insisting that she “be happy” throughout the night in order to express her gratitude to him. John and Claire both frown upon Justine’s frequent propensity toward sadness.

Another kind of privilege is at work here, hinted at by the economic and societal privilege on display. The guests embody the kind of privilege that prevents a society from acknowledging emotional difference, a stand-in in the film for environmental difference (or degradation). Sociologist Raoul Liévanos uses the term “environmental privilege” to describe “the taken-for-granted structures, practices, and ideologies that give a social group [a] disproportionately high level of access to environmental benefits.”<sup>76</sup> At this lavish party on a grand estate remote from any city, the guests are “protected from full knowledge of environmental (and many other social) problems”<sup>77</sup> by their seclusion and their access to “coveted environmental amenities”<sup>78</sup> such as John’s private forest and golf course, bordered by an expansive, uninterrupted shoreline. These more overt examples of the guests’ environmental privilege combine with the subtler aspects of their “fine-tuned yet unconscious practices of not noticing, looking the other way, and normalizing the

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<sup>75</sup> Doherty and Clayton, “The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change,” 270.

<sup>76</sup> Raoul Liévanos, “A Minority Perspective Is Limited: Environmental Privilege and Surface Water Hazards in an Impaired Estuary,” presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, April 18, Washington, D.C., as cited in Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 219.

<sup>77</sup> Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011): 219.

<sup>78</sup> Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America’s Eden* (New York: NYU Press, 2011): 4, as cited in Kari Marie Norgaard, “Climate Denial and the Construction of Innocence: Reproducing Transnational Environmental Privilege in the Face of Climate Change,” *Race, Gender & Class* 19, nos. 1-2 (2012): 5.



disturbing information [about Justine's emotional decline] they constantly come across."<sup>79</sup> The product is a culture of aloofness that perpetuates Justine's emotional disenfranchisement.

The reception bears the further dimension of geotrauma. The society of the wedding party creates a separation between nature and culture. This effects a trauma that Justine must recover from. As Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan write,

Our post-Romantic concept of nature, like that of God, fulfills the ideological function of providing a "ground," where in truth there is simply the void of a non-ground. And this isn't a void "out there," where God or nature *should* be, but "in here," with the purely human space carved out by human law.<sup>80</sup>

John's estate promotes the fantasy of nature as separate and other, as "out there." But in actuality, it functions as a phantom ground. Justine can see this. She is the only one in the film who early senses the existence of the void of a non-ground. Overall the wedding ritual seems to represent the apex of culture, the representation of the "irreducible violence of human social organization."<sup>81</sup>

The affection exhibited by Justine's family, friends, and work associates seems inauthentic, and their intentions toward the bride appear to degrade over the course of the evening. The effect is sabotage. The guests and the groom actively undermine Justine's aim to express her human agency by refusing to listen or simply to accompany her in her loneliness. Within this dynamic, Justine appears to find embodiment a deep challenge, one she is unable to meet without emotionally

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<sup>79</sup> Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 219.

<sup>80</sup> Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan, "Geotrauma and the Eco-Clinic: Nature, Violence, and Ideology," *Symploke* 20, nos. 1-2 (2012): 159.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

imploding. By descending into a melancholic stupor, she arrives at a place of isolation from others, which, in the context of the cruelties shown her, is the safest place she can find. The self-interest of the wedding guests contributes to Justine's undoing, and she finds some semblance of solace in melancholy.

Justine's descent into immobilizing depression is striking—she is now almost unrecognizable from the giddy bride of Part One's opening. As the Earth personified, the character of Justine embodies the inherent qualities of sadness and joy inherent to the cycle of natural death and rebirth. Freud discusses the ephemerality of natural beauty in a short essay from 1916 entitled “Transience.” In this piece, he describes a summer walk he takes with a friend of his, a poet. The poet bears a strong negative reaction to the beauty of nature that surrounds the two on their walk. Instead of taking pleasure in admiring the blossoming trees and flowers, the poet feels disturbed by their “fate of transience” come wintertime, which seems to him to diminish the flora's present beauty. In recounting this scenario, Freud insists on the validity of the opposing view—that is, “the value of transience is scarcity over time.”<sup>82</sup> There may be an innate sadness to the seasonally recurring death of natural beauty; however, there is also a joy in experiencing it the next season. Freud asserts that natural beauty is actually more beautiful for the very fact that it remains “independent of absolute duration.”<sup>83</sup>

Justine's “unconscious desire to avoid conformity”<sup>84</sup> is a reflection of her innate changeability. Like the poet in “Transience,” the society of *Melancholia* values

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<sup>82</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Transience,” in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 197.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

the “absolute duration” Freud speaks of—permanence, resilience, predictability, and life unpunctuated by disorder, as shown in the wedding guests’ unquestioning conformity to ritual, the seriousness with which they imbue spectacle, and the expectations they relentlessly impose on Justine. On the contrary, Justine embodies unpredictability, unreliability, and disorder. Her moods are impermanent—indeed, they are as transitory as the beauty of the natural world. Freud asserts, “the limitation of the possibility of enjoyment makes it even more precious.”<sup>85</sup> Justine symbolizes the Earth in all its passing beauty.

Michael, the groom, discounts Justine in a different manner from the way that her family does. During his wedding toast to the bride, rather than extolling anything about Justine’s character, he tells the room, “I never even dreamed I would have such a gorgeous wife.” That is the extent to which he is proud to be Justine’s husband. In Michael’s view, Justine’s beauty is her greatest virtue. Additionally, in a scene away from the guests, he reveals to her his wedding present: a plot of land with an apple orchard, where she can sit alone when she feels sad. Rather than make an effort to sincerely understand Justine’s sadness and perhaps help her through it, his gesture is to buy her a site at which she may continue to feel sad in isolation. It is through these gestures that Michael *others* Justine. He idolizes her based on her beauty as well as her sadness, compartmentalizing her as separate from himself—unrelatable. Instead of her family’s cruder mode of suppression—denying Justine any space within which to emote—Michael suppresses his bride by treating her as a

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<sup>84</sup> Graham Fuller, “The End of the World as We Know It,” *Modern Painters* 23, no. 7 (October 2011): 48.

<sup>85</sup> Freud, “Transience,” 197.

fragile object and preventing her from sharing her emotions. As a symbol of Earth, Justine is reduced by Michael's treatment to a thing to be adored but not touched, and in this way her continued, isolated suffering is secured.

The wedding party may further mimic the sentiments of Freud's poet friend. The guests' insistence and urgings that Justine embrace their values and behave accordingly suggests what Freud calls "a strong affective element disturbing their judgment."<sup>86</sup> Because Justine's character diverges so strongly from what her family and friends choose to project, she not only threatens to sow discomfort but also presents a potential challenge to their worldview. Confronted with an embodiment of the transitory, they are forced on some level to consider that principles contradicting theirs might be valid. Moreover, as Justine persistently fails to subscribe to her friends' and family's ideals, what emerges is the perception that there are forces beyond their control, such as inevitable loss. Fear plays an important role in denial, and fear of nature's transience contributes to climate change denial.<sup>87</sup> Freud writes, "it must have been the psychological revolt against grief that devalued the pleasure of beautiful things for them."<sup>88</sup> Essentially, Justine, personifying nature (with its tendency toward disappearance), unveils the threat of death and so gives the wedding party "a foretaste of grief over its destruction."<sup>89</sup>

By the end of Part One, the audience has the sense that Justine is experiencing awareness of something that nobody else around her can sense. When

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>87</sup> Gifford, "The Dragons of Inaction," 296.

<sup>88</sup> Freud, "Transience," 198.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Justine arrives at the mansion for the reception, she asks John, an amateur astronomer and scientist, what the name of the star is that she sees in the sky. John, despite his telescope and other instruments of measurement, knows the star's name, but only Justine is able to see it. For John, nature's entropy represents "the failure of . . . technology and a source of shame."<sup>90</sup> His approach to the world epitomizes the ethic of "technosalvation," a mindset in which "overconfident beliefs in the efficacy of technology appear to serve as a barrier to their own climate-mitigating behavior."<sup>91</sup> By contrast, at the end of Part One, Justine appears intimately acquainted with entropy via a kind of emotional-spiritual death. Her own confidence in the future is decimated. In its place, however, is the seed of an emotional sensitivity to the Earth that will prove crucial in the end. She is the only person present who sees the wedding reception for what it is—a superficial event constructed to celebrate a superficial marriage, complete with "rote manners," a "mindless schedule of wedding events," and the "insistence on her being happy."<sup>92</sup> Justine's finds herself in a dishonest reality, and she feels this dishonesty deeply. The melancholy she succumbs to appears to others like insanity; but this insanity is instead "a form of lucidity."<sup>93</sup> She carries a gift of sight that will later manifest as a saving grace for her and the family she cares most about.

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<sup>90</sup> Harris, "Oppression of the Bereaved," 244.

<sup>91</sup> Gifford, "The Dragons of Inaction:," 293.

<sup>92</sup> Cynthia Cruz, "Justine, a Prophet: Blindness and Vision in Lars von Trier's 'Melancholia,'" *Hyperallergic*, September 5, 2015, accessed January 31, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/233564/justine-a-prophet-blindness-and-vision-in-lars-von-triers-melancholia/>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

*Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me,  
pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?*  
Julia Kristeva

*Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process.*  
C. S. Lewis

## TWO • THE MECHANICS OF MELANCHOLY

Toward the close of Part One, it is still Justine's wedding day, but she is no longer celebrating. The guests' methods of emotionally disenfranchising the bride have left their mark, and she now engages in both adultery and excessive, sorrowful drinking (fig. 6). In resentment and anger, she viciously insults her boss (her new husband's father) and their profession (advertising), then promptly quits her job. By the end of the evening, Justine's marriage has dissolved, she is unemployed, and her parents have abandoned her. It is only her sister, Claire, who remains by her side. At the beginning of Part Two (entitled "Claire"), we are back at Claire and John's mansion at a later date. This time, Claire is preparing a bedroom for Justine and awaiting her arrival. We see Claire talking on the phone with Justine as if she were a child—Claire struggles to coax her sister by small steps into the cab she and John have sent to her home. After Justine manages to make the trip and finally arrives at the estate, we see why it was so difficult for her to get into the taxi in the first place: she has collapsed into a state of utter depression. Her crippling mental illness disables her from walking, bathing, eating, or getting into bed on her own, and she is barely able to talk. Even her beloved young nephew Leo's affectionate greeting does not elicit a smile or hug (fig. 7). For her part, Claire's character is now much gentler with Justine than what the audience witnessed during Part One. She is patient with her sister and comes to her aid in all the ways that she needs help. When John

criticizes Justine's helplessness, Claire defends her, attributing her disability to illness rather than the failure of will that John presumes it is.

In *Melancholia*, Justine does not suffer a typical bereavement. In Part One, we witness Justine's emotional injury as the result of a clash of values. As the evening progresses, Justine sinks into despair, finally taking her destruction into her own hands. With the support of psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva and the ecocritical concept of *geotrauma*, I describe Justine's depression, and I argue that it manifests in the ways that it does because Justine represents the Earth experiencing geotrauma. Her emotional decline can be described as *melancholia*, or melancholy<sup>94</sup>, which is different from what Freud calls mourning. In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes melancholy, a response to loss that deviates from the normal course of mourning. Melancholy, he says, is "both so interesting and so dangerous" because of the curious intricacies and reversals from normalcy that characterize the affliction and because its sufferers are inclined toward suicide.<sup>95</sup>

Over the course of the essay, Freud describes the criteria—of both the character of the bereaved and the circumstances of the loss—that must be in place for the bereaved to become consumed by melancholy rather than typical grief. Some of these criteria are exemplified in the character of Justine, and others take root in the plot of Part One to fully manifest in Part Two. Using Freud's terminology, the criteria, to be explicated further in this chapter, are: a "shock" to Justine's "object-

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<sup>94</sup> In the interest of eliminating confusion between the film and the affliction, from this point onward I will refer to the latter as simply "melancholy."

<sup>95</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 211.

relation” that had taken place;<sup>96</sup> Justine’s “conflict of ambivalence”<sup>97</sup> toward her “love-object”;<sup>98</sup> her impulses toward “self-reproach”<sup>99</sup> and “self-punishment”;<sup>100</sup> the “narcissistic foundation” of her “object-investment”;<sup>101</sup> her “disorder of self-esteem”;<sup>102</sup> and the fact that her loss is “more notional in nature” than a typical bereavement.<sup>103</sup> As she symbolizes the Earth, Justine’s loss of faith in her ability to fit into the world is her trauma and cause for grief. Her ensuing self-destruction is evidence that she suffers melancholy rather than typical mourning.

The portrait of Justine as a melancholiac is complicated by the idea that she is mourning the loss of herself. How she can both grieve and bear resentment toward herself is a fair question. In this chapter, I propose that Justine’s relationship with herself is a dualistic one, marked by both narcissistic self-love on the one hand, and resentment of self on the other. Justine carries a sadness with which she identifies egocentrically; she is careful not to lose her emotional autonomy to social conformity. So she embeds her sadness within herself, resents it for rendering her “other,” and so takes out her resentment through self-destruction. Justine is othered by society, but through self-punishment she contributes to that othering. Along the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 209. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud refers to the entity loved and lost by the melancholiac as the “object” or “love-object.”

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 205.



lines of conventional environmental thought, Justine as Earth is to a degree the “‘object’ of a violence perpetrated against [her].”<sup>104</sup> At the same time, in accordance with a central tenet of geotraumatic thought, she too perpetuates violence. This chapter will describe how this process and other factors constitute Justine’s geotrauma and ensuing melancholy, and will close with notes on the significance that an exploration of melancholy brings to an understanding of biogrief.

In discussing the melancholiac’s relationship to the love-object, Freud notes that, prior to the love-object’s death, the attachment must have felt some sort of “‘shock.’”<sup>105</sup> The shock Justine experiences regards not so much her failure to embrace the role of the happy-go-lucky bride or to uphold her marital vows, but rather the failure of her marriage to deliver on what she imagined it promised. Justine based her marriage on what much of the world might perceive to be an admirable motive: the attempt to blossom into emotional functionality, unencumbered by doubt, negativity, and, as von Trier puts it, her characteristic “‘longing for something of true value.’”<sup>106</sup> This desire for value had kept her separate from the world around her, so she became willing to partake in marriage because, in her eyes, it represented a “‘a ritual without a meaning.’”<sup>107</sup> In Justine’s estimation, such a ritual might unite her with the rest of the world and its attachment to meaninglessness. Kristeva writes of the melancholiac’s pursuit of value:

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the ‘Thing’ as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire

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<sup>104</sup> Matts and Tynan, “Geotrauma and the Eco-Clinic,” 153.

<sup>105</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 209.

<sup>106</sup> Von Trier, “Longing for the End of All.”

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

will become separated. . . . Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing.<sup>108</sup>

Justine can be seen in this passage. Disinherited of the value she longs for, Justine wanders the wedding reception aimlessly, in endless pursuit of an absent light,<sup>109</sup> an “imagined sun, bright and black at the same time.”<sup>110</sup>

The shock to the object-relation occurs when, having believed that willful matrimony was the key to lasting happiness and normalcy, Justine realizes she is unable to see her marriage through—or rather, is incapable of blinding herself enough to its meaninglessness in order to conform. She is dismayed to discover that the event she had been planning for so long, at the emotional and material expense of others, turns out not to be a magic passport to the new, competent, collected self she had idealized. When she cannot bridge the gap between her natural leanings and surrounding society, she experiences the kind of “disappointment” in herself that sets the stage for the ambivalence required of melancholy.<sup>111</sup>

Justine’s innate transience can be seen as a quality at the heart of her melancholy due to the ambivalence she feels toward it. In “On Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud acknowledges, “ambivalence is either constitutional . . . attached

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<sup>108</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> Kristeva suggests that the metaphor of a “light without representation”—a beacon of hope and fuel fervently sought by the melancholiac—was originally conjured by Gérard de Nerval, the nineteenth-century French poet and essayist who wrote about the relationship between art and madness.

<sup>110</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 209.

to every love relationship of this particular ego, or else it emerges straight out of experiences that imply the threat of the loss of the object.”<sup>112</sup> Justine’s melancholic process represents both of these cases. But it can be said that Justine does not feel total contempt for herself. If she did, she would not act out with so much conviction—self-assuredness requires self-respect. As von Trier says, she longs for truth, and this longing guides her throughout the film, even during her slower, depressive times. A part of her must resent the way the world works—the *worldly* world, with its behavioral requirements and societal expectations founded upon economic materialism. These are the standards that she is overtly expected to meet in order to get along and to be “happy.” Justine’s ambivalence toward herself is proven in her attempts to adjust to a world that disregards the earth. As she fails to meet its standards, Justine does, too, resent herself (Earth) for being so different from the society (human-constructed civilization) she longs to be a part of.

On its own, Justine’s self-respect is not simple. Her self-love is of the narcissistic type that Freud refers to. For instance, her “unconscious desire to avoid conformity” suggests a level of egocentricity, a desire for its own sake to be “other.” And, as von Trier puts it, she “feels more at home when the world draws near its end.”<sup>113</sup> A part of her coddles sadness, holds it close. Freud writes, “the narcissistic identification with the object then becomes the substitute for the love-investment, with the result that the love relationship, despite the conflict with the loved one, must not be abandoned.”<sup>114</sup> Justine tries to abandon her longing for true value

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>113</sup> Von Trier, “Longing for the End of All.”

<sup>114</sup> Freud, “On Mourning and Melancholia,” 209.

through matrimony, but it turns out she is incapable of abandoning her love for herself—essentially, love of sadness. Thus, narcissistic identification is triggered and “hatred goes to work on this substitute object” in the form of self-reproach.<sup>115</sup> This conflation of attachment and resentment amounts to ambivalence of the kind that Freud notes is crucial to the formation of melancholy.

During the denouement of the reception, Justine’s self-reproach manifests as various acts of self-destruction. Her “disorder of self-esteem,” a quality present in the melancholiac but not the typical mourner, builds up to a “delusory expectation of punishment.”<sup>116</sup> Kristeva notes, “the alternation of perverse and depressive behavior within the neurotic realm of the melancholy/depressive set is frequent.”<sup>117</sup> The measures of overt self-destruction that Justine takes during the wedding reception are interspersed with desperate appeals to family, bouts of hopeless brooding, and the borderline immobility of depression. Kristeva delivers a summary of Freud’s description of ambivalence in the melancholiac, noting that melancholy:

...conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. “I love that object,” is what that person seems to say about the lost object, “but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am nonexistent, I shall kill myself.”<sup>118</sup>

“The complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against another, and putting oneself to death but a tragic disguise for massacring an other.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>117</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 49.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 11. Kristeva’s use of the phrase “an other” instead of the word “another” here seems intentional, perhaps to emphasize the psychoanalytic notion of “other.”

This duality bespeaks the “ambivalence” of the melancholiac toward the love-object. Justine does not actively seek corporeal death. Instead she flirts with it unknowingly through self-destruction.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

*Everything henceforth goes on as if neither I nor those who are dear to me are any longer mortal.*  
Philippe Ariès

*The more joy there can be in the marriage between dead and living, the better. The better in every way.*  
C. S. Lewis

### THREE · MIMICRY AND THE SUBLIME

In contrast to the focus on human society and ritual in Part One of *Melancholia*, much of Part Two features interactions with the natural world. In addition to the eventual collision of Melancholia with Earth, other strange phenomena occur that concern the weather, animals, and insects: ashes fall from the sky, a bird cries urgently while flying out of formation, a horse becomes strangely immobile, and the buzz of insects becomes loud as Melancholia approaches. These incidents recall the prelude sequence of the film, a series of surreal cinematic paintings that depict a disrupted nature: dead birds falling out of a sickly tan-colored sky; a horse collapsing on his hind legs; the grassy grounds of a golf course giving way knee-deep to footfalls; tendrils of electricity emanating from the fingers of the protagonist; a dense ring of fluttering white moths surrounding Justine as she stares into the camera, arms outstretched; a woolly, grayish-brown web chaining Justine to the ground as she struggles to run forward in her wedding gown; and an enormous blue planet overtaking Earth in a slow but certain collision.

Each of these shots metaphorically evokes the events of Part Two, the part of the film that portrays nature as idyllic and sublime, but also otherworldly, deviant, and on the verge of fragmenting. Further, Part Two finds Justine, the film's iconoclastic symbol of the Earth, leaving the burden of her melancholy behind in order to act as human medium for the myriad signals sent by the un/natural world.

Having familiarized herself with darkness during the melancholy phase of her biogrief, she is able to open herself to the inevitable as the planet *Melancholia* comes closer to subsuming Earth. In a series of crucial scenes, Justine finds connection with the natural world—an Earth that is not only on the brink of collapse, but which is already undergoing a transformation.

In this chapter, I discuss various theories of the sublime and their implications for the way our natural world is regarded. I then explore Part Two of *Melancholia*, tracing von Trier's treatment of the natural world as sublime and noting how it informs Justine's experiences in nature. Considering what occurs within those moments and what is born from them, I apply Roger Caillois's theory of the processes of *mimicry and legendary psychasthenia*.<sup>120</sup> I argue first that these processes are activated by a conflation of Justine's melancholy and her receptive embrace of the natural world; and second, that they effect the "vertiginous displacement of environment onto [Justine's] body"<sup>121</sup>—the relinquishment of her autonomous self. Through mimicry, Justine's symbolism as the Earth shifts into symbolism of *Melancholia*, at which point she willingly accepts the inevitable end of the world and becomes a medium for the rogue planet.<sup>122</sup> This juncture of biogrief represents a turning point for Justine. From here onward she proceeds with a magnetic courage, inspiring her family toward acceptance. I close by suggesting some of the

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<sup>120</sup> Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, trans. and ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>121</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, "Roger Caillois and medieval animals," *In the Middle* (blog), February 2, 2006, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2006/02/roger-caillois-and-medieval-animals.html>.

<sup>122</sup> This shift in trajectory for the character of Justine recalls the acceptance stage of classic grief, albeit with a supernatural twist.

implications of von Trier's particular sublimity and of this stage of biogrief for the case of climate change.

As Part Two of the film progresses, Justine remains at the home of her sister Claire, who continues to try and help Justine convalesce. One night, Claire prepares a meatloaf, Justine's favorite food, for dinner, hoping to rouse her sister using her appetite. Justine tries to eat, but soon stops, utters in desolation that the food "tastes like ashes," and begins to weep uncontrollably. Justine's mood begins to change the next day in synchronicity with a strange occurrence. In the garden, as Justine and Claire pick blueberries, they watch a bird flying haphazardly alone across the sky. Immediately after its urgent squawking passes, a rain of ashes begins to fall, dusting the sisters and the blueberry bushes. This event delights Justine: she throws her head back, closes her eyes, and smiles in contented pleasure (fig. 8). The next morning at breakfast, Justine eats homemade blueberry jam out of the jar with her fingers as sloppily and happily as a toddler. It is likely that there are real ashes in her food now, but she eats it all with delight.

Next, Justine and Claire take their horses out for a ride. The horses gallop faithfully until they reach a shallow stream that connects to the edge of a densely wooded area. Justine's horse Abraham obstinately refuses to cross the small bridge into the forest. Despite Claire's admonishing, Justine beats Abraham with her riding crop until Claire tears it away from her. At this point Abraham has resigned from the ride, sitting down on the ground and emitting a low grumbling noise (fig. 9). The sisters then look up and see Melancholia hovering in the sky. Claire appears afraid and, in the next scene, returns to the mansion to peer apprehensively at the planet



from a window. Justine, however, seems peaceful, choosing to sit alone by the sea in a contemplative pose, quietly observing Melancholia.

Later, Claire is awakened from bed in the middle of the night by sounds coming from the stables. Checking in, she finds the horses stomping and neighing in their stalls. After petting them awhile, she returns to the stone patio to relax. From here she sees Justine walking away from the house in her nightgown, as if in a trance. Claire waits until Justine is further down the lawn before silently following her. Reaching a wooded area, Claire peers through the trees to see Justine reclining nude on the bank of a stream, bathed in the blue light of Melancholia and gazing sensually at the planet above (fig. 10). It is from this point that Justine's character exhibits a marked shift. From here, she no longer needs Claire to be her nurse. Rather, Justine sheds the heavy load of her sadness. As the days proceed and Melancholia draws closer, she grows boldly matter-of-fact about the coming event, and utterly fearless.

Nature is treated as sublime in the scenes of blueberry picking, horseback riding, and Justine's basking by the stream. This sublimity is unorthodox: not completely of the Earth, it is instead heavily informed by the looming imminence of Melancholia. Falling from an unseen above, the flutter of ashes onto the blueberry bushes is graceful, light, and serene. Justine's expression is seraphic as the ashes blanket the garden with a comforting, snow-like silence. Yet the falling ash brings to mind not just violent destruction, but also presents a threat of the unknown. In this scenario, fear, traditionally a component of the sublime experience, is amplified by a level of strangeness. The second example of the horseback-riding scene forces a question regarding the harmony between animals and nature as well as that between animals and humans. Earth's natural order is disturbed both by Abraham's

mysterious aversion to the forest and by his rider's inability to coerce him forward. The shot of Melancholia looming in the sky above signals that the foreign planet is the culprit of these inversions of order. During the daytime, the planet is a faint color blue that threatens to blend into the sky, lending it a note of surreptitious intent to overpower. This scene establishes a sense of the inevitable disaster in the film moving forward.

The sublime is most apparent during the nighttime scene where Justine basks by the stream. The cinematography of the nature around her and the planet above are rendered in rich, painterly blues and greens that augment the natural setting's existing beauty. Melancholia bears a monumental, looming presence, casting a blue glow on the nocturnal world below. Justine's facial expression is "content, complicit, sly," as if she and the planet above are sharing a secret that gives her comfort.<sup>123</sup> It is the first time in the film that Justine exhibits a deep sense of security, "as if she were being recharged by the rampaging planet's blue light."<sup>124</sup>

Ecocinema theorist Adrian J. Ivakhiv offers a useful summation of what the early notion of "the sublime" entailed:

For [Edmund] Burke and the nineteenth-century Romantics, the sublime was experienced in encounters with an overpowering and monumental Nature. Inspiring awe and astonishment, pleasure alongside pain, it was marked by a radical ambivalence in which the desire to be inundated by the sublime coexisted with a fear of being annihilated by it. . . . For both Kant and Burke, the sublime represented the "incommensurability between Nature and the human."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Rob White, in discussion with Nina Power, 'Lars von Trier's "Melancholia": A Discussion,' *Film Quarterly*, January 2012, accessed January 6, 2016, <http://www.filmquarterly.org/2012/01/lars-von-triers-melancholia-a-discussion/>.

<sup>124</sup> White and Power, 'Lars von Trier's "Melancholia": A Discussion.'

<sup>125</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 273; Stephen Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 13, as cited in Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 273.

The Romantic sublime is religious in tone and bears a “conservative effect, reifying nature as an idealized other.”<sup>126</sup> The construct of nature as other to human society is problematic in that it is “literally *produced* by capitalism, as a sort of commodity fetish providing some non-human justificatory ground for human society itself.”<sup>127</sup> A construct of the natural world founded by the capitalist mindset implicitly poses a danger toward efforts to counteract capitalism’s degradation of the environment.

Postmodern philosophical interpretations of the sublime, however, offer nuances that are applicable to a nature undergoing the capitalist transformation of climate change. Jean-Francois Lyotard theorized the postmodern sublime as “that which searches for new presentations [of the other], not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.”<sup>128</sup> This acknowledgement of the other as “unrepresentable” amid continual strivings to represent it anew signifies an intention to erase neat limits between agents and the acted-upon—a route toward creating radical new meaning. Fredric Jameson defines the postmodern sublime not as a confrontation with a concretely identifiable other, but rather “the inability to grasp the [global capitalist] system made up of unknowable others, within which one acts.”<sup>129</sup> Within his sublime, the other is not nature, essential or otherwise, but rather

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<sup>126</sup> Maggie Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change: Ethics of the Sublime and the Problem of Representation,” *Symploke* 21, nos. 1-2 (2013): 113.

<sup>127</sup> Matts and Tynan, “Geotrauma and the Eco-clinic,” 159.

<sup>128</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81, as cited in Maggie Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change: Ethics of the Sublime and the Problem of Representation,” *Symploke* 21, nos. 1-2 (2013): 112.

<sup>129</sup> Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change,” 113.

historicity—the idea that concepts or social practices are formed or inscribed by the events of history, as opposed to being primary, universal.<sup>130</sup> Timothy Morton offers a view of the sublime that acknowledges an active sense of the other within the space of ecological interdependence. This otherness does not preclude behaving toward it with intimacy and care. Morton writes:

Ecology is about relating not to Nature but to aliens and ghosts. Intimacy presents us with the problem of inner space. Our intimacy with other beings is full of ambiguity and darkness. Strange strangers flow and dissimulate. If we edit out the ambiguity and darkness, we achieve nothing but aggression.<sup>131</sup>

And Adrian Ivakhiv describes a theory of the sublime in which the other is, contrary to that of Jameson, not historicity, but rather “the recognition of our complicity with the ecological crisis—arguably the hidden collective trauma of postmodernity—and with the (ontologically and epistemologically) colonial incursions with which this crisis is historically bound.”<sup>132</sup>

In these postmodern notions, an experience of the sublime is imbued with the power to loosen fixed notions of meaning and identity, allowing for their potential new constructions. Maggie Kainulainen argues that in the era of the Anthropocene, where our ecological future is uncertain but most likely abysmal, it is of use to encounter climate change itself as a sublime object, and to treat this encounter as an “ethical event” with absorbable implications about our ecological

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<sup>130</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 274; “Historicity (philosophy),” *Wikipedia*, last modified April 15, 2017, accessed June 19, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_(philosophy)).

<sup>131</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 100.

<sup>132</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 274.

interdependence.<sup>133</sup> She proposes that such an approach will lead to theoretical and pragmatic solutions to climate change, writing:

A sublime encounter with climate change, while not a walk in the park, is marked by uncanny and unwanted potency, as one finds oneself implicated in the complex web of interactions that will produce some level of global catastrophe. While this feeling could lead to paralysis, I argue that this sublime encounter is necessary for any rearticulation of the discursive field that is capable of creating an ethical responsibility to (human and nonhuman) others and more adequately imagining and addressing the problem of climate change.<sup>134</sup>

I argue that von Trier adds to this conversation his own revised notion of the sublime, and reflects this notion dually through the characters of Justine and Claire. In *Melancholia*, nature loses its dependability as a stable, unchanging other, one that is ripe to receive society's projections of human ideals. Instead, the natural world destabilizes, expressing itself in new, strange ways that tip the balance of certainty. As the natural world of the film grows increasingly un-Earthly during *Melancholia*'s descent, nature appears strikingly other—beautiful and perturbing in its difference. In contrast to the mostly miserable and desperate incidents of human activity comprising the plot, nature grows bolder, more pronounced in its beauty, and Justine responds by opening herself to the shift. As well, nature's capacity to inspire apprehension, then terror, intensifies, a progression demonstrated particularly through Claire's reaction. The sisters are split in their reactions to the sublime. Von Trier thus renders the sisters opposites—dark and light, paying homage to the two sides of the Romantic sublime. *Melancholia* also builds on the early philosophies of the sublime by adding another dimension to the Romantic “incommensurability”

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<sup>133</sup> Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change,” 111.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 113.

between “Nature” and humankind: levels of otherworldliness and acceleration that crucially differentiate the known Earth from the unknown.

The unfolding events correlating with Melancholia’s orbit toward Earth further call to mind the interconnectedness referenced by postmodern philosophers of the sublime. Caillois’s theory of mimicry and legendary psychasthenia applies here. It consists of an “anti-utilitarian argument in which the spatial and the corporeal interpenetrate”<sup>135</sup> as part of an organism’s drive toward self-renunciation. This interpenetration is a way for the organism to “*become assimilated into the environment.*”<sup>136</sup> The processes of mimetic imitation of other organic matter and legendary psychasthenia, or the dislocation of the sense of self through abandonment to space, both stem from what Caillois calls a universal “*appeal to space.*”<sup>137</sup> He writes that the creature undergoing these processes first succumbs to the arrival of night: “Whereas bright space disappears, giving way to the material concreteness of objects, darkness is ‘thick’; it directly touches a person, enfolds, penetrates, and even passes through him.”<sup>138</sup> Once the darkness of night overtakes the subject, it leaves their body and mind dissociated. Once this disconnection is achieved, the organism’s sense of self is diminished enough that it can adopt traits of the body it seeks to imitate.

Justine’s mimicry is of the planet Melancholia. She becomes prepared to mimic the planet during the dark process of her melancholy. Her immersion in the

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<sup>135</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, “Roger Caillois and medieval animals.”

<sup>136</sup> Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” 98.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 101.

depths of despair gives her a willingness to venture further into dark space and be engulfed by it, in the sense of being dispossessed of her autonomy. When she, as the Earth, communes with nature during the rain of ashes and her seaside contemplation of Melancholia, she is starting to be eclipsed by the foreign planet. Venturing into the crepuscular night to bathe nude in its blue light, she opens herself to receive messages from Melancholia and allows her individuality to be eradicated. Her mimicry is psychological—her integration with space and with Melancholia represents her variation of the melancholic drive toward suicide.

The all-encompassing blue glow of this scene indicates a fusion that the rogue planet is achieving with Earth. The blue light cast over the stream, the bank, and the surrounding woods suggests a harmony reached between Melancholia and the wild Earth, while the glow cast atop the built structures illustrates humankind's unavoidable surrender to Melancholia. Neither the Earth itself nor the civilization dwelling on it can resist the encroachment of this foreign planet. Justine here obtains a sense of affinity for a world in its twilight. Her transformation represents the total submission of Earth to forthcoming annihilation by Melancholia.

Justine feels dwarfed by the planet Melancholia, and that comes as a relief. She no longer has to bear the responsibility of representing the Earth—the burden of carrying its emotional weight, the pain resulting from civilization's shameless defilement. Melancholia is Justine's salvation: it relieves her of her Earth-ly burden via its thorough incommensurability with humankind. Justine's process of depersonalization creates a shift in her attitude and character—an eclipse of her self. This foreshadows Melancholia's eclipse of the Earth. The blue planet will soon absorb the Earth just as it absorbs Justine.

*I worked to see beneath the surface appearance of things and stand in the presence of apocalypse.*  
 Craig Childs

*The tame death is the oldest death there is.*  
 Philippe Ariès

## FOUR · STRENGTH AGAINST THE LOOMING

The end of *Melancholia* presents two very different approaches to meeting planetary disaster. Claire succumbs to panic and terror, knowing that the life she loves will soon disappear and her young son Leo will not get to grow up on Earth. Simultaneously, Justine is emboldened. The sorrow that weighed her down is now gone and her mind is clear as she speaks to Claire, stoically counseling her against romanticizing the end of the world and life itself. Shortly after Claire discovers Justine lying naked by the stream, the two have a private discussion during which we observe a clear shift in roles between the sisters. Claire, no longer the strong one, admits her fears about Melancholia's approach while Justine, released from her melancholy and now an unflappable voice of reason, offers her insight. Claire cherishes the life she is familiar with, and is desperate to believe her husband John's assertions that the foreign planet will fly by, completely missing Earth. Justine, on the other hand, is positive that the Earth's days are numbered, and that, furthermore, "life on Earth is evil." In a later scene, she insults Claire's invitation to watch the collision together from the terrace while drinking wine and listening to music. Justine tells her sister with deadpan sarcasm that it would make more sense to meet on the toilet for the event (fig. 11).

After Claire realizes that the end is truly near, and once she discovers her husband John has committed suicide out of the same realization, her initial moves



are frantic. She tries to take Leo to the village, presumably to find a community that will console her, which her frustratingly dispassionate sister refuses to do. But Melancholia's intrusion on Earth's atmosphere has caused the cars' batteries to go dead, and the golf cart stops working once it reaches the end of the golf course. Claire, clinging desperately to her son, is forced to return to the estate (fig. 12). Justine patiently awaits them amid an eerie hailstorm and strong winds. As it dawns on Leo that his father is gone, the child tells Justine he is afraid. She responds with sensitivity, but also a confidence that bolsters her nephew. A "magic cave" will protect them, she says. The two proceed to gather long sticks from the woods and shave them of their bark. Justine then assembles the sticks into a tepee at the top of one of the golf course mounds. She guides Leo and Claire to sit on the ground within the "magic cave" before she enters and completes the circle. At this point, Melancholia looms enormous on the horizon. The three hold hands as the planet rushes toward Earth, creating an atmospheric surge depicted by an all-white screen. Once the collision occurs, the screen goes black and the film ends (fig. 13).

Justine's strong words with Claire during their private conversations could be viewed as insensitive, even cruel. I argue instead that, given the short time frame—two days—that Claire has to awaken from denial and accept the end of Earth, Justine is supporting her sister in the most efficient, and also the most generous, way she can. She helps Claire and her nephew Leo meet the approach of Melancholia with dignity and some degree of the acceptance that she herself has embraced—and, at the same time, she uses a bonding ritual to help them unite in collective acceptance. In this chapter I touch on Claire's response to the impending loss of the Earth using contemporary research on psychological response to climate change. I then discuss

how Justine arrives at her capacity to both accept Earth's imminent end and to act as an emotional support to her family. I explore the ecocritical concept of *geotrauma* in the context of Justine's and Claire's respective approaches to the Earth at the end of the film. I argue that Justine wields her conception of the natural world strategically, with the aim of assisting Claire and Leo toward accepting the death of the Earth just in time for its annihilation.

Toward the end of *Melancholia*, Claire exhibits multiple symptoms of psychological distress due to environmental change. Justine embraces the coming calamity, which only makes Claire's denial of the approaching end more striking. But her denial amounts to an ineffectual band-aid atop the emotional rollercoaster that continues to overtake her. Among the other *indirect* psychological effects<sup>139</sup> that Claire feels are: "eco-anxiety,"<sup>140</sup> worry, disgust, hope, helplessness, sadness, depression, guilt, alarm, fear, anger, despair, and apathy. One of the *direct* psychological impacts of *Melancholia*'s descent is *solastalgia*. A concept developed by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, *solastalgia* is:

the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of

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<sup>139</sup> Researchers Thomas J. Doherty and Susan Clayton designate three different classes of global warming-related psychological effects: "*Acute and direct impacts* include mental health injuries associated with more frequent and powerful weather events, natural disasters, and adjustment to degraded or disrupted physical environments. . . . *Indirect and vicarious impacts* include intense emotions associated with observation of climate change effects worldwide and anxiety and uncertainty about the unprecedented scale of current and future risks to humans and other species. . . . The *psychosocial impacts* of climate change include large-scale social and community effects of issues such as heat-related violence . . . conflicts over resources . . . migrations and dislocations . . . postdisaster adjustment . . . and chronic environmental stress." Emphasis mine. Thomas J. Doherty and Susan Clayton, "The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 4 (May-June 2011): 265, doi: 10.1037/a0023141.

<sup>140</sup> Justin Nobel, "Eco-anxiety: Something Else to Worry About," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 9, 2007, [http://www.philly.com/inquirer/health\\_science/weekly/20070409\\_Eco-anxiety\\_\\_Something\\_else\\_to\\_worry\\_about.html](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/health_science/weekly/20070409_Eco-anxiety__Something_else_to_worry_about.html) (site discontinued).

belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation.<sup>141</sup>

In Part One, Claire navigates the Earth with ease and a sense of natural integration. Her character crystallizes in Part Two as a person deeply dependent on the comforts of civilization. Von Trier intends the character of Claire to be a “normal person” who “thrives in the world and consequently finds it hard to say goodbye to it.”<sup>142</sup> As Claire attempts to project her difficult emotions onto Justine, the now-strong former melancholiac self-assuredly repels those emotions. Yet she is still able to empathize. Judith Herman describes trauma-borne grief as “extremely contagious.”<sup>143</sup> Justine is touched by Claire’s frantic despair and finds it in herself to intervene.

A crucial reason that Justine is able to support her family emotionally is that she has moved out of the idealization aspect of her melancholia. Theorist Steven Shavero writes that “Justine’s dysphoria, or lack of will, is the result of giving up on illusion altogether. This is why the approach of the planet Melancholia, which so demoralizes Claire, seems instead to energize Justine.”<sup>144</sup> According to psychologist and bereavement specialist J. William Worden, idealization of the dead or dying can occur as a defense against processing the painful emotions associated with loss.<sup>145</sup> Rosemary Randall, director of Cambridge Carbon Footprint, brings Worden’s

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<sup>141</sup> Glenn Albrecht, “‘Solastalgia’: A New Concept in Health and Identity,” *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 3 (2005): 48.

<sup>142</sup> Von Trier, “Longing for the End of All.”

<sup>143</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 144.

<sup>144</sup> Steven Shavero, “Melancholia: Or, The Romantic Anti-Sublime,” in Sequence 1, no. 1 (2012): 25. <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/sequence/files/2012/12/MELANCHOLIA-or-The-Romantic-Anti-Sublime-SEQUENCE-1.1-2012-Steven-Shavero.pdf>.

<sup>145</sup> Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 45.

findings into the context of climate change when she asserts, “the natural world may be idealized—seen only as magnificent, wild, and beautiful, while its dangers, threats, and discomfort are minimized.”<sup>146</sup> When Justine tells Claire that “life on Earth is evil,” she acknowledges the multidirectional exploitation necessary to surviving on a planet whose basic natural laws are characterized by entropy and death. This is especially true in the case of human lives, which “often thrive because of their violent acts” and are “maintained in the wake of ecological violence.”<sup>147</sup> Additionally, violence is inherent in the nonhuman world. The very concept of the sublime pays homage to the oblitative power of nature—in Kant’s words, “volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river.”<sup>148</sup>

Justine’s acknowledgement of the planet’s “evil” side signals a move away from, in Freud’s terms, the narcissistic fixation on the love-object, in which the melancholiac is incapable of seeing the ambivalence inherent to her relationship with the dying or dead.<sup>149</sup> As stated in Chapter Two of this thesis, melancholy evolves in part due to geotrauma, which has an idealizing effect. The narcissistic fixation is the result of a sense of nature as other. Justine’s processes of assimilation into space and

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<sup>146</sup> Rosemary Randall, “Loss and Climate Change: The Cost of Parallel Narratives,” *Ecopscychology* 1, no. 3 (2009): 123, doi: 10.1089/eco.2009.0034.

<sup>147</sup> Catherine Lord, ‘Her Green Materials: Mourning, “Melancholia,” and Not-So-Vital Materialisms,’ *NECSUS* 2, no. 1 (2013): 187, doi: 10.5117/NECSUS2013.1.LORD.

<sup>148</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91. As cited in Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan, “Geotrauma and the Eco-Clinic: Nature, Violence, and Ideology,” *Symploke* 20, nos. 1-2 (2012): 167.

<sup>149</sup> Freud, “On Mourning and Melancholia,” 209.

mimicry of Melancholia revise her conceptions of both the Earth and herself in relation to the Earth.

In the last moments of the film, Justine exhibits radical sensitivity and generosity. Facing her destruction squarely, she exhibits absolutely no self-pity, and instead directs all of her calm, steady energy toward easing Claire and Leo's transition into death. Herman writes, "in ordinary bereavement, numerous social rituals contain and support the mourner through this process. By contrast, no custom or common ritual recognizes the mourning [associated with] traumatic life events."<sup>150</sup> Justine sees beyond the social rules of grieving to invent a grief space and ritual that perfectly adapt to the needs and capacities of her family.<sup>151</sup> In the very end, we see that Justine, too, expresses sadness over the loss of Earth (fig. 14). Here, we find that "the survivor needs help from others to mourn her losses."<sup>152</sup> Justine's persistent strength comes not from having hardened in the face of trauma, but from having remained vulnerable.

In building the "magic cave," Justine partners with Leo to bring an experience of communion to their biogrief. As discussed in an earlier chapter, Francis Weller shares grief rituals common among many cultures, as well as devises new ones. These rituals serve by helping their participants feel their grief in deep enough ways to be transformed by it, and, by virtue of going on to participate in their wider culture, so transform that culture as well. One ritual he discusses in *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* is titled "Speaking to the Earth." It involves, first, finding a safe

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<sup>150</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 69.

<sup>151</sup> Harris, "Oppression of the Bereaved," 244.

<sup>152</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 69.

space and digging an opening in the earth large enough to speak into; next, expressing “gratitude to the earth for being able to receive your grief” while placing some sort of offering into the hole. Then, the participant tells the Earth what she needs. Weller suggests the following sort of message:

“I have been carrying this grief for so long, and I cannot hold it any longer. It is too big for me. It is weighing me down and depriving me of any joy. I know you can hold this sorrow. In fact, you can turn it into something sweet for the roots that rest in your body. I do this to set down my sorrows so I can better participate in the mending of our community. Thank you for being here for me and all of us.”<sup>153</sup>

It is a particularly powerful ritual for finding a sense of immersion and oneness with the natural world, the world we have become so disconnected from.

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<sup>153</sup> Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, 164.

*Shown the door by society, death is coming back in through the window, and it is returning just as quickly  
as it disappeared.*  
Philippe Ariès

*We aren't just destroyers. We are repairers, too. Destruction and creation—it's always both at once.*  
Craig Childs

## CONCLUSION • THE HOPE IN GRIEF

In *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, Adrian Ivakhiv states that *Melancholia* “presents an image intended to help us reach a kind of resigned or defiantly resistant stasis in a universe that moves so powerfully that it can and will destroy us.”<sup>154</sup> The threat of climate change brings with it a level of awareness—sometimes acknowledged, sometimes denied, whether passively or willfully—of the threat of extinction.<sup>155</sup> The process of global warming routinely proves to be moving more rapidly and aggressively than scientists can predict, and extinction of some animals and plants has already taken place or is under way. Under these circumstances, the various manifestations of grieving—anticipatory grief,<sup>156</sup> melancholy, and mourning, along with grief disorders—are all legitimate responses.

The socioeconomic inequality that engenders environmental privilege may be the greatest barrier to discerning and implementing effective countermeasures to climate change. It is natural for the people who benefit from inequality to blind themselves to the suffering their privilege causes others bodies, human and more-than-human. But grief, when approached with ample support from others and a

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<sup>154</sup> Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, 315.

<sup>155</sup> Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 97.

<sup>156</sup> Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 2.

willingness to feel deeply, can diminish this tendency to look away from the damage left by one's own ecological footprint. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler describes the personal politics of loss, specifically as they regard one's sense of self and identity in the wake of bereavement. She writes:

It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. . . .

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation that is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.<sup>157</sup>

When a loved one dies, we are struck by questions of who we are without that person—our sense of a constructed identity is leveled. This leveling of self is potentially an equalizing force. The anguish of loss can make way for a deeper understanding of the pain of others. Reconstructed and bearing a greater capacity for empathy, the self is less inclined to act without thought or care toward other lives. Grief can thus be a powerful tool in leveling inequality.

In their analysis of *Melancholia*, Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan discuss the film's implications for environmental thinking. This is a work of cinema that does not align neatly with what we typically think of as an environmental drama or "cli-fi" film, the kind of destruction narrative that provides a cathartic payoff by ending with a triumphant vision of a post-apocalyptic future. In Claire Colebrook's words, such a story alters our psychological "sense of the human end" by negating the scientific possibility of extinction.<sup>158</sup> Portrayals of Earth as a "sheer autonomous objectivity

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<sup>157</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 22.



... whose essence excludes us,” assist us in the construction of a problematic collective identity as masters of our fate—regardless of our effect on the planet.<sup>159</sup> While the cli-fi genre has demonstrated the impact of increasing climate change awareness to some extent, it has not had a correlative effect of increasing *concern* about climate change that is productive.<sup>160</sup> Instead, films from this genre generate what sociologist E. Ann Kaplan calls “empty empathy,” or a fleeting emotional response that fails to yield “pro-social behavior.”<sup>161</sup> Film is a mirror of human life and drive. As a medium for social commentary, it bears the potential to change our perceptions and expectations of ourselves, and eventually help initiate social change. I argue that part of the reason cli-fi yields the lackluster response of mere empty empathy is that it does not acknowledge certain truths we bear a fundamental, primitive understanding of: that the Earth suffers trauma; that more-than-human bodies are no less grievable than human bodies; and that our fate as a species is inextricably linked to the fate of the Earth. Because cli-fi does not evoke the realities of more-than-human life, it fails to resonate with humans on a level that engenders deep shifts in awareness.

*Melancholia*’s unique contribution to environmental film, then, is to offer a symbol that is “irreducible” to the plot points of the story’s social drama.<sup>162</sup> The

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<sup>158</sup> Claire Colebrook, as cited in Matts and Tynan, “The Melancholy of Extinction.”

<sup>159</sup> Matts and Tynan, “The Melancholy of Extinction.”

<sup>160</sup> Anthony Leiserowitz, “Before and After *The Day After Tomorrow*: A U.S. Study of Climate Change Risk Perception,” *Environment* 46, no. 9 (2004): 27.

<sup>161</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, “Global Trauma and Public Feelings: Viewing Images of Catastrophe,” abstract, *Consumption, Markets, and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2008), doi:10.1080/10253860701799918.

<sup>162</sup> Matts and Tynan, “The Melancholy of Extinction.”

planet Melancholia is totally unstoppable in its path to annihilate Earth, and the human characters largely fail to summon strength of mind or character when confronted by impending doom. Justine is the protagonist because she meets the more-than-human world at its level by shedding key presumptions of human superiority and a sense of nature as Other. Her submission to melancholy is crucial to this shift. Butler goes on to assert:

The disorientation of grief—"Who have I become?" or, indeed, "What is left of me?" "What is it in the Other that I have lost?"—posits the "I" in the mode of unknowingness.

But this can be a point of departure for a new understanding if the narcissistic preoccupation with melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others.<sup>163</sup>

Rather than denying the gravity of the geotrauma at hand, Justine empathizes with it at such a deep level that she actually unites with the suffering Earth. Her journey of biogrief renders her Earth's medium, caretaker, and partner into the end. By way of melancholy, she helps shoulder the ailing planet's burden through to its moment of subsumption. She is the ultimate ecological custodian.

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<sup>163</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

*Each of the following images is a still from the 2011 film Melancholia by Lars von Trier (Hvidovre Municipality, Denmark: Zentropa Entertainments).*



**Fig. 1.** An image from Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia* featuring an enormous rogue planet named Melancholia (left) orbiting close to Earth (right). Image: <https://thoughtforyourthoughts.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/melancholia-a-critique-of-modernism/>.



**Fig. 2.** In the film, Melancholia looms on the horizon the day before it collides with Earth. Image: <http://aflixonado.com/my-favorite-film-of-2011-melancholia-2/>.



**Fig. 3.** In a dreamlike image, Justine, her nephew Leo, and her sister Claire stand on the grounds of John's opulent mansion, the setting of the film. Image: [http://www.magpictures.com/melancholia/images/photos/photo\\_02.jpg](http://www.magpictures.com/melancholia/images/photos/photo_02.jpg).



**Fig. 4.** Justine, still under the spell of social rite, enjoys a dance with her new husband. Image: <http://theredlist.com/wiki-2-17-513-863-1321-1324-view-fantasy-sci-fi-9-profile-2011-bmelancholia-b.html>.





**Fig. 5.** The bride begins to visibly suffer as the night wears on. Image: <http://www.ferdyonfilms.com/?s=melancholia>.





**Fig. 6.** Justine runs in slow motion as brownish-gray tendrils, seemingly stemming from the surrounding trees and earthy ground, grasp at her limbs in a surreal cinematic painting from the film's prelude sequence. This shot is a reference to how Justine describes her depression: "I'm trudging through this gray, woolly yarn. It's clinging to my legs. It's really heavy to drag along." Image: <http://interdigitized.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Melancholia-Justine-as-Bride.png>.



**Fig. 7.** In another surreal cinematic painting, Justine gazes into the camera with lifeless eyes as dead birds fall from the sickly brown sky behind her. This is essentially her facial expression throughout the beginning of Part Two of the film. Image: <http://goodfilmguide.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/melancholia-kirsten-dunst.png>.



**Fig. 8.** Justine takes a break from blueberry picking to delight in a spontaneous rain of ashes, an event that foreshadows apocalypse. This scene signals a reawakening of Justine's senses by natural phenomena after her deadening bout of melancholy. It also highlights the fact that she becomes emboldened by the phases of Earthly destruction. Image accompanying 'Justine, a Prophet: Blindness and Vision in Lars von Trier's "Melancholia."' By Cynthia Cruz. *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/233564/justine-a-prophet-blindness-and-vision-in-lars-von-triers-melancholia/>.



**Fig. 9.** From the film's prelude sequence: an image of Abraham falling to the ground, evoking the scene in Part Two in which the horse abruptly stops at the bridge. When he does not continue, Justine inflicts a beating under which Abraham buckles and sinks to the ground. Image accompanying 'Justine, a Prophet: Blindness and Vision in Lars von Trier's "Melancholia."' By Cynthia Cruz. *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/233564/justine-a-prophet-blindness-and-vision-in-lars-von-triers-melancholia/>.





**Fig. 10.** Claire's view of Justine bathing in the blue light of Melancholia, luxuriating in what she thinks is a private expression of sensuality. While other scenes in the film depict the protagonist in sexual situations, this is the only one of Justine's experiences that resonates as erotic. This fact emphasizes the exceptional hold the foreign planet has on Justine. Image: <https://simotron.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/screenshot-lrg-28.png>.



**Fig. 11.** Claire, still hoping for the best, accuses Justine of paranoiacally catastrophizing the end of the world on the eve of Melancholia's collision with Earth. Justine sympathetically absorbs the criticism in order to remain in Claire's good graces—to be her last dependable confidante in this life. Image: [http://wfiles.brothersoft.com/m/melancholia-movie\\_153901-1600x1200.jpg](http://wfiles.brothersoft.com/m/melancholia-movie_153901-1600x1200.jpg).



**Fig. 12.** From the prelude sequence of the film, this cinematic painting foreshadows the scene in which Claire tries desperately to flee the estate, Leo in tow. Surreally, the grass gives way to Claire's footfalls to the depth of her knees, perhaps symbolizing Earth's utter permeability to Melancholia. Image: <https://mysterysciencekitchen3000.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/melancholia-10.jpg>.



**Fig. 13.** Leo, Justine, and Claire hold hands inside the “magic cave,” a structure that facilitates a simple ritual for expressing acceptance and unity in the face of destruction. Image: <http://www.audienceeverywhere.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/melancholia.jpg>.





**Fig. 14.** In the close company of Claire and Leo, Justine openly expresses sorrow over the approach of utter loss. Making manifest her vulnerability is one way she supports her family in their respective expressions of grief. Image: <http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/originals/20/3d/14/203d14c9957a41a0331dbf3427a22af2.jpg>

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