

Space boundaries: Understanding the dystopia of the real*

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“The earth is bad, life in this planet is horrible.
There’s nothing to grieve for”
Justine, *Melancholia*

EXAMINING HOW a certain idea of destiny and a certain idea of image meander in the apocalyptic narratives which are common place in the contemporary cinema, we will consider Jacques Rancière’s question regarding the destiny of images and the way they build the real. If we understand that “behind the same name of image there are several functions whose problematic adjustment represents the very manifestation of art” (Rancière 2003, 9), and of the cinematic art in particular, we will accept that art is not apart from reality, that images build both art and reality, configuring discourses and narratives. Understanding the way (cinematic) images function contributes to understanding our own real. Such movies as the two that make our focus here—*Melancholia* (Von Trier 2001) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968)—are, what we should call, an event. A visually complex and layered narrative about the real (and, in this way, also the meaning) of our existence, about the constructs and confinements that make our existence possible, and (in fact) bearable.

The first shots of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* show us a close up of Justine’s face. Behind her, dead birds are dropping from the sky, the air and movements are of a strange inertial viscosity. The unfolding of the narrative, the interplay of images is already there, in the first frames of the movie, in these (narratively) disparate, intermittent images. An analepsis or a prolepsis, both actually. These plans contain visually the memory of the future, the memory of death, of the world’s extinction, a memory which originates in and overlaps the memory of the world’s coming into existence. Both moments originating from and leading to nothingness, death, extinction at the same time. The image of Brueghel’s painting *Hunters in the Snow*¹ is enflamed and, in the same slow-motion rhythm, disintegrates to ashes, against the background of the unworldly prologue from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* accompanying the strange, ethereal images entrapped in this extreme slow motion. In outer space, a planet, whose name, *Melancholia*, is a direct reference to Dürer’s print, approaches the Earth. On a golf course,² Claire (Justine’s

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sister) is running holding her son in her arms while the ground is turning into a muddy marsh. Claire's black horse collapses and two moons appear in the sky. Justine, in her bride, gown is running through a glade, but her feet become entangled in a "woolly yarn," an expression best used also to describe both her melancholic apathetic state and the despair at being trapped and limited in the confines of a world which refuses to acknowledge its frailty and futility.³ A second close-up follows and, when she lifts her hands, electricity is flashing from her fingers and dancing around her fingertips. The planet reaches the Earth and impact occurs.

Just a few shots and we witness an entire regime of images, a regime of what Rancière calls "relations between elements and between functions" (Rancière 2003, 12). Therefore, we are considering images not as manifestations of a certain technical medium (i.e. cinematic), but as operations, relations between the whole and its parts, between a visibility and a possibility of signification and affect which associate with it, between expectations and that which (ful)fills them (Rancière 2003, 11). The relation between the slow-motion images and the thundering Wagnerian music is established through the tension contained both visually and auditorily in the slow motion images and in the harassing, haunting, mesmerizing sound. This is what Rancière calls the relation between part and whole. We see images that are part of the narrative, that already communicate that narrative even if their presence is cut, fragmented. They are pasted against the flow of the musical background, but not as a collage, as these images are a montage of man's fate, they contain the despair of a colliding universe. A montage is more than a simple juxtaposition of images. It is not a synthesis, it does not sum up, but it opens the layered space, time and narratives contained in an image. These temporal, spatial and narrative dimensions are in constant motion, and their montage deconstructs the stillness, confinement and rigidity of the frames. A montage is anamnesis, but in the sense in which Derrida speaks of anamnesis in which anamnesis is already present (Derrida 1990, 52). Between anamnesis and amnesia, the (cinematic) image is what Walter Benjamin calls *dialectics at a standstill* (*Dialektik im Stillstand*) (Benjamin 1989). The tension of the narrative (that the viewer does not yet know, but of which he is already growing aware) builds up in this montage where the almost still frames and the music become narrative nuclei of *visualities*.

The frames and the sound(track) are altogether images, not the visual elements that make up the frames and the scenes, but images as operations which "connect and disconnect the visible from its signification or the sound and its effect, which are already building, but also disconcerting, expectations" (Rancière 2003, 12-13). Such operations are not necessarily the result of the inherent characteristics of the cinematic medium. They are the result of an intentional difference and distancing from the common usage of images in cinema. Departing from a B-movie storyline, Von Trier approaches it in a manner that turns an overused story of the average American apocalypse disaster movie into a singular work of art. Great cinema has always been the result of parting with the regular ways of filming, the result of attempting to work with images out of their comfort zone, out of the audience's comfort zone, out of cinema's comfort zone. The result is always a cinema that stirs emotions, that audiences may like or hate, but at which they cannot remain unmoved, indifferent, a cinema that shakes severely the commodity of knowledge, inter-

pretation, critical language, and common ground. These cinematic images are visual inventions (or, rather, re-emerging specters of the visual) which trouble through excess and complexity, an excess close to how Warburg, and then Didi-Huberman understand and define the symptom (Warburg 1990 and 2003; Didi-Huberman, 2002) as excess, deviation, exception, singularity, nonconformity. It is unreasonable and out of place, and, a cinema that refuses to know or ever establish (and confine to) its place, a cinema which does not offer answers but raises questions, a cinema that does not heal and solve, but, on the contrary, leaves scars, and remains unsolved. Both *Melancholia* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* remain so-to-say “unsolved,” because the narrative (though involving and offering human perspective and death) is cosmic, goes beyond the limit of the human vision or understanding. The world ends but at cosmic level this is not an isolated fact, it is part of a certain rhythm in which space changes and reshapes itself, where no organizing rules apply, no categories or a transcendental implication or outlet.

Such visual and narrative fragmentation that we witness at the beginning of *Melancholia* and then repeatedly during the wedding reception scene is also present throughout *Space Odyssey* and especially towards the end of the movie when the camera follows the man who is lost, engulfed in space. Unlike Ulysses who wanders away, gets lost and in the end returns, here, if we can talk in terms of a return, that would be, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, only a return to errance, to endlessly wandering away, which acts as a deconstruction of the human-confined coherent word, a deconstruction of Ithaca, of the confined shelter in a limitless, shelterless space where meaning does not fold upon itself, does not recuperate or restore things. The man will not overcome space, nor regain a preexisting order, but he will be lost, resorbed in this space: “The eye of the fetus, exorbitant, the eye of that which is coming, of fore-seeing existence, does not perform the *synopsis* of a cosmos world. Its glance is beforehand the glance; it is fore-seeing (*prévoyant*) in a sense that is opposite to fore-sight (*pro-vidence*). Undoubtedly, it receives and even shelters within the immense obscurity over which it floats (and it is, first of all, us, the audience, who this eye fixes), but it only contains it for as long as it is open, as it itself is immensely, exorbitantly open toward this space in which it has been launched, to this space that it does not organize above all in a representation, but to which it confines from all parts and in all senses” (Nancy 1993, 64).

This *mute immediacy of the visible*, as Rancière calls it, undoubtedly radicalizes the visual effect, but this radicalization operates and enforces itself through a sort of (inter)play of the mechanisms (and of this *power*) that separate the cinema from the plastic arts and draws it near to literature: “the power to anticipate the effect in order to better move or contradict it. The image is never a simple reality. The images of the cinema are first and foremost operations, rapports between what can be said and the visible, means of playing with the before and after, the cause and the effect” (Rancière 2003, 14).

In both movies discussed the montage of sound and images bare visible these mechanisms. In *Melancholia*, the first frames/images are almost stills, Brueghel’s painting in this montage slowly disintegrates, the still frames functioning as prolepses already announcing the end, anticipating, playing with the viewers’ expectations and comfort zone, not delivering, despite their expectations (as the common apocalyptic cinema always delivers humankind in the very end). In this montage Von Trier deconstructs both painting

and cinema, in their limited self-contained and independent understanding. Kubrick also plays with this anticipation, with the before and after, also overturning expectations. The foreseeable course of events is constantly blurred, intercut by visual symptom or anachronisms, like the sleek black monolith floating aimlessly through space. It is not an indication (of some yet obscure, but to be discovered by the end, meaning). Kubrick deconstructs, thwarting and discrediting ready-made categories as “science-fiction”: “It takes space seriously as des-orientation and as distancing of meaning” (of human life, history, technical progress, etc.) (Nancy 1993, 63). If the movie proposes anything as an instance or as an indication of meaning, Jean-Luc Nancy observes, it is the black monolith which is compact and impenetrable, which signals, rather like an intimation, “to all technique and the (in)humanity in it, but which is not God, which is only present through its hard and smooth surface, presence of an absence. . . . If the director leaves a door open here to an interpretation in terms of a negative theology, this is thwarted by another aspect: the fact that the monolith with its impeccable rectangular form appears itself to be more likely a product of technique, a machined piece” (Nancy 1993, 63). But even so, against this impenetrable mute appearance, the monolith appears as a symptom that (inter)cuts and overthrows the narrative flow and coherence of the movie. It is an impenetrable memory (as its layers and fissures are not visible) that opens the linear narrative, which signals that there is no such thing as linear narrative, that each narrative is a constellation of threads, histories and images. The monolith could be what Benjamin calls *vortex-origin* (*origine-tourbillon*) (Benjamin 1985) as, despite the impression of being aloof, and impossible to reach, it acts in fact like an opening towards the space, time and memory of our existence. The man who was sent into space with the help of a technique (the computer Hal) which he will end up shutting down and disconnecting from itself (as it gradually develops its own paranoid will and project) will be himself disconnected from this technique that had become the vehicle of his life and existence and plunges in the darkness of memory, revisiting (not passively, but experiencing, discovering) his own (entire) life, and also the narratives of human existence. This technique he disconnects from itself becomes “. . . idle, finite/infinite, this man, instead of ensuring himself the empire of space, touching the limit of space, of himself, re-crosses time, space, drifting, deviating time up to his own origin, in order to wander adrift, floating fetus within the placenta of galaxies, his eye wide open upon the disoriented space, upon the time with no direction, and upon us, viewers of this pensive eye and at the same time almost devoid of glance, absorbing the entire space just as much as aspirated and swollen in it” (Nancy 1993, 63).

Both movies engage upon a different perspective of the cosmos, of man being trapped in his limited condition struggling to believe he is in control. Yet, the human being is far from any control of the universe, but merely at its mercy. Justine’s brother-in-law, an amateur astronomer, believes that Melancholia’s trajectory can be predicted and that the end of humanity will undoubtedly be averted. But Melancholia engages in a death dance of attraction and rejection with our planet. When the imminent impact is beyond any doubt, he commits suicide, not being able to accept that he (as a human being) was no longer in control. The equations, regularities and predictions that mark the human life and existence within the unpredictable contents of the universe are limited and there-

fore easily overthrown. Jean-Luc Nancy speaks in terms of a new type of cosmology which is a-cosmic, no longer confined to man's (point of) view, to his grasp. Such a cosmology, as both movies reveal, is dystopian because it cannot be regulated, ordered or tamed (when compared to the utopian illusion of knowledge and control of the human being over the space it inhabits, such an acosmos comes across as disrupting): ". . . we don't have yet a cosmology to answer the non-cosmos we are contained in; a non-cosmos which is no longer chaos, as a chaos follows a cosmos, or precedes it, while our *acosmos* is not preceded or followed by anything. It traces itself . . . the contour of the unlimited, of the absolute limit which nothing else delimits" (Nancy 1993, 62).

The human being lives in a philosophy of the limits (*philosophie des confins*), explains Jean-Luc Nancy. This aspect best defines our condition as "we confine ourselves to the multidirectional, pluri-local, reticulated, comprehensive space where we take place. We do not occupy the point of origin of a perspective, or the overhanging point of an axonometry, but we touch from all sides, our sight touches from all sides its limits, in other words, at the same time indistinctly and undecidedly the finiteness thus exposed of the universe, and the infinite intangibility of the external rim of the *View* limit . . ." (Nancy, 1993, 64). Therefore, limit is the limit of the vision. In this light, the author concludes, the meaning of the world, and of human existence is neither outside it, nor within. Its meaning is there where its limit is, but, "in the logic of limit in general, touching means surpassing it, surpassing it never means touching the other side. The limit unlimits the passage to limit." In this context, the "question of technique" is nothing else but the question of meaning at/against its limits, or, rather, "meaning at the edge"⁴ (Nancy 1993, 65).

Cinema as technique, on the other hand, uses images not as a relation between that which took place somewhere else and that which unfolds, and takes place under our very eyes, but as "operations which make the artistic nature of what we see" (Rancière 2003, 14).

In his book on photography, André Rouillé uses the generic term of visibilities (*visibilités*) in an understanding of the visible close to Rancière: "visibilities name things in an obvious manner and embody forms, but they are not confused in them. Independent of things and forms, visibilities are manners of seeing and of making visible, lights and manners of distributing light—singular repartition of the clear and the obscure, of what is seen and what is not seen" (Rouillé 2005, 353). As Rancière puts it, an image is not an exclusivity of the visible. An image is first of all a relation, that which makes the montage possible, despite the fragmentation of the frames. And through that, it is a relation with that which is not visible, past, future or present (like the disaster in *Melancholia*).

The images of cinema and (according to Rancière) of art in general are operations which produce a divergence, a difference within the visible and the real itself—they are distancing operations. They constantly shift between resemblance and dissimilarity, as they do not function as a mere copy of the real, but they create the real themselves. The cinema does not imitate, but creates the real. It is not a technique of mere reproduction, but rather a montage of operations and relations between images, which can sometimes be words (best seen in Godard's cinema), or sounds (as the *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde* or the *Blue Danube Waltz* in the two movie discussed), or they are in a visible which does not produce its image (as it is the disaster relating all the disparate

frames at the beginning of Von Trier's movie or as it is the threat of the disaster in *A Space Odyssey* which is present, but not visible, in all the silent and long space shots). In such a montage as that of the beginning shots of *Melancholia*, the suggestion of a catastrophe lurching, threatening, happening is no longer in the future. Even as the movie begins with the newlywed couple heading for the reception, the disaster is already there, it already happened, it is already in the past, already in the first still shots of the movie and throughout the subsequent "visible" unfolding of the narrative, in Justine's melancholia and in Claire's hatred for it, for Justine's living in the disaster and in its ruin, towards her thinking, envisaging, contemplating the disaster and putting it into words. But Claire herself begins to think (about) the disaster, begins to understand that the fate of the humanity has already been decided, is no longer a matter of future, but a matter of past, a matter of a continuous present: "To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it. The disaster is separate, that which is most separate. When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment" (Blanchot 1995, 1-2).

But this is a far-reaching disaster, not that of the isolated human being (of Justine, or of the astronaut in the *Space Odyssey*), but of the humanity, the disaster that signals itself through these (so to say) isolated cases. The cinematic montage of images produces an alteration of the common understanding and expectations (*resemblance*) of (depicting) the disaster. This is *disimilarity* through montage as it both *clarifies* and *obscures* its images and their narrative threads. Von Trier's montage *clarifies* Brueghel's painting through the relations it establishes with the entire opening shot of the movie, and yet it *obscures* it, it blurs it as painting, as an image belonging to a specific genre and/or art. The slow-motion frames are, in their turn *obscured*, yet *clarified*. Through the emphasis placed on them by the slow motion, the images are singularized, they are isolated as (im)possible thoughts of the disaster. And here lies the obscurity, in thinking the disaster (if that, as Blanchot says, is ever possible). But by thinking it through montage and images, cinema is thinking its own disaster.

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; "I" am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me—an other than I who passively become other. There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. (Blanchot 1995, 1-2)

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Notes

1. Brueghel's painting was originally part of a series of twelve landscapes—twelve months—covering all the months of the year. *Hunters in the snow* may have been December or January, the end or the beginning of the year, and in von Trier's montage and atlas of images the beginning and the end of life, the end of life and the beginning of death. The chilly color scheme evokes a cold gloomy day in winter, the season of barren earth and death.
2. The golf course is a reference to Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte*, 1961, a movie about the melancholia of a deteriorating relationship of a married couple.
3. This is another direct reference to a movie haunted by melancholia, Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961.
4. "Technique is precisely that which is neither *theoria*, nor *poiesis*: that which does not assign the meaning either as knowledge, or as oeuvre. It is for this reason that today science can so well pass for *techno-science* without being the case of 'disparaging' its knowledge to a 'simple' instrumentation: science does no longer assign, in a metaphysical way, the virtually final punctuation of a knowledge of truth, but, on the contrary, it assigns more and more the conjugation and exercise of truths throughout *techné*, neither knowledge, nor oeuvre, but incessant passage to the borders of *phusis*. The *phusis* or the nature have been the means [*les figures*] of self-representation. *Techné* initiates the coming, the *différance* of the presentation, removing from it, on the side of the origin, the value of the 'self' ('*auto*'), and on the side of the ending, the value of the 'presence'."

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Abstract

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The understanding of our world (of its meaning, be it absent, encrypted or implied), the shaping of the real inevitably happen against the cosmic aperture which the human existence faces. This cosmic aperture functions as a constellation of meanings and images, symptoms and anachronisms which are out of grasp, but which the human being will try to control and fully explain. The memory of the humanity bears within its birth and death altogether, two hypostases of its haunting specters. There is the anamnesis of birth and the *punctum* of death, both instances being out of grasp, elusive and flickering as nothing more but a fleeting flashing instant. Such a title could create the expectation of approaching dystopias as disrupting narratives within the real and within its images. However, our approach pursues a different thread. We will observe in the case of two cinematic masterpieces how the real, the world, life itself is in fact in its nature dystopian.

Keywords

Dystopia; Symptom; Image; Narrative; Montage; *Melancholia*; 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.