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## Her green materials: Mourning, 'Melancholia', and not-so-vital materialisms

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### Introduction: Slow greens, impending greys

'I'm trudging through a grey woolly yarn. It's clinging to my legs. It's really heavy to drag along', says Justine (Kirsten Dunst) to her sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsborough). Draped like a corpse in the whiteness of her wedding dress, Justine is immobile in a state of acute depression – that is, melancholia.<sup>1</sup> The colour palette of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) with its opening sequence of slow motion sensuality establishes the thesis statement of the film's narrative. The green and vital life of Earth, its cultural traditions and weddings, will be obliterated for eternity by an incoming rogue planet called Melancholia. This narrative premise allows the spectator to witness cinema at its most painterly, as *tableaux vivant* with compositions that illuminate Justine's wedding in many shades of green.<sup>2</sup> Grey and blue insert shots set in space foreshadow the film's *denouement*: the grey and ashy blue absorption of Earth by Melancholia.

One digital 'painting' reveals Justine in white caught in entangled yarns of black and grey. The spectator is invited to consider whether these powdery ropes are living soil or dead dust or even both. Throughout the film such images telescope the inextricable connections between living ecologies and apparently dead geologies, between a 'vital' humanness and a death-driving melancholia. Psychologist and film critic Judith Pinter describes such interconnections as the 'parallel between Earth and humankind' which then 'gradually disintegrates'.<sup>3</sup> *Melancholia* traces the vicissitudes of a non-apocalypse, as no new order will emerge. The film does so through

a narrative in which all that is green and ecological comes under fire from deathly greys and ashy blues, at both the geological and affective levels.

Von Trier's film does more than offer itself as an 'end of the world' genre piece. The qualities of *Melancholia* as ecological cinema are quite different from contemporary works. As theologian and film scholar John Pahl has noted, *Melancholia* avoids the traps of Hollywood blockbusters and their tendency towards 'spectacle' and military might; von Trier's film rather chooses a meditative path or 'way of the cross'.<sup>4</sup> Pinter recalls that in von Trier's body of work women often sacrifice themselves.<sup>5</sup> In *Breaking the Waves* (1996) Bess sacrifices herself as a prostitute to reclaim her husband's fortune. Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) sacrifices herself for her son. In contrast to Pinter I would suggest that the 'sacrifices' become more complex with *Antichrist* (2011). Here, what is epistemologically served up to the Nature goddess is the scientific rationality of Willem Dafoe's character 'he'. *Melancholia* may sacrifice the entire planet yet Justine, the melancholic protagonist, refuses to sacrifice herself to either the superficialities of science or civilisation. Moreover, as I shall argue, the status of *Melancholia* as an 'ecological film' derives from its power to help the audience to partake of a poignant and powerful experience of surrender to the material affects of possible extinction.

Von Trier's 'planetary' road movie is different from either *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009) or *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011). Hillcoat's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel offers a parable of 'deep ecology'. The film draws out its bleak blacks and greys as the remainder of an annihilated green. Here, what persists is the reminder that the 'eco'-scene not the anthropocene is key to our survival.<sup>6</sup> *Take Shelter* raises the question of whether the protagonist's hallucinations of apocalyptic storms are mental illness or prophetic images. Still, the alleged pathology reveals the state-of-things-to-come. *Melancholia* goes much further. Bruno Latour argues that the film's unlikely premise points towards a different but possible event: the destruction of our species due to catastrophic climate change.<sup>7</sup> *Melancholia* may not explicitly explore the damaging consequences of pollution and ecological breakdown; however, it does challenge the anthropogenic fantasy that all is well with our environment.<sup>8</sup> In an extensive and brilliant vein, Steve Shaviro has elegantly described *Melancholia* as a 'cosmic drama' which is also a domestic drama focusing on women.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will run with this insight to explore how von Trier's film of domestic interiors stages the human psyche as a planetary drama of green and grey, of non-human and human nature quaking at the edge of geological materials. My methodological approach

will be to entwine a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of the film with a feminist and Deleuzian slant to forge a feminist 'materialist' critique.

My reading finds further theoretical contexts from the small but growing body of work on *Melancholia*. This comprises more analyses which focus on the film's status as a symptomatic narrative of our current anxieties that the days of the anthropocene are numbered. Tim Matts' and Aidan Tynan's recent essay 'Melancholia of Extinction' interpret von Trier's film as a *zeitdiagnose* for the cultural impossibility of mourning an environmental cataclysm.<sup>10</sup> Mourning aforethought is an oxymoron. Justine's melancholic condition can be read with Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' and with the idea that Matts and Tynan develop, that Justine's state of 'non-being' is a mode of 'geophysical critique'. They suggest that her incorporation of the annihilation to come is a form of 'openness'. Justine refuses the consolations of Claire's bourgeoisie conventionality. Justine also rejects the gentlemanly rationalities of her brother-in-law John (Kiefer Sutherland). As such her openness critiques social conventions such as marriage, property, and scientific rationalism. Von Trier the cultural analyst suggests that the anthropocene and nature can never be reconciled. In other words, the film's narrative provides an example of what I have termed elsewhere a 'theoretical fiction'.<sup>11</sup> By this I mean that a fictional event (such as an incoming planet) is part of both a narrative and a set of intertwining theories about, in the case of *Melancholia*, our human confrontation with environmental catastrophe. To face traumatic anxiety about the end of the world requires a sequence of images which move slowly because meditatively. In the case of von Trier's film, rather than a literal story about the horrific outcomes of global warming, *Melancholia* offers a graceful tale of familial and geological catastrophe. Both the meditation in the face of annihilation and any possible sense of catharsis require the film's aesthetic to establish the notions of 'affect' and 'materiality'. Justine journeys through an interplanetary narrative in which green life confronts grey annihilation both at the psychological *and* particulate level of soil and tectonic materials.

Where there is affect there is the geology of painterly slowness. Paintings are single shots which focus on one composition of subjects; the attendant cinematography of depth and the special effects of compositing, morphing, and rotoscoping form layers of colour and shape.<sup>12</sup> When André Bazin made his distinction between painting and photography, he emphasised how the aesthetic materials of painting form their own 'microcosm'.<sup>13</sup> This is independent of the 'realist' requirements of reproducing the object.<sup>14</sup> Cunningly, in *Melancholia* the cinematic and painterly photographs adopt the best of Bazin's two though distinct definitions. The photographs produce

microcosms both cosmic and familial. The prologue presents a set of paintings which do attend to the family album – but Justine and her woolly yarn will not provide the intended wedding photograph to record the happy day. Rather, von Trier's digital paintings figure a set of counter-images to those that one would expect for a wedding. Instead the photo-album is the archive aforethought of green and grey materials producing energy fields through which humans and objects will be death-entangled. Here is one wedding and one cosmic funeral.

In order to explore the film's poetics of green and grey materiality along the threshold of mourning and melancholia I will draw on the 'new materialist' work of Jane Bennett and Freud's two works on mourning, melancholia, and introjections: 'Mourning and Melancholia' and *The Ego and the Id*. In the canonical 'Mourning and Melancholia' Freud argues that melancholic states result from mourning that is blocked or frustrated. Mourning can enhance a state of life and liveliness because it allows the jettisoning of dead psychological states. However, states of melancholia are not like mourning. In the latter the loved one is an object which cannot be surrendered; the act of letting go is indeed in process, however slowly. In contrast, melancholia is a pathological form of mourning which drastically inhibits the ability to discard the lost object.<sup>15</sup> Melancholia inhibits the capacity to discard what needs to be dead, which is somehow kept half alive. In a different approach, new materialist philosophies require that even nonhuman 'things' – everything from living stem cells to pieces of dust and atoms, rubbish and bits of plastic – are considered to have a 'vital materiality'.<sup>16</sup> Bennett's attempt to find vital networks between dead objects will enable me to make critical connections between specific strands of these new materialist philosophies and Freud's work on mourning.

The gap between Freudian psychoanalysis and a materialist political account of desire has been extensively tracked by Deleuze and Guattari, who consistently critiqued Freud's focus on psyche as identity rather than the psyche as belonging to a set of force fields. The broad project of *Anti-Oedipus* aims to wreck the Freudian discourse of the 'psyche'. Still, Deleuze and Guattari succeed in collecting pieces from the debris to produce a language of 'desiring-machines'.<sup>17</sup> These machines can 'topple man as the king of creation'.<sup>18</sup> Here is a critical moment which connects to the current 'green' discourses in which humans are not considered to be the centre of all created life (or non-life) but merely one part of it. Once the human is not considered the be-all and end-all of creation the result is a being who 'ceaselessly plugs an organ-machine into an energy-machine, a tree into his body, a breast into his mouth, the sun into asshole: the eternal custodian

of the machines of the Universe'.<sup>19</sup> In Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy machines are more than mechanical. The image of the sun plugged into an 'asshole' provocatively connects the geological with human anatomy but also with materials that are the waste products of life. One entity can be easily transformed into its opposite, be this food into shit, human to nonhuman, identities into particles.<sup>20</sup> In comparable terms, von Trier makes gravitation an objective correlative of emotion.

I will bridge the gap between a new materialist and a psychoanalytic reading of *Melancholia* by examining where materialism, gender, and ecology overlap. Along with Jane Bennett's pro-vitalist approach I will engage with Claire Colebrook's feminist critique of vitalism. Colebrook's approach commits itself to 'new vitalisms' which, like Bennett's methodology, focuses on all things living. Colebrook's feminist critique will allow me to discover the possibility of materialisms which are not entirely dependent on the vital. As I will argue, there is a place for lifeless materials which do not have to be assimilated into either the machinery or the psyche of vitality. Colebrook tackles the binary notion that matter (often passive and feminine) is acted on by spirit, thought, creativity, and life (masculine agency).<sup>21</sup> Likewise her approach avoids the trap of theorising action to be 'masculine' and 'female' as the passive material that will be worked upon. Colebrook's feminist analysis supports my own critique of the tendency in some theories of ecology that situate nonhuman life metaphorically as 'feminine' and on the side of passivity.<sup>22</sup> Von Trier's film brings its women characters centre stage without bringing green ecology onto the side of the feminine as a source of receptive fertility.

## Mourning 'anthro', mourning green

In *Melancholia* material matters are also domestic projects hinged on matters of tribal affiliation such as marriage and wealth. Shaviro has pointed out that John and Claire's country estate reminds one of the 1% owning the 99%.<sup>23</sup> Through a melancholia that rejects both marriage and its attendant properties Justine's depathologised pathology critiques the global capitalist system. The film's bipartite structure entitled 'Justine' and 'Claire' sets out a mourning path for the capitalist anthropocene through the gradual melancholic rejection of social structures, be these marriage or the illusion that one's property can be one's cataclysm bunker. As young Leo notes, 'you can run but you can't hide.' While Claire is fully in control in the film's first half micromanaging her sister's condition, in the second

half the stakes change. It is Justine's melancholia as an epistemological strength which begins to offer a counter-vitality. Claire's domesticity, her precarious sense of security in maintaining the homely order of things, can only be traumatised by the ways of cosmic bodies. The film inverts its paradoxes. By this I mean that in the first half Claire's vitality keeps Justine barely propped up; in the second half it is Justine's inner deadness that rises to the occasion. *Melancholia* takes this level of domestic drama and stages it at the material and molecular level, one that can be read both in ecological and feminist terms.

To understand the ecological and feminist nuances that exist through a vitality which absorbs and can produce the deathly requires taking a detour through Bennett's project in *Vibrant Matter*. While not explicitly feminist Bennett's agenda is ecologically political. Her thesis is that

the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.<sup>24</sup>

Here her aim is to vitalise the perception of the deadness of the nonliving as means of re-articulating the relationship between the human and nonhuman, the organic and nonorganic. Von Trier's film explores the geological and organic ridges between dead and living materials staged as they are on the vulnerable country estate. *Melancholia* does more than poke fun at John's comical attempts at scientific rationality. After all, he is rich and built a business based on 'consumption' and 'conquest', which in themselves have devolved from enlightenment values of expansion and progress. John is concerned about the cost of everything from weddings to taxi rides. Justine's 'soul' ride will remain indifferent to materialism while surrendering to materiality with its pleasures of specific moments. She will enjoy the sensual and haptic pleasures of nature, from picking blueberries to eating jam to lying naked on a grassy slope. Importantly, this vitalisation requires crumbling edges – and not just those of falling ash but of the anthropogenic, symbolic order.

One theoretical approach to tracing such a 'crumbling edge' is offered by Bennett's chapter 'Vitality and Self-interest'.<sup>25</sup> Here she offers the ethical alternative to the all-too-human view that produces a schism between what I term our sense of human centrality ('here') and the biosphere ('over there'). For Bennett the counter-anthropogenic view needs to do more than see the

vital importance of the nonhuman, for examples the biosphere and other animals. Bennett argues that the recent public concern for environmental security in the wake of disasters like Hurricane Katrina has promoted a greater social interest. People fear for their own survival in the wake of climate calamities.<sup>26</sup> However, this somewhat better state of public concern still involves a set of denials. While there is a sense of the dangers of global warming and pollution there is also what I would characterise (borrowing the use of the term from Latour) a 'disconnect' between understanding that humans (active) are not separate from the 'environment' (passive and somehow separate from us).<sup>27</sup> This is where Bennett's vital materialism can enter the stage. In her vision even nonliving materials are given vitality through their connectedness to the 'assemblage' of life. Bennett is loyal in following the Deleuze/Guattari concept of assemblage and sets out a honed description:

[a]ssemblages are not governed by any simple head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory of the impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the vital source of each materiality alone.<sup>28</sup>

The implication is that the force of even one element only in combination with others can produce something entirely unexpected. Calculating the results of a shift in the shape of the assemblage itself may be difficult. The important aspect here is that even a dead object is part of a field of vitality. Hence, for Bennett all things become vital. The advantages of this approach for a new materialism that meets political environmentalism (with all its self-serving agenda for humans) is that the nonhuman and the geological are no longer regarded as extensions of us. Rather than being passive agents nonhuman life, icebergs, water, or the earth's crust are theorised to have lives of their own. Likewise just as lost humans become a source of melancholy, or that which is less than vital, so too can the nonhuman biosphere find itself ingested as a deadening mass.

Where Deleuze and Guattari envisage forces and fractures psychoanalysis theorises a build-up of unconscious materials directed towards human agents. In a move which is counter to the theory of mourning in his 1917 work, in *The Ego and the Id* Freud emphasised that when mourning is frustrated the tendency is to identify with the lost person as a prerequisite for being able to mourn them.<sup>29</sup> What is lost can be transformed into pieces



of the living person's psyche. Mourning is a process which entails letting go of dead materials. There is the familiar cliché that when a friendship or relationship ends someone becomes 'dead' to the other person. Freud argued all through *The Ego and the Id* that we internalise what is lost. A lost object which has ostensibly died is re-invigorated when it is assimilated back into the psyche. Once again the lines between what are nonliving and living become further complicated.

In *Melancholia*, Justine's sabotage of her own marriage and demise into melancholia correlates with the planet Melancholia's inexorable path. At the same time it is as if Justine absorbs aspects of her mother Gaby (Charlotte Rampling) when the latter speaks out blatantly against her daughter's marriage. Her mother tells Justine to 'get out' while she can. Justine does. The spectator's 'share' could offer the psychological interpretation that Justine internalises her almost detached and uncaring Gaby, the woman who is hardly being a 'mother'. Justine may have had to mourn her reliance on a not-so nurturing mother; in place of the loss she might have internalised her mother's assertive feminism. Another interpretation is possible: Justine incorporates the melancholic force fields that will inevitably swallow Earth. People and gravitational fields, people and dead planets, and people *as* material forces are the stuff of the dramatic and cinematic poetics in *Melancholia*. The human condition is undone and wounded by both humans and gravitational forces and their mutual entanglements.

Mourning and melancholia can be linked to sites of wounding. The ecocritic Cartriona Mortimer-Sandiland introduces her links between ecology and mourning by introducing Aldo Leopold's phrase that refers to a 'world of wounds' or the ongoing damage being done to the biosphere.<sup>30</sup> Following the remarks of ecocritics David Eng and David Kazanjian, Sandilands further nuances what is meant by this 'world of wounds'.<sup>31</sup> For them the makings of 20<sup>th</sup> century melancholia have devolved from the 'catastrophic losses of bodies, spaces, and ideals' and from those 'psychic and material practices of loss and its remains' that are 'productive for history and politics'.<sup>32</sup> Eng and Kazanjian are referring to the biosphere, species, peoples, and cultural traditions – that is, what I term the 'green' ensemble. If there is a resistance to acknowledging the mourning of exterminated aspects of ecology then melancholia ensues. In both his 1917 and 1923 essays Freud maintains the thesis that there is no mourning without melancholia. Throughout 'Mourning and Melancholia' he argues that the release of affect that accompanies mourning actually re-affirms life; however, melancholia draws libido back into the psyche.<sup>33</sup> It is as though an object both living and dead is incorporated into the psyche. There is a certain denial at work in allowing

what is dead to have another form of life. In more contemporary terms melancholia might be regarded as a specific state of cognitive dissonance. Von Trier's film can be read as a theoretical fiction about anthropogenic hubris, this being the mistaken assumption that everything can carry on being an organised garden of delights even in the face of environmental catastrophe.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, with the exception of Justine (and also towards the end, Claire), the characters in *Melancholia* will be in a state of both mourning and melancholia denied.

The quick and fast mourning technique of saying 'this species gone, let's enjoy another' is an anathema to a profound experience of environmental mourning. To mourn slowly is to commit to an ethical response. I would take Sandiland's theoretical move to another extreme and suggest that a deep ecology which supports a planet's right to be a biosphere for its own sake (not just ours) deserves a practice in which melancholia and mourning work together.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore this 'pair' of psychic processes would require a capacity to mourn the loss of ecological assemblages. These would have to be experienced in all their vital materiality. Mourning which anyway works slowly would dwell on the details of the ecological losses taking place. Melancholia does productive work when it attaches its reins to the mourning process, preventing the latter from being too rapid or superficial. Indeed this is where melancholia invites in not just the vital but also what I think is missing from Bennett's philosophy of vital materialism. If what I am terming a not-so-vital materiality is given a place within the processes of mourning and melancholia then mourning becomes a profound act. So not surprisingly the prologue of *Melancholia* slows everything down to the state of a hanging picture, forcing us to behold it while knowing that the slower the loss then the more clearly the spectator can emotionally follow the slow flaking into ash of *Hunters in the Snow* (1565).

The fortunes of the not-so-vital are dramatised in one crucial scene in the library. Justine becomes distraught with a set of painting catalogues. A series of Malevich plates, with their austerity and geometrical purity, are already open on the display shelves. Distressed by them Justine hurls them off the shelves and replaces them with paintings that depict nature and tales of vivid life. The selected paintings include choice ironies. Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* (1610) might suggest the beheading of power or, alternatively, that once the King has been assassinated long live the King. *Homo sapiens* are a power-driven, hierarchically-minded species. As Justine notes towards the film's end 'life on Earth is evil'. Humans often thrive because of their violent acts and much human life is maintained in the wake of ecological violence. Justine chooses Breughel's *Hunters in the Snow*, a painting that

depicts some balance between humans and nature: a pleasant day in the snow, hunting for food not competition, communities working together, people skating on ice. The digital painting of Justine sinking into water is a citation of John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852), a character about to drown. Thus inescapably it telescopes the watery boundaries between life and death. The Malevich plates are pure line and form, empty of life except as cultural products. Perhaps Justine is refusing to mourn the loss of pre-Enlightenment art and its consolations. Her desperation is her melancholia. Many of the paintings include images of forests and trees. In the film's second half Justine will go riding through the woods and thrash her favourite horse because he refuses to move deeper into the woods (perhaps the horse knows the end is nigh). Anthropogenic mastery is entangled with green nature and cannot do without an assemblage of ecological entanglements: food, power, death, life, and artworks. The not-so-vital Malevich plates do not depict life, yet as artefacts they are a result of human effort. These plates are emotionally empty if not deadening to the point that they distress Justine into replacing them. In this scene Justine refuses to mourn.

Replacing old psychological states with new ones is a precarious business. Bennett's optimistic approach that all materials can be made vital is strongly critiqued by von Trier's visual storytelling. *Melancholia* offers a vital if grey planetary body which does indeed have a 'life' of its own, if only gravitational. Likewise Malevich plates (artistic life) and beads and soil-like threads are constituents in the vital and not-so vital ecologies which the film intends to paint. A concept of materiality does indeed shift the shaping experience of both mourning and melancholia. It can indeed stimulate a self-serving approach to ecology itself. If 'green' can be perceived as a not all-powerful goddess but as something which is indeed vulnerable to not-so-vital materialisms then green ecology might be treated with more sensitivity. It is all-too-human to consider 'Nature' as a limitless resource that can stand up to anything, which it cannot. *Melancholia* critiques the 'limitless' fantasies of global capitalism as the spawn of scientific rationalism by reminding the audience that ecology, the foundation of all capital turnover, is decidedly limited.

## Her green and grey materials

In *Melancholia* 'male' scientific rationalism and consumerism are in the orbit of a melancholic and green feminist critique. In *Antichrist*, Willem Dafoe's character attempts vainly and helplessly to master his wife's 'female'

irrationality. In a role-play scene Dafoe's 'he' attempts therapy by playing 'Nature' and tries to get Charlotte Gainsborough's character to play a scientist with a doctoral thesis. His attempts fail and with an emotionally savvy twist the female epistemologist relocates herself on the side of 'evil nature' and 'evil women'. Nature has already conspired in the shot preceding the scene in which a branch breaks in the rain. Here the male-female battle allows for no dissolutions except in entangled images of nature. In contrast, Claire refers to Justine in the second half as 'Tristram'. The female melancholic acquires a more masculine Tristram role and will build the magic hut for the queer family to sit in before planetary impact. Masculine and feminine forces connect through an assemblage and exchange of materials. Having said this *Melancholia* also maintains the tension between culture and nature, without which there would be an insufficient distance for the melancholic position to maintain is space for critique. Whereas *Antichrist* needs to maintain the male-female dyad, *Melancholia* maintains separations and then allows the gap to crumble.

To address this double action of separation and collapse I will use Colebrook's gender analysis of materialist philosophies. As she notes in her assessment of Bergson's vitalism with its dependence on Descartes such models were keen to see sense, structure, and spirit as forces that imposed themselves on matter. Inert matter is brought into being through form. Colebrook argues that in such traditions matter 'has no intrinsic form or identity' unless transformed by 'divine force'.<sup>36</sup> Matter cannot be 'devoid of striving, purpose, expression, or meaning'.<sup>37</sup> Inevitably, as Colebrook suggests, the implication is that enlivened matter is the force of 'desire' as it cannot be separated from anything 'productive and creative'.<sup>38</sup> This is where gender enters the scene. Colebrook parses the ideology of traditional vitalism by pointing out that reproduction is made to side with the female force which provides the material for male activation. Yet curiously Colebrook herself becomes caught in the paradox of gender and activated life. In the traditional vitalisms 'the feminine is the productive, fertile, and directed towards the masculine power of synthesis'.<sup>39</sup>

If Colebrook's argument is that Bergson regarded masculine form as that which sparks female matter into life then in her use of metaphors the very idea of the female directing itself 'towards' the masculine implies that this female energy is already productive and fertile. Through close readings of Bergson, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz, Colebrook makes more nuanced connections between 'nature' and 'culture', arguing that 'culture would not be an extension of nature but, *through its very materiality*, that which acts demonically in opposition to nature's potentiality'.<sup>40</sup> Here the idea is not that

natural phenomena are ‘potential’ qua Bergson but that this potentiality is already on the move, vitalising itself of its own accord. Moreover there is plenty of room within such demonic oppositions for a materiality that need not be geared towards divine sparks, productivity, and creativity. Colebrook’s definition of culture as materially active but not the chief progenitor leads me to make one more move. Her terms could be inverted: nature need not be an extension of culture but through its materiality nature would become that which acts demonically in opposition to culture’s potentiality. This reversal of terms enables a feminist materialism to consider nature itself as that which might activate the potentialities of culture.

Clearly, like Bennett, Colebrook maintains the theme that all materials are operating vitally. However, her insight that nature can work ‘demonically’ against a culture can be traced in the wedding scene when Justine’s boss Jack (Stellan Skarsgård) makes a speech and shows a slide from her commercial portfolio. This is revealed to be a geometrical image of four anorexic women with their bodies forming sides of a square; they are shot from above and they all look like zombies. This *Vogue*-style photo shoot reveals capitalism’s exploitation of the female image coupled with the manner in which it is constructed to look deathly. The square finds its correlation in the Malevich plates which appear in Justine’s act of switching catalogues. This shoot is ‘demonically’ opposed to ‘her’ green potentialities. The slide reinforces a sexist binary opposition. Equally well, within the film’s context, the slide offers a subtle suggestion of a dead and not-so-vital potentiality. Nature is already entangled in culture and the latter infects nature with capitalism’s overflow of carbon dioxide and forest fires. The buying and selling of women’s images (and indeed the buying and selling of women) in global capitalism has its corollary in the exploitation of green ecologies under fire. The action and reaction between culture and environment, between masculine and feminine, produces entanglements which decompose such binaries. These entanglements produce admixtures of the vital and the deathly.

For both Bennett and Colebrook the implication is that matter can never be entirely dead – that is, untouched by some form of vitality. By corollary just as there is no entirely passive female, nor for that matter a consistently active masculinity, matter somehow is never allowed a ‘break’. In other words, it is as if matter is not allowed to be AWOL from life. When does matter itself get its turn to be lifeless, dead, and somehow inactive? In the film’s second half when Justine is steeped in her clinical state of melancholia she comes to the dinner table to eat her favourite dish, Claire’s meat loaf. As Justine eats, eyes closed in a near-haptic trance, she makes the shocking

then moving revelation that her mouth is not full of succulent food but ash. Ash is the material left after bodies are burned. It is the final detritus or 'left-over' from life. However it is not as if the meat loaf is any longer an animal springing about the fields. Having said this, the animal will have consumed its share of green materials to grow into a body ready for slaying. The dead meat provides protein and can sustain the body's biochemistry. Justine has gone to the next level, absorbing the dead meat that has been transformed into its ultimate death state: burned-out ash. Furthermore, in this deathly and culinary moment Justine has not ingested just any ash. In her melancholic imaginary the ash is from that radical other to life – the planet Melancholia. Here is a bizarre admixture of the allegedly living, dead, and the half-living. The planet is the half-living (or even dead or half-dead body) that propels a set of actions and consequences. In this case Justine's intense moment has been brought on by a quasi-vitalising deathliness. In other words, Justine's dramatic moment is one in which not-so-vital materialism emerges in the assemblage of family dinner. What started out as green-produced food ends its journey on the coattails of Melancholia's grey and ashy blue. Green and grey do more than meet, for grey will consume all of the existent shades of green.

Visually greens stand out against grey and grey-blues. In *Melancholia* the gradual incursion of grey and dark blues as they slowly invade green can be traced in scenes in which the optical regime of film is edged away by that of haptic sensibility. One helpful interlocuter to such scenes is Laura Marks's concept of haptic visuality, developed comprehensively in her now canonical *The Skin of the Film*. Broadly, Marks connects the haptic visuality (or the skin) of cinema with a double logic both of synaesthesia, where touch is important, along with a displacement of the dominance of the optical regime. The painterly effects of layers and compositing in *Melancholia* do allow the spectator a sense of surface and touch. As Marks points out, haptic affects can emerge through the use of hands and touch within the frame itself.<sup>41</sup> In one garden scene both sisters pick blueberries and find themselves under a snow of grey ash. Eyes half shut, Justine bathes in the flakes. The next breakfast scene finds the family watching as Justine, her eyes once again closed, consumes blueberry jam with her fingers, looking as though she is in a state of haptic rapture. Von Trier keeps the camera close to the sensual reactions of the two women, particularly Justine's skin, her closed eyes, her fingers, and her tongue. This intense sense of touch has already been prefigured in the prologue in which Justine's fingers emit lightning sparks as though she were finger-charged through a 'northern lights' effect. These lightning fingers are also signifiers of haptic affects. The charges are

a result of Melancholia's gravitational field. Thus, Justine's haptic fingers are direct links to the incoming grey materials.

In the film's final mesmerising shot in which Justine, Claire, and her son Leo all sit in the magic hut which Justine has built with Leo, Melancholia looms large as the three figures in their Shaman hut eventually become stick figures on the horizon. The flesh becomes a silhouette, a triangle which implies geometry. The glory of the anthropocene becomes drawn in geometrical lines in its pathetic attempt to use magic against a ruthless and all-consuming material object. It is through this assemblage that masculine and feminine becomes re-materialised. After all, one would expect the standard domestic unit of father, mother, and child. Yet here are two sisters and a son, and Justine the melancholic has guided her charges to the point where all genders and materials will be crushed to dust and where all binary oppositions will cease.

### **Conclusion: Her released materials**

Within the logic of the film's two halves Justine's refusal of marriage economies, her thwarting of her role as an exchange object on the markets of ritual and conformity, leads to a disabling state in which Claire must nurse her sister. Yet it is in the film's second half that Claire's Nietzschean value-system will be smashed to pieces, counterpointed by Justine's so-called pathology or act of onto-epistemological confrontation with the facts of planetary extinction.<sup>42</sup> As Shaviro notes, Justine comes into her own when she 'gives up on illusion'.<sup>43</sup> When Claire fancies a glass of wine for the event, Justine suggests they 'meet over the toilet'. In doing so she displays a primal calmness. Justine's interiorisation of the messy facts of life is a corollary of her meditative capacity to face material reality. This meditative quality suffuses the film through its slow motion sequences, intimate 'natural' scenes between Justine and Claire, sensuous cinematography, and lingering editing. Many scholars have cited the aesthetics of slowness for somewhat different reasons. For Pinter the film treats 'souls and planets as stand-in for each other'.<sup>44</sup> Matts and Tynan capitalise on a similar move by tracing the melancholia or the gradualness of staying open to painful and global truths. Mourning repressed and melancholia that concatenates both life and death all move gradually. Shaviro emphasises that the prologue presents an anti-narrative replete with an aesthetic distance which enhances a type of Kantian 'disinterestedness' from which there will be no 'sense of an ending'.<sup>45</sup> As an example of ecological art *Melancholia* deploys a meditative aesthetic to confront the audience on two mutually entangling levels: one

which uses stealth to provoke an ecological analysis of the prospect of unthinkable loss and a second which is an affective and material experience in the face of the melancholic prospect of mourning (aforethought) a cosmic and inconceivable loss.

The methodological consequence of intersecting a feminist-materialist-Deleuzian reading with that of a psychoanalytic and ecologically 'symptomatic' one is to emphasise how *Melancholia* insists on an affective edge between materials both living and dead. To my mind this edge is both maintained yet constantly collapsed. To do so helps the audience move between a melancholic and cathartic state. After all, as Freud argued, catharsis enables the release of affect and melancholia inhibits that release. Yet for the spectator to depart from the viewing experience with a desire to remain open to ecological knowledge and experience its affects, a vital epistemological and emotional stance is important. In contrast to Freud, von Trier's film theorises melancholic states as requiring some degree of release. Justine is unafraid of the incoming planet; it will bring her the release of death.

Earlier I placed *Melancholia* in that recent (and yet-to-be named) genre that could be termed the 'ecological film'. It offers itself as a narrative which bears bad news about the destiny of civilisation in the face of catastrophic climate change. *Melancholia* does so through a feminist and interior drama which avoids the clichés from even von Trier's earlier work – that is, women must take the role of solo agents who turn themselves into sacrifices. In *Melancholia* it is the assemblage, the desiring-machinery of ecology and humans which will be the narrative's sacrifice.

A theory of vital materialisms allows the sense of large and desiring-machinery to come to the fore. *Melancholia* offers us a vision in which what cannot be controlled partakes not just of life or even death but an interim and not-so-vital zone between 'soul' and planet. Human behaviour produces the vital and the dead and partakes of the not-so-vital. Anthropogenic influences do not act upon the ecological systems of planet Earth in some active matter. It is more the case that human behaviour acts within the planetary system as part of its material assemblage. In turn, this assemblage responds against and through us. When *Melancholia* begins its final approach Justine and Claire enjoy its flakes of dust as though they were bathing in snowflakes. These materials make and unmake themselves around assemblages woven from the complexities of death and life. The green materials of Lars von Trier's cautionary tale fuse and separate through yarns of grey at the poignant edges between mourning and melancholia. For those about to surrender to matter, we salute you.



## Notes

1. Throughout the chosen term will be 'melancholia' (see Freud 1917). Freud always referred to terms such as mourning and melancholia but never 'depression'.
2. For a detailed reading of the *tableaux vivant* aspects of *Melancholia* see Shaviro 2012, pp. 10-14.
3. Pinter 2011.
4. Pahl 2012.
5. Pinter 2011.
6. The architecture of 'deep ecology' is credited to the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (see text from 1989). Influenced by Spinoza, Næss treated 'Nature' as the primary context and human life as but part of it; hence, the philosophy critiques anthropocene mastery. There are connections between this deep ecological approach and the work of James Lovelock – *The Revenge of Gaia* (2007) and *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (2009) – which both warn that the human failure to realise this situation is but part of the planet's eco-system, its complex feedback loops, and the planet's status as a living organism in itself will lead to cataclysmic changes. In terms of his speculative scientific analysis Lovelock considers these changes to be inevitable.
7. Latour 2011, p. 5.
8. Latour 2011, p. 6.
9. Shaviro 2012.
10. Matts & Tynan 2012.
11. Lord 1999. My term 'theoretical fiction' defines the way in which an intellectually driven fiction can provide not just a story, characters, and emotional catharsis but also develop the 'big idea' rather than a set of opinions or assertions. The fiction carries its own theories and can develop within a philosophical and critical context. See also Lord 2003 for an analysis of Virginia Woolf's theorising of gender in *Orlando* under my section 'Theoretical Fictions of their Own' (pp. 144-149).
12. Venkatasawmy 2013, pp. 129-156. This section provides an informed definition of an array of special effects terms.
13. Bazin 1968 (orig. in 1958), p. 15.
14. Ibid.
15. Freud 1917, pp. 243-245. Freud explains that mourning is the understandable response of loss to a loved person, object, or ideal. However, pathological mourning turns into 'melancholia'; it is this which can cause the subject to feel responsible for the loss of the loved one; the subject can become self-hating or even possessed of the lost object. This sense of 'possession' is what can be read extensively in *Melancholia*, except in this case the possessing agent is a planet.
16. Bennett 2009, p. vii.
17. Deleuze & Guattari 2004 (orig. in 1983), chapter 1, 'Desiring-machine'. 'Desiring-machines', they argue, 'make us an organism' (p. 8). Throughout this chapter Deleuze and Guattari argue that *homo sapiens* should be considered *homo natura*; there should be no fundamental fracture between humans as nature and nature as humans.
18. Deleuze & Guattari 2004 (orig. in 1983), p. 5.
19. Ibid.
20. Deleuze & Guattari 2004 (orig. in 1987), p. 284.
21. Colebrook 2008, pp. 57-64.
22. Lovelock 2007, p. 208. The most distinctive example of the 'female-as-nature-nurturer' metaphor can be found in the paradigm-shifting work of James Lovelock, the co-creator (with Lynn Margulis) of the Gaia hypothesis. Lovelock defines the 'Gaia Theory' as a 'view of the Earth that sees it as a self-regulating system made up from the totality of organisms,

the surface rocks, the ocean and the atmosphere tightly coupled as an evolving system. The theory sees this system as having a goal – the regulation of the surface conditions so as always to be as favourable as possible for contemporary life'. Lovelock attempts to defend his use of the 'she' for the Gaia system by arguing that he wants to use metaphors that access the unconscious mind (p. 197). Beyond this, he does not reflect upon the problems of gendering the planet as a 'she'.

23. Shaviro 2012, p. 7.
24. Bennett 2009, p. ix.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-122.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
27. Latour 2011, p. 2.
28. Bennett 2009, p. 24.
29. Freud 1923, p. 3. Freud focuses on mourning – that is, on losses that are a result of the Oedipus complex. The 'ego-ideal' becomes synonymous here with the 'super-ego' and it is through such identifications with the father (for instance the ego-ideal as super-ego) that the subject diminishes their sense of loss from within the Oedipal structure. Importantly for Deleuze and Guattari, Freud's emphasis on the role of subject to parent identification is the entire problem in his system. They want desiring-machines to replace the apparatus of psychical identifications.
30. Leopold 1941, p. 165. 'One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.'
31. Eng & Kazanjian 2003, p. 5. Quoted in Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, p. 340.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
33. Freud 1917, pp. 243-248.
34. Lord 1999.
35. Sandilands 2010.
36. Colebrook 2008, p. 57.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
41. Marks 2000, pp. 127-193. Here her chapter 'The Memory of Touch' focuses on the cinematic aspects of fingers and hands.
42. Shaviro 2012, p. 24. He notes that Claire has a 'will-to-life' but that what can be read as philosophical paradigm will also meet its end.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Pinter 2011.
45. Shaviro 2012, pp. 10-14.

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