

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD: THE INTERMEDIATIC DIALOGUE AMONG APOCALYPTIC PRODUCTIONS

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Abstract: In lyrics, painting and poetry, cinema and other media, the Apocalypse has been a fascinating and inexhaustible theme. Robert Frost, a North-American poet, is one of the voices that, with his unpretentious poem "Fire and Ice", offers an apocalyptic vision of the universe to his readers. Several films have worked with the same idea – that fire or ice would end up destroying the world. Von Trier's film, *Melancholia* (2011), on the other hand, presents a quite different suggestion regarding the end – a collision between two planets. For him, the imaginary planet, Melancholia, which obscures one of the guardian stars of the constellation of Scorpio – Antares –, is apparently in a collision course with the Earth and, in the end, the planets clash, causing total destruction. To enhance the effect of his creation, von Trier uses computer-generated imagery (CGI) and Wagner's music.

Keywords: Arts. Media. Intertextuality. Intermediality.

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É O FIM DO MUNDO: O DIÁLOGO INTERMIDIÁTICO ENTRE PRODUÇÕES APOCALÍPTICAS

Resumo: Em letras de música, na pintura e na poesia, no cinema e em outras mídias, o Apocalipse tem sido um tema fascinante e inesgotável. Robert Frost, um poeta norte-americano, é uma das vozes que, com seu desprezioso poema “Fire and Ice”, oferece uma visão apocalíptica do universo a seus leitores. Vários filmes desenvolvem a mesma ideia – que fogo ou gelo acabarão por destruir o mundo. O filme de von Trier, *Melancholia* (2011), por outro lado, apresenta uma sugestão bem diferente em relação ao fim – uma colisão entre dois planetas. Para o cineasta, o planeta imaginário, Melancolia, que obstrui a visão de uma das estrelas guardiãs da constelação de Escorpião – Antares –, está aparentemente numa rota de colisão com a Terra, e no final os planetas se chocam, causando destruição total. Para intensificar o efeito de sua criação, von Trier utiliza imagens computadorizadas (CGI) e a música de Wagner.

Palavras-chave: Artes. Mídias. Intertextualidade. Intermidialidade.

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Robert Frost

In the North-American movie industry, several films elaborate on the theme of the end of the world. Two of these, *Knowing* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, are striking examples of this concern. In *Knowing* (2009, directed by Alex Proyas, featuring Nicholas Cage), the world is destroyed by fire; however some children are saved by aliens, ensuring the future repopulation of the Earth. Thus, in this film, the population of our planet is not entirely annihilated. As the refrain of the song by R. E. M. puts it: “It’s the end of the world as we know it”. In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, directed by Roland Emmerich, featuring Dennis Quaid and Jake Gyllenhaal), the world is destroyed by a new ice age. As in *Knowing*, there are survivors. It is, nonetheless, the end of the world as we know it as well.

Robert Frost’s poem “Fire and Ice”, quoted in the epigraph of this paper, is a fascinating understatement about the same theme. This poem, which appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* on December 1920, deals with the end of the world in an apparently simplistic and detached way. According to the renowned early 20th-century astronomer Harlow Shapley, the poem was inspired by a reply he had given the poet in 1919, after being asked about the end of the world. The astronomer’s opinion was that the sun would explode and incinerate the Earth or that the Earth would freeze. According to Frost’s biographers, in this nine-verse poem, the poet represented the nine circles of Dante’s *Inferno*, in which sinners live among flames, trapped up to their necks with blocks of ice. It is possible that “Fire and Ice” has been influenced by both – Dante’s poem and the astronomer’s information. In Lars von Triers’ film *Melancholia* (2011), the impact of the two planets – the Earth and Melancholia – suggests, however, that fire or ice would not suffice. Besides that, after the impact, there would be no survivors to repopulate the world. To quote once more from the song’s refrain, “It’s the end of the world as we know it/And I feel fine”. Justine [Kirsten Dunst], the melancholic protagonist of the first part of the film, could have sung these lines at the end of the film, when she finally regains emotional stability, while her sister, Claire [Charlotte Gainsbourg], withers away in despair.

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Film studies show that over 400 doomsday films have been shot, some in which mankind is not totally extinguished; among these, *2012* (2009, directed by Roland Emmerich, featuring John Cusack) is outstanding. Most of older films, however, cause less impact than the ones mentioned above.

In *Melancholia*, a more recent production by von Trier, the film's poetry and the imminent impact of the planets Earth and Melancholia, leading to their total destruction, enthrall the spectator. As Stephen Greenblatt might have put it, the film's theme resonates with other artistic or mediatic productions about the end of the world. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the state of mind of the two female protagonists – one given to melancholia and dejection, and the other, to panic, regarding the disruption of her harmonious family life and imminent death. However, *Melancholia* does not dialogue only with other films and texts. The very title of the film might bring to the spectator's mind such engravings as *Melencolia* (1514), by Dürer, and *Melancholia*, by Fomenko (a contemporary artist and mathematician who undertakes a rereading of Dürer), and elicit aesthetic interactions or intermediatic correlations between the film and the illustrations (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 – *Melencolia*
Dürer (1514).



Figure 2 – *Melancholia*
Fomenko (21st century).

These two prints refer to the psychological condition of the female protagonist, Justine, in *Melancholia*, who suffers from deep melancholy. Her contrived cheerfulness and ostensive acceptance of what her life has turned into (set by society's standards) gradually lead her to a melancholic and depressive behavior, and bring about the destruction of her marriage on the very night she gets married. This happens in spite of the promise Justine has made to her sister and brother-in-law that she would "behave" in the wedding reception being held in their magnificent resort. In the second part of the film, sometime after Justine's failed marriage, she falls into a deep troubled mental state so that she cannot even open her own eyes (see Fig. 3). Hence, she asks for her sister and brother-in-law's help and she is taken by cab to their house. Ironically, with the imminent threat of the planet Melancholia, Justine begins to connect with her family and to recover her well-being.



Figure 3 – Justine (one of the images of melancholia at the opening of the film). Available at: Melancholia>Google images. Access on: 11 ago. 2015.

In the end of the film, with the increasing proximity of the planet Melancholia, she displays total emotional poise and control. Realizing that Claire is unable to comfort her nephew Leo, Justine

builds a magic cave (see Fig. 4), and tells him it is going to protect them from the approaching disaster.



Figure 4 – Justine, Leo and the magic cave. Available at: Melancholia>Google images. Access on: 11 ago. 2015.

Melancholia is not an adaptation of a literary text, but an original script. The film's shooting techniques resemble those of a previous production by von Trier, *Antichrist* (2009). Considering the technical proximity between the two films, this paper will also make remarks about *Antichrist*, and other media, especially painting and photography, used in the film to intensify its meaning. The technical devices include the practice of extreme slow motion, illustrations – reproduction of famous paintings –, and the use of CGI (computer-generated imagery). All these elements contribute to construct von Trier's views regarding controversial human nature, the dysfunctional family and the chaotic universe. Through the investigation of these aspects, the validity of science is questioned and even ridiculed. A symbolic bridge separates the world from the characters' private universes; however, neither the private universes nor the smaller

shelters – the magic cave or the fox's hole –, can protect its inhabitants.¹

After a sequence of scenes shot in extreme slow motion, the title of the first part of the film is projected on the screen: "Part 1: Justine". In this part, the film deals with the wedding reception for Justine and Michael [Alexander Skarsgård]. There is a gradual withdrawal of Justine's mask of contentment from evening until dawn. After the end of the celebration, Justine abandons her husband and goes riding with her sister Claire.

In "Part 2: Claire", the film turns to the deteriorating psychological condition of Claire – married to John [Kiefer Sutherland] and mother of Leo [Cameron Spurr] – as the planet Melancholia and the Earth are getting closer. While provided with shelter by her sister and brother-in-law, Justine's recovery is surprising, in contrast to Claire's deteriorating mental condition. The division of the film into parts reminds us of the segmentation of texts, especially because von Trier has used this technique in the film *Antichrist*. This film is divided into six parts: Prologue; Chapter One: Grief; Chapter Two: Pain (Chaos Reigns); Chapter Three: Despair (Genocide); Chapter Four: The Three Beggars and Epilogue, driving this film even closer to the structure of a fictional text.

The scenes in extreme slow motion, also employed in *Antichrist*, suggest, at first sight, that we are looking at a picture or a photograph, gradually introducing the spectator into the film's atmosphere. Therefore, we have to adapt to very different rhythms from everyday life's. Moreover, this technique enhances the scene and builds up tension, anxiety and expectation. It also portrays the difficulty of the characters in going their own ways.

Two scenes from the beginning of the film are striking examples of this effect. One of them shows, from left to right, Justine, Leo and Claire on the mansion's immense lawn, at night, walking

¹ The abundance of wounded animals, distorted faces and mutilated members are striking features of *Antichrist*, and we will not analyze these elements in detail here.

slowly, distant from each other. In the sky, a star hovers. The movement of each character is so slow that we get the impression they are still. It is as if the spectator is looking at a photograph, were it not for the tail of Claire's dress swaying slowly in the wind. This scene somewhat anticipates the end of the film, when the same three characters sit together inside the magic cave while *Melancholia* and the Earth collide – the family members are separated in life and united in death. John, Leo's father, the only other character in the mansion, had committed suicide the day before the collision. The second scene is equally slow and one of the most shocking at the start of *Melancholia*. It shows Justine walking extremely slowly and with great difficulty, with tendrils and branches further restraining her movements (see Fig. 5).



Figure 5 – Justine restrained by the tendrils, filmed in extreme slow motion.
Available at: [Melancholia](#)>Google images. Access on: 11 ago. 2015.

This image refers to the photographs of Steven Meisel, cover photographer for Italy's *Vogue* since 1998. Human beings, particularly beautiful women, establish dialogues with a troubled outer nature, emblematic of a great inner trouble and suffering. Along with the use of slow motion, while von Trier brings us close to Meisel's photography, he intensifies the notion of human stagnation and unsuccessful struggle in people's lives. Time seems to be suspended

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as in photography. The extreme slow motion technique appears throughout the film, especially at times of great tension as in the end, when the collision between Melancholia and the Earth is imminent. Anguish and hopelessness reach its climax.

Other images of the film's opening appear as illustrations from books found in John and Claire's mansion. The reproduction of *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, take over the screen and is slowly consumed by fire, thus alluding to the two possible causes of the world's destruction suggested by Frost – fire and ice. As in this scene, allusion is often used in art to intensify the meaning of the artists' productions. In the words of Tiphaine Samouyault (2008):

A citação, a alusão, o plágio, a referência, todos inscrevem a presença de um texto anterior no texto atual. Essas práticas da intertextualidade dependem pois da co-presença entre dois ou vários textos, que absorvem mais ou menos o texto anterior em benefício de uma instalação da biblioteca no texto atual ou, eventualmente, de sua dissimulação. (p. 48)

[Quotation, allusion, plagiarism, reference, all of them inscribe the presence of a preceding text within the current text. These intertextuality practices depend, thus, on the co-presence between two or several texts, which more or less absorb the preceding text to allow the installation of the library within the present text or, eventually, its dissimulation. (Free translation)]

Brueghel's painting shows people having fun in the element of their own destruction – ice. If ice does not suffice, fire – an image created by CGI in the film – will take care of it. The same *motif* appears in the first part of the film, when Justine, in her growing indignation against her marriage, aggressively replaces the illustrations exhibited in one of the mansion's rooms with older ones of different appeal. The illustrations exhibited in the room are contemporary, geometrical in form, in different colors and combinations. Justine replaces them with the same painting of the opening of the film – *Hunters in the Snow*, by Brueghel –, *Ophelia*

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(1852), by John Everett Millais, and *David with the Head of Goliath* (c. 1610), by Caravaggio. Ophelia's painting had already inspired von Trier in his previous film, when the female character (unnamed, also played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) submits to a therapy session conducted by her husband. She lies on the grass, sinks into it and becomes a single element with it. In *Melancholia*, the illustrations chosen by Justine to replace the modern abstract painting have a point in common: they all allude to death, metaphorically or otherwise (see Fig. 6).

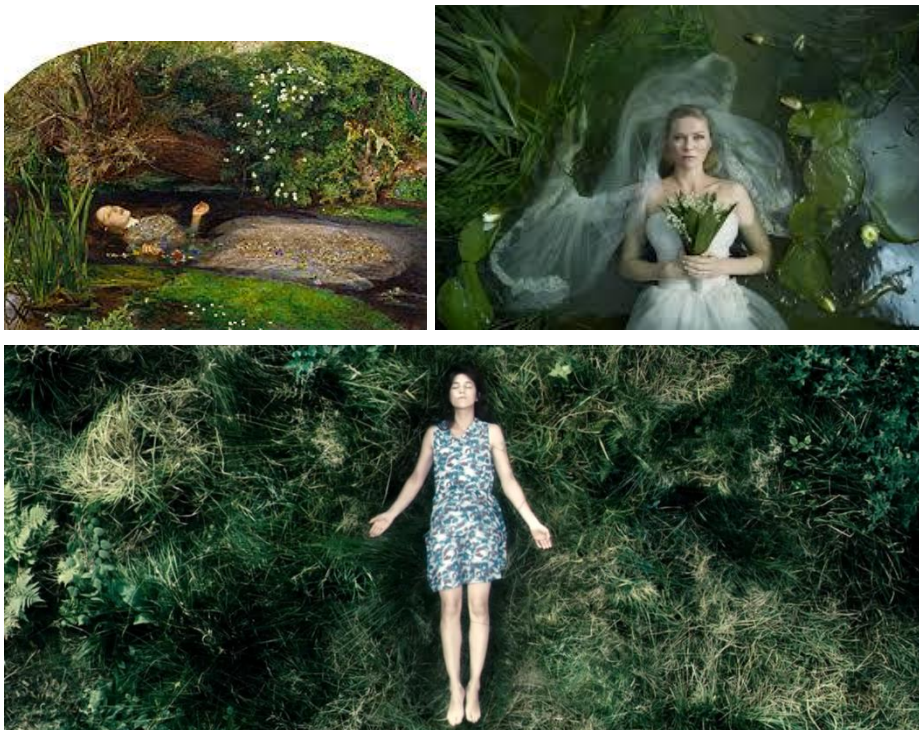


Figure 6 – Millais's *Ophelia* and von Trier's rereading of it in *Melancholia* (DVD cover) and *Antichrist*. Available at: [Melancholia](#)>Google images. Access on: 11 ago. 2015.

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Ophelia, a character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, commits suicide after her father's death and the rejection by Hamlet. David, in combat against the giant Goliath, wins the fight with the use of a slingshot, killing the giant and becoming a hero to the Israelites. The painting *Hunters in the Snow* literally and metaphorically alludes to death, as its own title and the earlier reference to it suggest. Ice and snow are associated with rigidity and death, as well the activity of the hunters. Illustrations come together to reinforce the film's theme: the destruction of the Earth and all living creatures, and, of equal importance, the characters' emotional reaction when they are confronted with imminent death.

The reproductions of paintings work as intermedial references aiming at the construction of meaning, according to Irina Rajewsky (2009). She states that an intermedial reference is an allusion made

in film to painting, or in painting to photography, and so forth. Intermedial references are thus to be understood *as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product's overall signification*: the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced ("individual reference"), or to refer to a specific medial subsystem (such as a certain film genre) or to another medium qua system (*Systemreferenz*, "system reference"). The given product thus constitutes itself partly or wholly in relation to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers. In this third category, as already in the case of media combination, intermediality designates a communicative-semiotic concept, but here it is by definition just one medium – the referencing medium (as opposed to the medium referred to) – that is materially present. (p. 54)

According to Walter Moser (2006), instances of mediatic interaction are endless. New forms of interaction appear with each artistic gesture. Among the many interactions one can work with, there is the interaction between word and image, that is, Brueghel's and Millais' paintings, Frost's poem and other creations about the end of the world, such as the film *Melancholia* itself. The artist is always searching for new ways to express his/her creativity. This process of

re-creation is, inevitably, different for each artist, and influenced by the historical moment and context. Moser (2006) also makes clear that, as one medium serves as a vehicle for another, interactions become possible even when they pertain to distant times or places, or to different languages or media.

Justine seems to be in tune with the approach of the planet Melancholia. In one of the nights she spends in the mansion, she bathes in the nude in the bluish light of the planet. According to the character, the world is evil, and its destruction, inevitable. To Claire, the proximity of death, and the approaching chaos in her organized and systematic world, ruled by schedules, planning, and rituals, destabilize her completely, leading her to a breakdown.

The chaotic universes, created by von Trier, relate to the controversial human nature, the dysfunctional family and the everlasting human anguish. In consonance with these ideas, the value of science is ridiculed, and the construction of a private universe reveals itself as useless. Along with the powerful telescope used to watch the trajectory of the planet Melancholia, John builds for his son a distance-measuring device – a small rod with an adjustable crooked wire circle attached to one extremity. Thus Leo, who is about nine years old, can know if the planet Melancholia is nearer or farther from the Earth. Just after finding out that John had committed suicide and that his body lies in the stable, Claire takes this gadget to observe the planet's proximity. When she uses it for the first time, she is relieved to see that the blue planet seems farther from the Earth, since the planet looks smaller than before. After a few hours, however, the device clearly indicates that Melancholia is getting closer. In fact, it is not the planet that is headed for the Earth, but, as Melancholia passes through the Earth's orbit, it attracts the Earth. After the second time she uses the gadget, Claire becomes desperate, since there is no doubt that the two planets are getting closer. The telescope, a more sophisticated instrument, is forgotten, and the simple rod with the crooked wire circle confirms a scientific fact: the imminent clash of the planets. This simple apparatus resembles the

pyramid of fear shown in *Antichrist*. Trying to help his wife, the male character draws a pyramid, which he divides into three parts. The upper part is supposed to represent his wife's greatest fear, which changes until it becomes the word "me", meaning that she is greatly afraid of herself. Although naive, this type of realization is valid, just as the rod with the wire circle. The female character in *Antichrist* has long planned the destruction of her son and, at the end of the film, the spectator realizes that the mother has prepared and watched all the steps that lead her son, who is only four years old, to his death.

At Eden – the hut built far from the city, in the middle of the woods –, in *Antichrist*, and at Claire and John's mansion – also far from any urban center – in *Melancholia*, the male character and Justine are portrayed respectively in images created by computer graphics. In one of the initial scenes of *Melancholia*, dead birds falling from the sky make up the background for Justine's melancholic face. In *Antichrist*, the noise of falling oak seeds disturbs the character's sleep and, later, we see him outdoors with the seeds falling around him. These two spaces – Eden and the mansion – are private universes built far from civilization. Bridges keep these universes apart from the rest of the world. In *Melancholia*, the horses refuse to cross the bridge, and, in spite of our awareness that there is a bridge to and from the mansion, the spectator is kept away from anything beyond their private world. In *Antichrist*, following their son's death, the parents return to Eden in an attempt to rehabilitate the mother. In the woman's imagination, she crosses the bridge in extreme slow motion, a technique that emphasizes the character's smallest movements. In the film's fictionalized reality, we see the mother running across the bridge until she reaches the vicinity of the hut, in an attempt to overcome the apparent fear and pain she experiences for her son's death or, should we say, for her own evil nature. For Cirlot (1984), the bridge is something

que é intermediário entre dois mundos separados. [...] Em inúmeros povos é a ponte que liga o sensível e o supra-sensível. Sem este significado místico, a ponte simboliza sempre a passagem de um

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estado para outro, a mudança ou o desejo de mudança. Como dissemos a passagem da ponte é a transição de um estado a outro, em diversos níveis (épocas da vida, estados do ser), mas a “outra margem”, por definição, é a morte. (p. 471)

[that stands between two separate worlds. [...] Among several peoples it is the bridge that connects the sensory and the supersensory. Apart from this mystical meaning, the bridge always symbolizes the passage from one state to the other, change, or the yearning for change. As we have mentioned, bridge crossing is the transition from one state to the other, at several different levels (stages of life, states of the self), but the “other margin” is, by definition, death.]

This return to the place where she had spent part of the preceding year with her son finally reveals that the mother not only had watched her son's death, but also had planned it. Properly trained to chase objects of desire, when he is at the window of their apartment in the city and drops his teddy bear, the boy plunges into death. In this place, ironically called Eden, set apart from civilization, the mother, who is involved in researching genocide in literature, ends up incorporating the evil with which she has wasted her life. It is also in Eden that she almost kills her husband, already wounded, who is hiding in the fox's hole, a supposedly safe retreat.

In *Melancholia*, as mentioned before, the horses refuse to cross the bridge, and the spectator does not see any character crossing it, even though we know they did. Claire and John's mansion, separated from the world by the bridge, however, is not safe from destruction (see Fig. 7). In *Melancholia*, there is no exit, no escape, except in the world of children's imagination. When the boy asks his aunt about the imminent disaster, Justine promises they will be safe if they build the magic cave.



Figure 7 – The moment the Earth and Melancholy clash.
Available at: Melancholia>Google images. Access on: 11 ago. 2015.

The fragility of the cave does not exist in the boy's imagination. Justine knows, however, that nothing will protect them from a catastrophic end, and she feels fine, as the song indicates. Refusing to take part in what Claire artificially thinks of as a celebration before the end of the world, Justine behaves with extreme verbal cruelty towards her sister. However, as the end approaches, Justine takes Claire, along with her nephew, into the magic cave. Justine's and Leo's serenity contrasts with Claire's hopelessness. Justine and Leo keep holding hands. Claire lets go of them and recoils in total despair. As Eleanora Rosset (2012) recalls, Lars von Trier, in an interview, says that he chose this way of telling the story because, as he sees it, the most important is not what happens but how it happens, both in the outer world as well as within people's inner world.

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