

Kleitia VasoAkademia Pomorska
Słupsk**TOO MUCH LOVE FOR THE WORLD: APOCALYPSE
IN THE WORKS OF T.S. ELIOT AND LARS VON TRIER****ZBYT DUŻO MIŁOŚCI DO ŚWIATA: APOKALIPSA
W DZIELACH T.S. ELIOTA I LARSA VON TRIERA**

Słowa kluczowe: apokalipsa, melancholia, literatura, kino, Eliot, von Trier, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Freud.

Key words: apocalypse, melancholia, literature, cinema, Eliot, von Trier, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Freud.

The joining of beginning and end, the way in which the commencement of one marks the onset of the other is, in a certain sense, the refrain of the *Four Quartets*. In *Burnt Norton*, the first section of the long poem, T.S. Eliot, elaborating on the concept of time as cyclical, writes that “the end precedes the beginning”¹, overturning the accepted notion of linear time and consecutive order. He explicitly superimposes the two by pinpointing that “The end is where we start from”². Fittingly, Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* begins with the end of the film which, coincidentally, is the end of the world. The film’s prologue presents images of the apocalypse, here caused by the collusion of the earth with a destructive planet called Melancholia. The images depicted in the prologue are later revisited in the unfolding of the plot which eventually leads back to the prologue. In the interview with the director entitled *Longing for the End of All*, von Trier explains to Nils Thorsen that beginning with the end focuses the viewer’s attention on “how the characters we follow react as the planet approaches earth”³, rather than on the actual plot. The gradual approach of the oncoming disaster intensifies the behavior of the characters which, in turn, illuminates human nature. For Justine, a character afflicted by depression, the approaching apocalypse will serve as a kind of awakening, or as Martin Scorsese phrases it in *The Wartime Quartets*, an elaboration

¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton.” Harcourt, 1943, <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/1-norton.htm> [dostęp 10.11.2017].

² Ibid.

³ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

on Eliot's Four Quartets, "a spiritual journey in which the awareness of death is a beginning"⁴. Indeed, it is death that jolts Justine out of her depression and makes her feel most alive.

One striking similarity between the works of Eliot and von Trier emerges in their presentation of women in the throes of nervous breakdowns, episodes inspired by the poet and filmmaker's own personal experiences. Regarding his protagonist, von Trier explicitly states that "Justine is very much me. She is based a lot on my person and my experiences with doomsday prophecies and depression"⁵. Referring to *The Waste Land*, in *The Life of the Poet*, James Olney suggests that the line "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept," is "sharply personal, alluding to Eliot's nervous breakdown and his treatment in Lausanne on Lac Leman"⁶. Indeed, *A Game of Chess* and the first part of *Melancholia* titled *Justine* share many visual details. The chair "like a burnished throne, / glowed on the marble"⁷, the "sevenbranched candelabra"⁸ in *A Game of Chess* find their echo in the opulence of the wedding taking place in the first part of the film. The wedding's beauty actually worried von Trier: "But the problem was that we had a magnificent castle in Sweden, and when you add a wedding with all the guests in gala and tux, it can hardly avoid becoming ... beautiful"⁹. In both cases, the dazzling veneer stands in strong contrast to the terror it unsuccessfully tries to conceal. The aristocratic surroundings do not relieve the misery of either woman. In *A Game of Chess*, despite the marble and the glitter, the first woman is falling apart as she waits for her lover: "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me"¹⁰. The same applies to Justine. Her wedding is "the most expensive wedding"¹¹, as its sponsor, her brother-in-law, John, bitterly states. Yet, despite its beauty, Justine grows increasingly unhappy. Not even midway through it, she tells her sister Claire or, rather, herself: "I have to pull myself together"¹². In a later conversation with Claire, she likens her state at the wedding to the sensation of "trudging through this gray, wooly yarn. It's clinging to my legs. It's really heavy to drag along"¹³. She feels imprisoned, condemned to go through motions against which her whole being revolts. Tellingly, both *A Game of Chess* and *Melancholia* explicitly refer to Hamlet's Ophelia, the figure symbolizing female "madness." Eliot closes the section with mad Ophelia's lines: "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good / night, good night"¹⁴, and the film's prologue concludes with an image of Justine wearing a bridal dress and drifting in water, a filmic reproduction of John Everett Millais' painting titled *Ophelia*.

Ophelia bestows upon both women the unmistakable stamp of madness. Yet, like her, their "insanity" is triggered by the outside world. The focus on appearances, suggest both poet and filmmaker, might be the very element which sets in motion the individual's undoing. There is a scene in *Melancholia* in which Justine's father, a silly older man, takes some very elegant cutlery and places it in his pocket. In order to entertain his dates, he asks for new

⁴ M. Scofield, *The Wartime Quartets*, Cambridge 1988, p. 221.

⁵ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

⁶ Ed. D. Moody, *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge 1994, p. 11.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land> [dostęp 10.11.2017].

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land> [dostęp 10.11.2017].

¹¹ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memfis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memfis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

¹⁴ W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html> [dostęp 30.11.2017].

forks, a gesture which recalls another one of Eliot's protagonists, J. Alfred Prufrock, an even paler and weaker version of Hamlet: "No, I am not Prince Hamlet!"¹⁵ he claims, only a mere advisor. The sad protagonist ponders the self-destructive parsimony of having "measured out my life with coffee spoons"¹⁶, the lack of daring to "disturb the universe"¹⁷, "before the taking of a toast and tea"¹⁸. As he reflects on these existential questions, his life has slipped away in salons where "women come and go / talking of Michelangelo"¹⁹. The line's repetition, placed in between Prufrock's more profound concerns, highlights the silliness and empty chatter that make up a large portion of life. The same silliness takes place in *Melancholia*. The wedding is segmented by a number of formalities which render absurd its continuation while the bride, Justine, is clearly coming undone. The guessing of the number of marbles in a jar, the cutting of the cake, only highlight Justine's internal crumbling. As she shows the first signs of her unraveling, her sister Claire insists on Justine pulling herself together. "We agreed you won't make any scenes. We don't want any scenes"²⁰, she tells her. Justine's growing unhappiness and drowning lethargy is caused precisely by this insistence on keeping up appearances. "I should be happy"²¹, she tells John, with a submissive, defeated look on her face. Before she enters the hall, after her naps and baths mid-wedding, she practices her smile, preparing "a face to meet the faces that you meet"²². "I smile and smile and smile"²³. she tells Claire exhausted, tired by the unsuccessful efforts at maintaining a façade.

If her wedding is so undesirable to Justine, why does she decide to get married? Von Trier claims that Justine, "is very much me"²⁴ while her sister, Claire "is supposed to be a normal person"²⁵. In her last desperate effort to become Claire, i.e. a normal person, and "to end all the silliness, anxiety and doubt"²⁶, Justine initially throws herself completely into her wedding. The wedding represents her last chance at a semblance of normalcy. Yet, by the end of the first part of the film, Justine ruins things by having intercourse with one of the guests. At the beginning of the second part, entitled *Claire*, she has fully surrendered to her depression, her melancholia. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud defines such a state as "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment"²⁷. The symptoms which Freud enumerates as constituents of melancholia perfectly correspond to Justine's condition. Indeed, in the first scenes of the film's second part, she has to begin from ground zero. She cannot perform the simple actions

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock> [dostęp 25.11.2017].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock> [dostęp 25.11.2017].

²¹ Ibid.

²² T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock> [dostęp 25.11.2017].

²³ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memphis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

²⁴ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ S.Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, http://www.arch.mcgill.ca/prof/bressani/arch653/winter2010/Freud_Mourningandmelancholia.pdf [dostęp 01.12.2017].

of taking a bath or eating. She attempts to eat meatloaf but cries, only saying that “it tastes like ash”²⁸. She has lost her appetite for everything. Did she ever desire anything?

Yes, she desires the planet. Throughout the wedding, while Justine can barely feign any interest in her husband-to-be and guests, she comes alive when she looks at the sky. During her wedding, in a very telling scene, Justine leaves her wedding, the castle, and drives a golf cart to the middle of a field. She carelessly lifts her bridal dress, tearing it, and relieves herself while looking at the sky. In yet another, even clearer example of desire, Justine, leaves her sister’s house, walks outside, lies naked and is visibly aroused while looking at the sky. She literally wants the planet, the sky, heaven, Eliot’s “heaven and damnation / which flesh cannot endure”²⁹. Her longing for the sky indicates her desire for “another intensity / for a further union / a deeper communion / through the dark cold and the empty desolation”³⁰. She attempts the official communion – marriage – but that proves unsuccessful. She has intercourse with a stranger in a last attempt to feel something but nothing works. Only when looking at the planet she is calm and free, free “from temporal enchainments”³¹, a phrase that Kenneth Paul Kramer uses in *Redeeming Time: T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets* to evoke the state of the poet during the rare moments of grace. During these “timeless moments”, the “poet discovers that spiritual substance cannot be found fully in the totality of his experiences. Rather, it emerges from unsought, unforeseen moments of redeeming reciprocity (divine-human mutual contact) that interrupt time briefly in places entered by chance...”³². The divine-human relationship assumes a literal form in *Melancholia*. And, although it may seem one-sided, it is not. The planet is approaching earth and will eventually collide with it, resulting in Lars von Trier’s version of a “happy ending”³³, a term he uses humorously to refer to his film.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this spiritual inclination which causes Justine her great unhappiness at her wedding and her inability to function. For her, the real communion is not holy matrimony but a holier, more profound one. In the interview *Longing for the End of All*, von Trier clarifies the cause of his heroine’s unhappiness. Justine, he states, “longs for pathos and drama”³⁴. She does not believe in rituals. During the wedding, the director suggests she wonders whether “it’s all worth it. A wedding, after all, is a ritual. But is there something beyond the ritual at all? There isn’t. Not to her. It’s a great shame that we melancholiacs don’t value rituals...Perhaps because we melancholiacs set the stakes higher than just a few beers and some music...It seems so phony”³⁵. She is similar to Joe, another one of von Trier’s heroines who claims that “perhaps the only difference between me and other people was that I’ve always demanded more from the sunset; more spectacular colors when the sun hit the horizon”³⁶. Thusly, Prufrock’s ritual of “toast and tea”³⁷ cannot fully involve Justine. She sees

²⁸ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memphis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

²⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton.”, <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/2-coker.htm> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “East Coker.”, <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/2-coker.htm> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

³¹ K.P. Kramer, *Redeeming Time: T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets*, Michigan 2007, p. XIII.

³² Ibid.

³³ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ L. von Trier, *Nymphomaniac*, Zentropa, 2013.

³⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock> [dostęp 25.11.2017].

beyond empty rituals. Like Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, Justine is a seer. “I know things”³⁸, she tells Claire and proceeds to provide the number of the beans in a jar, a guessing game for the wedding guests. The nickname her nephew uses for her, Aunt Steelbreaker, also suggests the possession of a higher, inexplicable power. She sees the end just as Eliot suggests in the Notes to *The Waste Land* that “what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem”³⁹. “I Tiresias have foresuffered all”, the prophet claims⁴⁰. What he sees approaches what Justine sees, the both figurative and real end, the “unreal city”⁴¹, the spiritually dead waste land. In *The Waste Land: A Critical Study*, Vikramaditya Rai writes that Tiresias is “the enlightened ghost of the race watching the depressing spectacle of modern humanity which has fallen from the ancient heights and forgotten the old values and sanctities. But he is ... the conscience of humanity”⁴². Justine serves the same role.

What Justine sees, namely the end, revives her. Firstly, she thinks the end is deserved: “The Earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it... All I know is that life on earth is evil”⁴³. Differing from Freud’s definition of melancholiacs as self-reviling, Justine does not blame herself for her unhappiness but the world. “When you are longing for shipwrecks and sudden death, it must be because it seems more real than this phony world?”⁴⁴ is a question that Thorsen poses von Trier, a question to which the director answers with a resounding yes. The discrepancy between reality and what could be creates the chasm which renders Justine miserable. “Her longings are too great. Her hankering for truth is too colossal. I think that goes for melancholiacs in general. We have high demands on truth”⁴⁵. The paradoxical truth of melancholia stemming from too strong of interest in the world, rather than a disinterest in it is very clear in Walter Benjamin’s description of Charles Baudelaire. Addressing Baudelaire’s spleen, one synonym of melancholia, Benjamin claims that “first and foremost, it is that fatally foundering doomed flight toward the ideal, which ultimately – with the despairing cry of Icarus – comes crashing down into the ocean of its own melancholy”⁴⁶. It is precisely the aiming for too high that enables the fall. “The way upward and the way downward is one and the same”⁴⁷, states the epigraph to the *Four Quartets* supplied by Heraclitus, illuminating both Eliot’s merging of end and beginning, climb and fall. In his poem *The Voyage*, Baudelaire unequivocally expresses the disappointment of one whose great expectations of the world have led to disappointment and dejection after experiencing it: “O Death, old captain, the time has come!... This land bores us, O Death! The fire searing our brain is such that we want / to plunge to the bottom of the abyss, whether it be / Heaven or Hell”⁴⁸. Baudelaire sings the battle cry and Justine follows in his footsteps. Any extreme is better than the humdrum of a regular life. The desire is for depth – an abyss – regardless of its positive or negative contents.

³⁸ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memphis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

³⁹ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and other poems*, London 1990, p.45.

⁴⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land> [dostęp 10.11.2017].

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² V. Rai, *The Waste Land: A Critical Study*, New Dehli 1965, p. 76.

⁴³ L. von Trier, *Melancholia*, Memphis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

⁴⁴ N. Thorsen, *Longing for the end of all*, <http://www.melancholiathemovie.com/> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ W. Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, Massachusetts, 2006, p. 29.

⁴⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/2-coker.htm> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

⁴⁸ C. Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil and Other Works*, New York 1963, p. 103.

Ultimately, more than depression, the planet Melancholia represents the nearness of death, the knowledge of which is ignored by mostly everyone in the film, except Justine. Unable to confront the truth of everyone's approaching death, John, with a scientist's obsessive desire for control, takes his own life before the planet can claim it. In *East Coker*, Eliot confirms that no one can escape death, regardless of name or status: "They all go into the dark,/ The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant, /The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters"⁴⁹. Justine knows that death is there waiting. Unlike Claire, she knows that waiting for it "while drinking wine and listening to a symphony"⁵⁰ would just be "a distraction from distraction by distraction"⁵¹. Only acceptance, recognizing and coming to peace with the finality of time can lead towards treating life with the seriousness it deserves. This conclusion is what leads Slavoj Žižek to categorize *Melancholia* as an ultimately optimistic movie. "I find something beautifully poetical in the attitude of the main person, Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst, this inner peace, how she accepts this"⁵², Žižek writes. Justine accepts it because fundamentally she is repelled by her and everybody's partial or, rather, superficial engagement with life until that point. "If you really want to do something good for society, if you want to avoid all totalitarian threats and so on, you basically should go... we should all go to this, let me call it--although I'm a total materialist--fundamentally spiritual experience of accepting that at some day everything will finish, that at any point the end may be near. I think that, quite on the contrary of what may appear, this can be a deep experience which pushes you to strengthen ethical activity"⁵³, Žižek continues, emphasizing the idea that the awareness of the nearness of the end, the knowledge of this fact, heightens the intensity of one's engagement with life. Indeed, it is the apex of suffering, the approaching end which manages to bring closer the two sisters. Facing annihilation, the sisters "have been two and they become one"⁵⁴, says von Trier. The one moment approaching true happiness might be this one, the very end, where freed from running and avoidance, joined by suffering and truth, the sisters and the little boy stand as one.

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⁴⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "East Coker.", <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/2-coker.htm> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

⁵⁰ L. von Trier. *Melancholia*. Memfis Film Intl., Zentropa, 2011.

⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton.", <http://www.davidgorman.com/4Quartets/2-coker.htm> [dostęp 20.11.2017].

⁵² M. Erickson, *The Optimism of Melancholia*. *Big Think*, 2017, <http://bigthink.com/postcards-from-zizek/the-most-anticipated-movie-of-the-summer-according-to-slavoj-zizek> [dostęp 01.12.2017].

⁵³ Ibid.

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Streszczenie

W *Melancholii* Larsa Von Triera Justine, przygnębiona bohaterka filmu, z niecierpliwością oczekuje zniszczenia świata, uznając to za stosowny cel dla siebie i całej nędznej rasy ludzkiej. Film skupia się na apokalipsie, która w końcu jest, i jest piękna. „Na początku jestem moim końcem, moim końcem jest mój początek”, pisze T.S. Eliot w *Four Quartets*, choć Von Trier nie obiecuje lepszego świata. Zarówno filmowiec, jak i poeta przeplatają osobisty koniec, dosłowny lub figuratywny, z masowym zniszczeniem. Jednak w filmie cel jest pożądanym, a dzięki Justine reżyser sugeruje, że takie pragnienie może wynikać raczej z głębokiej miłości niż odwrotnie. Ta sugestia przypomina opis Waltera Benjamina Charlesa Baudelaire’a jako nowoczesnej melancholii. „Melancholia nie patrzy na ideał”. To sprzeczne z intuicją pochodzenie chęci zniszczenia i płynne przeplatanie się osobistej i globalnej apokalipsy w *Melancholii*, a także w kilku wierszach Eliota, były przedmiotem mojej pracy.

Summary

In Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*, Justine, the film's depressed protagonist, eagerly awaits the world's destruction, deeming it a fitting end for herself and the entire miserable human race. The film focuses on the anticipation of the oncoming apocalypse which, in turn, is visually and verbally expressed in beautiful terms and images, implying that, even in the end, there is beauty. "In my beginning is my end, / in my end is my beginning," writes T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* and while Von Trier does not promise a better world emerging from the ashes of the old one, he does suggest that, regardless of the consequences, the end represents a necessity when life has turned into a senseless and tiring series of farces; the superficial actions lacking content, a phenomenon that Eliot so often sympathetically derides in his poetry. Both filmmaker and poet interweave the personal end, literal or figurative, with destruction *en masse*. Yet, in the film, the end is desired and, through Justine, the director suggests that such a desire may stem from a too profound love rather than the opposite. This suggestion echoes Walter Benjamin's description of Charles Baudelaire as a modern melancholiac whose melancholy results not from a refusal of the world but a "doomed flight toward the ideal." This counterintuitive origin of the desire for destruction and the seamless interweaving of the personal and global apocalypse in *Melancholia* as well as in several of Eliot's poems will be the focus of my paper.

Biography

Kleitia Vaso has graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (2004) and a Master of Arts (2009) in Comparative Literature from the University of Georgia, the United States. In 2010 she returned from the United States to Tirana, Albania where, for five years, she taught English and Academic Writing at Polis University. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in Literature at the Pomeranian University in Słupsk, Poland. She published a bilingual collection of essays entitled *Fluturim/Flight* in 2017.

Biografia

Kleitia Vaso ukończyła Bachelor of Arts (2004) i Master of Arts (2009) w dziedzinie literatury porównawczej na University of Georgia w Stanach Zjednoczonych. W 2010 roku wróciła ze Stanów Zjednoczonych do Tirany w Albanii, gdzie przez pięć lat uczyła angielskiego i pisania akademickiego na Uniwersytecie Polis. Obecnie jest doktorantką literatury na Pomorskim Uniwersytecie w Słupsku. Opublikowała dwujęzyczną kolekcję esejów zatytułowaną *Fluturim/Flight* w 2017 roku.

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