

This paper is part of a larger project I am working on, on re-enchantment and melancholia in contemporary narratives. In it, I will focus mainly on two films as emblematic of recent approaches to religion in the global north, particularly in northwest Europe.

In order to look at the mechanism, the grammar of re-enchantment in these contemporary narratives, we need, first, to engage with the idea of disenchantment which has served as a hermeneutical tool to understand society and the arts in the last two centuries\*. And now you'll have to excuse my German:

Jener große religionsgeschichtliche Prozeß der Entzauberung der Welt, welcher mit der altjüdischen Prophetie einsetzte und, im Verein mit dem hellenischen wissenschaftlichen Denken, alle magischen Mittel der Heilssuche als Aberglaube und Frevel verwarf, fand hier seinen Abschluß. Der echte Puritaner verwarf ja sogar jede Spur von religiösen Zeremonien am Grabe und begrub die ihm Nächststehenden sang- und klanglos, um nur ja keinerlei »superstition«: kein Vertrauen auf Heilswirkungen magisch - sakramentaler Art, aufkommen zu lassen. Es gab nicht nur kein magisches, sondern überhaupt kein Mittel, die Gnade Gottes dem zuzuwenden, dem Gott sie zu versagen sich entschlossen hatte.<sup>1</sup>

In Weber's understanding, the Judeo-Christian – and we could add Islam here- religion itself has been the primary agent of disenchanting the world, by gathering all the magic in one entity, and then Man, with his industrial revolution and veneration of science has abolished magic from the world altogether. Art, in many ways, has tried to take the place of magic both as totem and experience- and this is reflected both in the poetics and the content of Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. The two films, one dealing with an enchanted past and a disenchanted future, form a neatly hermetic, or even hermetically sealed whole when it comes to the place of magic, the transcendent, the metaphysical in human experience. We start off with a physical cave whose entry was sealed due to an earthquake in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, and end with a 'magical cave' that humans will flee into when world faces the final cataclysm. Both deal with cosmology, anthropology and eschatology and offer ways in which contemporary humans come to terms with such questions. Both use atmospheric music with grand sweeping vistas, as acts become more and more symbolic, and the medium of cinema evolves into the medium of opera.

*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, made in 2010, is about the paintings in the Chauvet cave in the Ardeche region of France.<sup>2</sup> What is interesting about these paintings is that more than other cave paintings one may be familiar with, they try to imitate motion, with superimposed layers of drawing. As such, as Herzog's inimitable narrating voice informs us, they are a kind of

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<sup>1</sup> That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world<sup>19</sup> which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion. The genuine Puritan even rejected all signs of religious ceremony at the grave and buried his nearest and dearest without song or ritual in order that no superstition, no trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation, should creep in.<sup>20</sup> There was not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatever. <sup>1</sup> (61-62) <http://www.s-hb.de/~klaus.boenkost/pdf-docs/Weber-Protestantische-Ethik.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> A model has been made of it. Speak of the reproducibility of the work of art, Benjamin

proto-cinema. Herzog's voice-over makes us more readily suggestible to connections and deeper meanings, Herzog's persona and voice become part of the process of both the psychoanalysis and re-enchantment this film makes happen. A re-enchantment that gives life to the cave paintings, that reanimates them.

[Slide 2, 3]

Imagining our ancestors as interested in the moving image as we are creates a sense of immediate connection, a communion, on which the whole narrative rests on. Through this documentary, we somehow connect to the ice age man, as they themselves were trying to connect to generations to come, to us – according to one theory forwarded by one of the scientists interviewed. Herzog's film brings us dreams of thousands years ago, the traces of which may or not have remained with us through the intervening generations. We are now all lying on Herzog's couch, trying to remember these forgotten images, trying to put ourselves in the shoes of the primitive to interpret the signs, the paintings, to understand what life for our ancestors might have been like. In many ways, both the work of the cave conservators and the work of the film, become a kind of a humanist religion that is not far away from ancestor worship. We look at these paintings and say, humans like us thousands of years ago have made them so they must have a meaning. Moreover, they are European humans, just like you and I, who have done this, so they have even more special meaning to you and me.

Caves have always been potent symbols, almost in all cultures, including the Islamic one: Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation in a cave near Mecca. The more immediate reference here, though, is to Plato's allegory of the cave, people being deceived by the very images they create with the help of light and shadow, exactly as Herzog is doing in the film.<sup>3</sup> There are several minutes when Herzog plays with the lighting and the angle to give us different perceptions of the cave paintings, making them seem more alive, more in motion, just as their Makers seem to have intended them to be.

[SLIDE 4]

In many ways, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is about the 'correct' or 'meaningful' way in which we are supposed to engage with the cave and the paintings. We are told that the Lauscaux Caves that were found in the 40s again in France had been open to the public and the very presence of humans, the breath, had carried germs which then destroyed the paintings. Accordingly the French authorities are now very careful about who enters the Chauvet cave, and Herzog tells us that they have been given unprecedented access, for a short period of time to film. As such archeologists and filmmakers become the high priests that can have access and interpret the paintings- and not being prophets even their access is limited: they wear jumpsuits and helmets, almost ritualistic robes, walk on a specially placed wooden plank in order not to disturb the calcite, and at no point touch the walls or the paintings themselves- .. in any case, they have access to the cave, to the temple, in fact, the very sacred space of the *sekineh*, to interpret the wall paintings, the scripture, or the Presence, if you will.

[SLIDE 5] video

One should bear in mind that this pilgrimage inside the cave happens to a soundtrack of (Christian? Ernst reijseger) choral music, and we, as the audience, perceive it as an 'experience' of the scientists and the film makers and soon enough, the more suggestible of us, including myself, feel a part of this experience, this communion with the past.

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<sup>3</sup> also cave, Rheingold, Valkyries

The religion preached here is a very humanist one bordering on, as I suggested earlier, ancestor worship, and the annunciation comes when the lead scientist, the arch priest, tells the film crew to stop for a minute and listen to the cave. What we hear is the calcite, which has formed incredible shapes through thousands of years, dripping- thus we hear TIME itself, the making of the world, as we shall hear and see the unmaking of the world in *Melancholia*. However, the archpriest/archeologist in the cave draws our attention to something. 'If we listen, we can hear our own heartbeats'. Thus, this experience, which is presented to us by Herzog as a religious one with the accompanying music, is the kind of religion that does not transcend: it is one that folds back on Man himself, and at the moment of epiphany, revelation, all we can hear to hope is the sound of our own hearts.

When Herzog speaks to the archeologists and historians to get a better sense of the kind of human that produced those paintings, they make references to an animist past, where humans did not see themselves as dissociated from nature, plants and animals as they do today. While the fact that the animals painted have so much vigour and facial expression may surprise the viewer, it is in keeping with 'pre-historic' man's world view. These paintings are in turn described as ritualistic- there's an altar elsewhere in the cave- and as a conscious record of the period- one of the scientists seems to suggest that they wanted to leave these 'marks' for future generations. This approach seems to suggest when we try to commune with our ancestors, we're not trying to get in touch with an indifferent, unresponsive being(s), but with a consciousness that is/was expecting just such an interaction. There is an uncanniness to the way the animals have been depicted, *because* they are so life like, ready to jump at us from the walls. And as Freud will tell you, there is a very strong link between the uncanny and animism:

Die Analyse der Fälle des Unheimlichen hat uns zur alten Weltauffassung des Animismus zurückgeführt, die ausgezeichnet war durch die Erfüllung der Welt mit Menschengestalten, durch die narzißtische Überschätzung der eigenen seelischen Vorgänge, die Allmacht der Gedanken und die darauf aufgebaute Technik der Magie, die Zuteilung von sorgfältig abgestuften Zauberkraften an fremde Personen und Dinge (Mana), sowie durch alle die Schöpfungen, mit denen sich der uneingeschränkte Narzißmus jener Entwicklungsperiode gegen den unverkennbaren Einspruch der Realität zur Wehre setzte. Es scheint, daß wir alle in unserer individuellen Entwicklung eine diesem Animismus der Primitiven entsprechende Phase durchgemacht haben, daß sie bei keinem von uns abgelaufen ist, ohne noch äußerungsfähige Reste und Spuren zu hinterlassen, und daß alles, was uns heute als »unheimlich« erscheint, die Bedingung erfüllt, daß es an diese Reste animistischer Seelentätigkeit rührt und sie zur Äußerung anregt<sup>4</sup>

Freud lays his finger on the narcissistic overestimation of one's own precedents, this will to worship ancestors. This worship of ancestors, and its distasteful narcissism is also reflected in one of the crucial scenes in *Melancholia*. One of the imaging people in the project says that

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<sup>4</sup> Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings, and by the narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes (such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, the magical practices based upon this belief, the carefully proportioned distribution of magical powers or "mana" among various outside persons and things), as well as by all those other figments of the imagination with which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to withstand the inexorable laws of reality. It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be re-activated, and that everything which now strikes us as "uncanny" fulfils the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression

after he started working on the paintings, trying to understand the layers and how they work, he started having dreams of the animals that were in the paintings. So, Herzog's analytical couch is yielding results. For him, entry into the cave induced not only the experience of communion but also dreams to haunt him in his sleep.<sup>5</sup> He also connects his work to the way cave paintings are taken care of in Australia by the aborigines. He says that when an aborigine sees that one of their ancestral paintings are deteriorating, they touch it up, (ihya vs. conservation) and when asked why they violate the integrity of the painting, they answer that it is not them who is painting, but that they are possessed by the spirit of their ancestors to do it- it is a collective rather than an individual understanding of art. Art, then, is necessarily a palimpsest. The obsession with the individual producing the artwork is also highlighted when the scientists talk about the red palm traces on a wall, and they are elated to find that all the palms belong to a particular human being with a crooked little finger- a proto form of signature, they say. When Europeans want to venerate the paintings, or indeed any other cultural artifact, they isolate them in museums, whereas this aboriginal anecdote prove there are other ways to engage with the past and its ghosts. Herzog thus questions our practices of museumization and the film helps us explore the relationship between art, ritual and experience. It is also a lesson in looking, the camera lingers on the paintings through modulating music and light, and forces us to see, re-see, and change our angle. In fact, it trains in such a way that when we have looked enough at the faces of the lion, it is not difficult to see the lions in the scientist's face. The film makes this transference possible, in line with Freud saying that this animism remains in us.

Lars von Trier's attempt at meaning making, his film *Melancholia*, starts immediately with news of this apocalypse: we see a smaller, round, heavenly body hit the earth, to the tune of Wagner. So the operatic turn is here. The film opens with 'highlights' from the story we are about to watch, and this forewarning only heightens the sense of doom when we encounter those scenes in the narrative.

The film tells the story of a wedding ceremony, somewhere possibly on the East Coast as a planet called Melancholia comes too close to the earth for comfort. The wedding collapses, and the next day we see three characters, the runaway bride Justine, Justine's sister Claire, and Claire's husband John react to this imminent encounter. [Tristan and Isolde]  
[Show sequence 6] 0:40- 2:20 6:30-end

Because of the opening sequence, we as viewers already have a sense of doom, Trier thus places us in the position of the omniscient watcher. The narrative itself starts with a scene of a long limousine trying to go round a bend in the road. We see that the limousine contains a wedding couple, who first find the situation funny, but then have to walk to the wedding venue, where very anxious wedding organizers and relatives are waiting. From the scene of the world being, in a way, pollinated by another planet, we seem to have entered a grammar conception, birth and death. Here, the limousine with the couple looks like a fertilized egg getting stuck in the fallopian tube.

[Slide 7]

*Melancholia* has been a running theme in European literature, a humour, *black bile*, that could be the symptom and the result of several predicaments. In his hefty and influential 1621 book entitled *Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton explores almost all of the causes with references to the Greek classics and the Bible, and devotes his last chapter to what he calls 'Religious Melancholia' which can take several forms, but he starts off with the following, with emphasis on teleology:

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<sup>5</sup> close and distant reading, we need to get out of the cave to understand

Some seem to be inspired of the Holy Ghost, some take upon them to be prophets, some are addicted to new opinions, some foretell strange things, *de statu mundi et Antichristi*, saith Gordonius. Some will prophesy of the end of the world to a day almost, and the fall of the Antichrist, as they have been addicted or brought up; for so melancholy works with them, as [6306]Laurentius holds. (312)

From the beginning, with her uncanny, automaton smile, Justine is represented as a prophetic figure in *Melancholia*, corresponding to the description of those who experience 'religious melancholia'. We often see her looking up at the sky and when she arrives at the wedding venue, she guesses the number of beans there are in a vase, a device for a lottery for the wedding guest. When the wedding planner is astonished that she can guess the right number, she is quite deadpan: 'I know things!'

When both the moon and the approaching planet are visible in the night sky, Justine leaves the wedding party to commune with them, heightening the sense that she is somehow in connection with them. There are protracted shots of the garden which has been landscaped in perfect perspective like in a Renaissance painting. It's an uncanny sight/site, firstly because it is a replica of the gardens we have seen in renaissance paintings, and also because there are two different 'moons' in the sky, the shadows are all wrong.

[Slide 8]

In her bridal dress Justine becomes a symbol of femininity that has an organic bond with the lunar cycle. Here, von Trier is picking up the theme of women being more in touch with nature, women being a conduit through which nature speaks to men from his 2009 film *Antichrist*. It is also worth noting here that in Herzog's cave, the only human form depicted is the lower half of a woman's body— and this takes on more significance when we go along with the suggestion that the cave was a site of religious ritual. In *Melancholia* Man's hubris, and women as natural carriers of anxiety is reimagined. Justine's feminine anxiety is paired with wisdom is contrasted to John's trust in astronomy, his telescope, and that the planet *Melancholia* will come very close but not crash into it. John of the Book of Revelation, Apocalypse of John, John as the prophet who cannot bear the burden of the message and commits suicide.

That the world is ripe for destruction, that humanity has lost direction and has prepared itself for the wrath of God is signaled in the profession of Justine, the sort of professional activity one would have to engage in to be able to possess the sort of 'country seat' that the wedding is celebrated at. She works for an advertising company that, in the words of Justine, produces lies that encourage young girls to buy 'subpar products'. One of the images shown as celebration of Justine's work is that of models who look like they've been strewn on the floor. Von Trier doesn't give an exact account of how Justine got alienated from her job and attained her new powers, but we are given to understand that *Melancholia* has chosen her as an interlocutor. When her sister tells her to calm down she goes into the library. She replaces the modernist paintings on display with Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* and *Ophelia* by Millais. The Breughel scene is reenacted when Claire tries to get back home with her son in her arms, as the earth turns into mush, and her steps become just as heavy as if she were walking in snow. It is also a cinematic reference to Tarkovsky's *Solaris* in which it is extensively used. Justine also has a vision of herself floating in the river, just like *Ophelia*. And thus Justine, knowing what will happen, makes art the oracle that many people have been taking it for. We'd do well to remember, however, these are all paintings painted before the ultimate disenchantment of the world, in the Weberian sense.

Justine seems to be functioning in a metaphysical world that is no longer Christian. When the groom gives Justine the photograph of an apple orchard he's bought for her as a token of his

love, Justine's face makes it clear that she has no use for earthly things anymore, particularly not for the garden of paradise that Man has been expelled from.

After the failed marriage ritual, the second part of the film deals more directly with the approaching of Melancholia. The several dysfunctional humans Herzog has introduced us to suggest that religious Melancholia and disenchantment of the world, has already hit the planet some time ago. We see Claire fret about the approaching planet as pessimist internet is full of news of how it will actually hit the world. John clearly despises and chastises Claire for giving unscientific rumours such credit and forces her to enjoy this 'once in a generation' opportunity to observe the planet and more importantly, to observe how precise scientists have been in their calculations.

[slide 9]

But we the viewers know that all is not well when a horse named Abraham refuses to cross a bridge that seems to mark the boundaries of the estate. The day of reckoning has come and everybody will be counted in their own homes.

Leon, the nephew has made a loop out of wire to observe the approaching planet, and again, we are given a lesson in seeing. Trier is pretty harsh on people who put their trust in science- when his god fails, John goes and commits suicide among the horses. Claire's flight is different from John's- primarily because she is a mother- and her first instinct is to save Leon rather than flee. Her futile attempts to get beyond the circumference of their estate are all thwarted, and turns back home which is by now uncanny, without the usual sense of homeliness. She still tries to bring some kind of enlightened order to the situation and wants the end of the world to somehow conform with her idea of ritual. 'I want us to be together when it happens' she says to Justine and is met with pure contempt. This neat, curated death that tries to celebrate human achievement. To meet even death with the hygiene of a business meeting, a professional cocktail environment; in short with the protestant work ethic.

**Justine:** You want to

meet on the terrace, and sip wine, the three of us?

**Claire:** It would make me happy.

**Justine:** Do you know what I think of your plan?

**Claire:** No. I was hoping that you might like it.

**Justine:** I think it's a piece of shit.

**Claire:** Please, Justine. I just want it to be nice...

**Justine:** Nice? Why don't we meet on the fucking toilet?

**Claire:** Fine, then - let's not...

**Justine:** You're damn right let's not!

**Claire:** I really hate you sometimes...

However much she may disdain her sister, Justine has a soft spot for her nephew, and she starts to build 'a magic cave' for him as she has promised earlier in the film. She promises, also, that nothing can harm him as long as they are in that magic cave. Just as the 'primitive' tool that Leon had made told them the earth was going to be hit, just such another 'primitive' safe space will see them through to the other side, whatever that other side may be. In the absence of the cave, a metaphorical one needs to be built, and this can only be possible through the use of magic, by re-enchanting 'material'. When that last moment comes, it is not human accomplishments that will give us comfort, but the belief that there are powers at work that we can't control, something that transcends. And so

Justine puts up the poles of a tepee, Native American style, and invites her sister and nephew inside. Then we see the glaring, judging eye of the planet, maybe of God, tearing the blue sky.

If we treat the two films as a whole, they give us a survey of the ways in which humans have interacted with art and God. Herzog's film suggests a collective sense of art that carries on human endeavor to the next generations to be transformed by them, both in form and meaning- and so I take the two films together, like the palimpsest of human drawings and bear scratching on the walls of Chauvet cave, or the palimpsest that Justine makes use of in her sister's library, that contains copies of European art, from the classical to the modern. Herzog wants us to remind of our history in the cave and all its associations and von Trier seems to respond to that by saying that we need somehow to cling on to the dream and the magic we forgot, as they will come to our help in our last hour of need, or that when stripped of all hope, the cave, with all its prophetic, philosophical and artistic association is what we will regress to. Both films offer us moments to reflect on the intersection of art and spiritual experience. God haunts both films [Nietzsche] in the way we hear the dripping of time in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, and the way *Melancholia* represents God's judging eye come to exact judgement.

*Cave of Forgotten dreams* finishes with a sequence of albino alligators that live not too far away from the Chauvet cave, in the biosphere created by the hot waters produced in a nuclear plant. What would these already mutant alligators make of those cave paintings when they evolve even more, say, with the help of a possible nuclear explosion? Or indeed, when the planet in *Melancholia* hits us? What consciousness will inherit the earth in the future, and what will they make of not only us, but also our meaning making, and meaning explaining processes? And thus, although the film may have opened with conjectures about the past, it directs its hermeneutic lense to the future, to imagine a cataclysm, an apocalypse, that may spell the end of humanity but may be open up space for a new beings, consciousness or presence.