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The Moving Image and the Time of Prophecy: Trauma and Precognition in L. Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and D. Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016)

Abstract

Both the deferred recurrence of post-traumatic symptoms and the foresight granted by prophetic vision bring about a disruption of temporality and generate a chronological discontinuity which is often formally rendered as narrative discontinuity. This similarity produces an interpretive ambiguity that is central to the films, *Melancholia* (2011) by Von Trier and *Arrival* (2016) by Denis Villeneuve. Both movies begin by hinting at the post-traumatic origin of visions and then gradually shift towards a prophetic explanation. In addressing these two case studies, this article approaches prophecy and its temporality from a narratological perspective, integrating the critical parameters of trauma-theory with the contribution of Agamben's concept of "Messianic time" and of Mahayana Buddhism.

Keywords

prophecy, trauma, film, time, Christian eschatology, Mahayana Buddhism

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Even when personal beliefs allow little space for the supernatural, the uncertainty regarding the origin of vision - godsent prophecy, demonic deception or human hallucination - undoubtedly still grants the audience an entertaining spectacle in fiction. William Shakespeare must have been aware of the enticing complexity of this kind of doubt, so eloquently spoken by Hamlet's character after seeing a ghost:

[...] The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.¹

“Out of weakness and melancholy” or out of oracular vision? This question is central to the two case studies this article addresses. Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) intentionally linger on the borderline between different interpretations of visionary revelation, or more specifically, on the blurred threshold that differentiates prophecy from post-traumatic dream and hallucination. Both directors scatter the main storyline with oneiric scenes and various interruptions of the film's chronological sequence. In doing so, they hint at the disrupted temporality that is characteristic to post-traumatic narrative. Mirroring the discontinuity in the characters' perception, both directors adopt different expressive devices to portray the ordinary and altered states of consciousness. Lars Von Trier uses fixed cameras along with enhanced color and slow motion for dreams and visions, while for ordinary consciousness he uses the shoulder-camera and maintains a documentary realism. Villeneuve, in turn, generally resorts to warmer photographic filters for the protagonist's intrusive visions and colder ones for the rest of the storyline. Consequently, as the characters oscillate between different states of consciousness, the audience oscillates with them, shifting between different interpretations. While visionary truth

that is initially disguised as post-traumatic is slowly revealed as prophetic, we gradually dismiss a pathological/traumatic origin of the vision and accept prophecy.

By the end of both films it becomes clear that the protagonists have not been dealing with something that has already happened. There were no post-traumatic memories belatedly recurring in their perceptions. They were not coping with a traumatic past. They were actually facing the precognition of a future yet to come, which is not an easy one. In *Melancholia*, the protagonist foresees the destruction of planet Earth under the impact of another planet. In *Arrival*, the protagonist faces future death by cancer of her yet-to-be-born daughter.

While similar in the way they play with the ambiguity between post-traumatic symptoms and precognition, these two films reveal some interesting differences in their concepts of time, which will be interpreted in this article as hinting at different cultural paradigms: Western, lineal time (*Melancholia*); Eastern, collapsed time (*Arrival*).

Melancholia: The Time of the End

As anticipated, in *Melancholia* we see Justine, the precognizant protagonist, and the other characters struggling first with the premonition then with the certainty of a disaster of cosmic proportions, leading to the ultimate destruction of life in the entire universe. This film's planetary catastrophe does not meet any reassurance regarding any possible afterlife, nor does it involve any divine intervention. Nonetheless, this movie stands as a case of "secularized eschatology" – i.e., an apocalypse deprived of any spiritual meaning, without hope for salvation, but nevertheless still informed by Western eschatological discourse.

The film begins with a long overture displaying oneiric sequences of Justine and the other characters caught in their final moments (later in the film we learn that those were Justine's

prophetic dreams) alternated with space images of planet Melancholia's final impact against the Earth. The following first chapter of the film recounts Justine's wedding day, showing her failed attempts to meet the expectations of social life while being aware of the impending collective death. Instead of cutting the cake and joining the marriage celebration, she hides upstairs and falls asleep, having one of those ominous dreams. Then, shaken from her sleep by her sister Claire, Justine says, "I know you'll hate to hear it."² In response, Claire urges her not to say a word to her groom, Michael. When it is time to toss her bouquet, she freezes to the point that Claire has to throw it for her. When Michael shows her a picture of the property he bought for her, Justine fails to exhibit the slightest enthusiasm or gratitude. When he begins undressing her to make love, she dresses back up and leaves to go and have sex with a stranger in the golf field. She insults her boss in front of other wedding guests and gets fired.

Von Trier lets out very little about Justine's life before her wedding day. Therefore, we are left to imagine her past and plausibly her history as a mentally challenged person. But is she "just" depressed? Judging by several evidences of Justine's clairvoyance scattered by the director throughout the film, it is reasonable to infer that not only her visions, but her melancholy too may be of a rather unusual kind, triggered by the burden of her unique awareness of the future. Then we may interpret her social dysfunctionality as caused by a form of phase displacement, relegating her to a time that is comparable with Agamben's definition of "messianic time" – a time that "is not the end of time, but the time of the end [...] it is not the last day, but it is the moment in which time contracts and begins to end."³ Justine's time, just like messianic time, has contracted under the weight of her precognition, while the time of the other characters who are either still unaware or in denial, keeps progressing at its usual "prophane" pace. Since messianic time is also defined by Agamben as the time of the "incessant revocation of every vocation"⁴ we may attribute her

dysfunctionality to her prophetic awareness inexorably “revoking” her from her marriage, job, and social life in general.

By the beginning of the second and last chapters of the film, Justine is prostrated by what would reasonably seem to be severe depression. Reaching out for her sister’s care, she is too helpless to even hail a taxi and move into her place. It is Claire who eventually organizes her transportation to bring her home. There, Justine is unable to get out of bed, wash herself or eat. “It tastes like ashes,”⁵ she says while tasting what used to be her favorite meal. Judging from her self-sabotaging conduct during the first chapter, her crisis appears to be the product of an acute melancholic outbreak in a mentally challenged mind.

In his essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud explains the etiology of melancholy, differentiating it from mourning as follows:

[...] we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost. Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows ‘*who*’ it is, but not ‘*what*’ it is about that person he has lost. So, the obvious thing is for us somehow to relate melancholia to the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness, unlike mourning, in which no aspect of the loss is unconscious.⁶

Unlike Freud’s description of the etiology of melancholy (i.e., depression), Justine does not come across as an unconscious bearer of the unprocessed mourning of a past loss. In fact, in this film, “melancholia” is not simply the psychological product of some unclaimed experience buried within, but a destructive force advancing from outer space in the shape of a rogue planet that, after hiding behind the sun, is on a collision course against Earth. Therefore, while Justine’s behavior and reactions may be rightfully qualified as full-fledged depressive, it is their unusual trigger that makes this case different from the classical psychoanalytical description of depression wherein she

is not reacting to unconscious loss, but is actually “pre-mourning” a collective death brought to her awareness by prophetic vision.

During a confrontation with her sister, Justine prophesizes the upcoming utter destruction of all the living in the universe. To prove her prophetic abilities, she tells Claire the solution to a quiz she could not possibly have known otherwise:

JUSTINE: The Earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it.

CLAIRE: What?

JUSTINE: Nobody will miss it.

CLAIRE: But where would Leo grow?

JUSTINE: All I know is, life on earth is evil.

CLAIRE: Then maybe life somewhere else.

JUSTINE: But there isn't.

CLAIRE: How do you know?

JUSTINE: Because I know things.

CLAIRE: Oh yes, you always imagined you did.

JUSTINE: I know we're alone.

CLAIRE: I don't think you know that at all.

JUSTINE: 678. The bean lottery. Nobody guessed the amount of beans in the bottle.

CLAIRE: No, that's right.

JUSTINE: But I know. 678.

CLAIRE: Well, perhaps. But what does that prove?

JUSTINE: That I know things. And when I say we're alone, we're alone. Life is only on earth, and not for long.⁷

Lars Von Trier's strike (or perhaps grimace) against psychoanalysis is played here on the sensitive issue of the oracular value of dreams and visions. Freud and psychoanalysis in general strongly denied such possibility, proclaiming that the material of dreams only come either from the dreamers' memory of past experiences, the dreamers' reactions to physical sensations and perceptions originated internally by their organs, or by the dreamer's external surrounding during sleep.⁸ Von Trier contradicts this theoretical tenet by extroverting the question. At this point of the film it is clear that the "melancholia" is not just the product of the "loss of an object that is withdrawn from [Justine's] consciousness," let alone the fortuitous result of environmental or physiological stimuli. It is no longer an issue "internal" to Justine, i.e., no longer interpretable as subjective and endogenic material. Justine's anguishing awareness eventually becomes a very "external" and collective issue: an upcoming collision of an astronomical scale.

This anti-psychoanalytical and anti-psychiatric argument resonates with the old dispute between Surrealism and psychoanalysis⁹ and is fueled by Von Trier's own ambivalent attitude. As a person declaredly affected by severe depression, he resorts to psychoanalysis,¹⁰ but as a filmmaker, he recurrently challenges it throughout his body of work. In *Breaking the Waves* (1996),¹¹ Bess, the protagonist, for most of the film seems to be haunted by guilt complexes triggered by a psychotic relationship with Christianity. However, in the end, the self-inflicted acts of atonement she performs to restore her husband's health turn out to be effective, confirming her as a true believer and martyr. In *Dancer in the Dark* (2000),¹² Selma, an immigrant from Eastern Europe, gives in to moments of trance while experiencing the extreme hardships of her work in a factory and later, of trial and death row. What seems to be dissociative disorder, by the end of the film turns out to be a resource of resilience allowing her to carry out a heroic (and tragic) endeavor. In *Antichrist* (2009),¹³ the protagonist (a nameless "she") is being helped by her husband, a

psychotherapist, to process her grief from the accidental death of their son. He thinks he is helping her get rid of unreasonable guilt, only to eventually discover that she had deliberately caused their son's death, that she is a witch, and by relieving her guilt he unleashed an evil force. *Nymphomaniac* (2013)¹⁴ shows its female protagonist, Joe, compulsively engaging in casual sex throughout the different stages of her life. While everything seems to suggest some form of sexual addiction resulting from an unhealthy household and sexual abuse, Joe fiercely refuses to define herself as a "sex-addict" and claims her identity as a proud "nymphomaniac." Later in the film, like some form of mystical initiation, she recounts the experience of her first orgasm as a girl, levitating over a field while having a vision of Messalina and the Whore of Babylon.

In all these films, due to the director's narrative choices, the protagonists' borderline behavior and unusual perceptual experiences are presented first as akin to pathological manifestations and then gradually closer to non-pathological/prophetic/numinous phenomena. In *Melancholia*, this passage occurs when the disaster is as manifest and imminent as the gigantic blue planet Melancholia, looming in the horizon. That is when the tables are turned, normality is irrevocably lost, and the film's characters transition from functionality to dysfunctionality and vice versa. In fact, all characters but Justine, by the end of the film, collapse while facing the hard truth, falling into panic and despair. Justine's brother-in-law, at first fascinated by the astronomical phenomenon, confident that planet Melancholia would harmlessly pass by Earth without impacting against it, eventually realizes the imminent destruction and commits suicide. Justine's sister, Claire, who played the role of the older sister in charge of Justine's social and psychological issues, by the end of the movie transitions by nervously rejecting all evidence of danger, into deep terror.

Contrary to the psychological trajectory of the other characters, Justine's oppression seems to be progressively lifted as the final hour approaches. For her, the ending of time coincides with

some form of liberation. At night, she lies naked on the grass, bathing in the blue light of planet Melancholia approaching the Earth, as if she were offering herself to a lover. Empowered by such intimate communion with the deadly force she has known for so long, she speaks the truth in harsh words, leaving no room for denial:

CLAIRE: I want us to be together when it happens. Maybe outside on the terrace... Help me, Justine. I want to do this the right way.

JUSTINE: You'd better do it quickly.

CLAIRE: A glass of wine, together, maybe.

JUSTINE: You want me to have a glass of wine on your terrace?

CLAIRE: Yes. Will... will you do it, Sis?

JUSTINE: How about a song? Beethoven's Ninth. Something like that? Maybe we could light some candles. You want us to gather on your terrace to sing a song, have a glass of wine, the three of us?

CLAIRE: Yes. That would make me happy.

JUSTINE: Do you know what I think of your plan?

CLAIRE: No. I was hoping you might like it.

JUSTINE: I think it's a piece of shit.

CLAIRE: Justine, please. I just want it to be nice.

JUSTINE: Nice? Why don't we meet on the fuckin' toilet?

CLAIRE: Then let's not.

JUSTINE: You're damn right, let's not.

CLAIRE: Sometimes I hate you so much, Justine.¹⁵

However, the same Justine who unveiled the apocalypse to her sister, later shows a more compassionate side when speaking to Leo, her nephew, not telling him that his father has died and denying the imminent disaster:

LEO: I'm afraid that the planet will hit us, anyway.

JUSTINE: Don't be... please.

LEO: Dad said there is nothing to do, then... Nowhere to hide.

JUSTINE: If your dad said that, then he's forgotten about something. He's forgotten about the magic cave.

LEO: The magic cave... Yep. Is that something everybody can make?

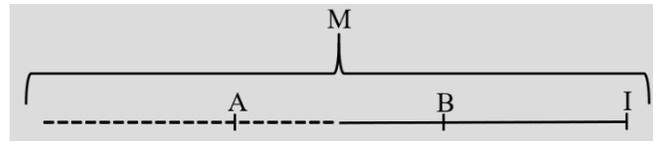
JUSTINE: Aunt Steelbreaker can. All right, let's go find a stick, all right? Hold my hand.¹⁶

The film ends with Justine sitting with Leo and Claire under the “magic cave” she has built (actually, an open teepee made of wooden sticks). Her back is turned towards planet Melancholia – i.e., aligned with its collision course against planet Earth – while she holds Leo and Claire’s hands. Leo, confiding in Justine, keeps his eyes closed. Claire, terrified, cannot tear her gaze from the horizon. They all die swiped away by the impact.

In hindsight, returning to Agamben's terminology, Justine’s time has much in common with “messianic time” – that is, Justine, due to her own foresight dwells “in the time of the end,” but unlike the original Christian messianic time analyzed by Agamben, the time of Justine (i.e., the time in which Von Trier inscribes her narration) bears no salvific perspective, no final transfiguration into eternity – only the complete erasure of life from the universe. Pure and simple.

Unlike the Messiah and his faithful believers who share their calling with a community of followers, Justine is prophet to herself and no one else, spending her wait almost entirely in solitude. When the tormented “time of the end” precipitates into the actual “end of time,” i.e., when the impact is imminent and manifest for all, then under undeniable evidence, prophecy gives way to certainty. Paradoxically, Justine experiences a lifting of her own anxiety. What she has always known in solitude finally becomes shared experience, while her long-time familiarity with

the future catastrophe becomes a source of empowerment. To summarize the analysis carried out so far, I will use a graphic representation:



M = Temporal range of Justine’s clairvoyance characterized by her awareness of the imminent ending of life (compared here with Agamben’s “messianic time”).

Dashed line = time of Justine’s solitary prophetic awareness.

Continuous line = evidence-based collective certainty of the imminent disaster.

A-B section = transition from dysfunctionality to functionality (Justine) and vice versa (other characters).

B-I = prophesized event unfolds.

A = point of Justine’s maximum oppression and dysfunctionality under the weight of unshared prophetic awareness.

B = point of Justine’s relief from the weight of prophetic oppression.

I = Impact: “end of time,” i.e., prophecy fulfillment - destruction is completed.

On the one hand, there are considerable limits to spatial (thus, quantitative) representations of time which inevitably tend to neglect the qualitative dimension of the human experience of temporality.

On the other hand, the concept of precognition as specifically recounted by *Melancholia* rests on a linear progression from the time of prophecy to the time of its fulfillment. Therefore, a linear representation of time, however schematic, suits this case study well, landing itself to a comparative analysis with our second case study, *Arrival*. In this, precognition is the result of the most radical disruption of temporal linearity and with it, of causal order.

Arrival: The Collapsing of Time

Denis Villeneuve’s sci-fi film *Arrival*, like *Melancholia*, begins with a long sequence of images that the spectator initially understands as flashbacks. Later, as the story unfolds, these are understood as precognitive visions (flashforwards) experienced by Louise, the main character. We

see intimate moments of her life with her daughter, Hannah, from birth, to childhood, until early youth, when the girl dies with a deadly disease – seemingly, a form of blood cancer. These sequences recur throughout the movie, interrupting the main storyline like intrusive thoughts. After this introduction, the film recounts the arrival of aliens on Earth, who have come to share with humans a written language that allows them to perceive the past, present, and future as one. Louise, who is the first to learn this language, progressively becomes capable of knowing the future. By the time the film’s storyline discloses this, the spectator is enabled to retrospectively understand the previous flashbacks as actual flashforwards produced by the protagonist’s mind revolutionized by her new linguistic tools.

Before I delve into the analysis of this prodigious language, retracing possible analogies with Asian meditative practices and philosophies, I would like to linger on the moment towards the end of the film when Louise deals with the responsibility of disclosing to her young daughter the truth about her future illness. It is a Sunday, sometime in the future, somewhere along the shore of a lake, when Hannah asks her mother:

HANNAH: [...] Are you going to leave me like Daddy did?

LOUISE: Hannah, honey, your daddy didn’t leave you. You’re going to see him this weekend.

HANNAH: He doesn’t look at me the same way anymore.

LOUISE: That’s my fault. I told him something that he wasn’t ready to hear.

HANNAH: What?¹⁷

Interestingly, similar to our first case study, it is the women who seem to be more capable of sustaining the truth,¹⁸ while male characters tend to escape. For instance, in *Melancholia*, John (Leo’s father and Justine’s brother in law), without taking leave of his wife and son hides in a

stable and kills himself long before the final collision. In *Arrival*, Hannah's father, Ian, cannot sustain the prophecy of his daughter's upcoming early illness and death. He blames his wife for choosing to conceive despite knowing Hannah's future.

However, carrying on in our comparison between the two films, Louise's choice significantly differs from Justine's, who lies to protect young Leo from the unbearable awareness of his father's desertion and death, and from the unforgiving fate that awaits them all. She hides from him not only the truth, but her own emotions too, fleetingly showing them to the camera through a grimace of pain in a moment when Leo cannot see her face. Conversely, Louise kneels down to look Hannah right in the eye, displaying an emotional complexity that is hard to describe such is the intensity and sophistication of Amy Adam's performance under Villeneuve's direction. She speaks her prophetic truth:

LOUISE: Well, believe it or not, I know something that's going to happen. I can't explain how I know, I just do, and when I told your daddy, he got really mad. And he said I made the wrong choice.

HANNAH: What? What's going to happen?

LOUISE: It has to do with a really rare disease, and it's unstoppable. Kind of like you are, with your swimming, and your poetry, and all the other amazing things that you share with the world.

HANNAH: I am unstoppable?

LOUISE: Yeah.¹⁹

Unlike Justine who lies to young Leo, Louise tells her daughter the truth, disclosing her impending "rare" and "unstoppable" "disease." Louise describes Hannah's illness as unstoppable, but immediately compares it to the unstoppable nature of Hannah herself and her amazing talents. Even though Louise never directly tells her daughter that she will be irreversibly ill until death, she presents Hannah's identity and illness as phenomena that are directly related, contiguous,

holistically integrated into a continuum. “Unstoppable,” the adjective that Louise attributes to both, her daughter and her disease, becomes polysemic here. It qualifies the inexorability of a terrible disease and Hannah’s wonders. Non-dualistically bound together, she presents both sides to her daughter equanimously.

As previously mentioned, by the time we see this scene, towards the end of the film, we know that Louise is not experiencing a post-traumatic flashback. On the contrary, she is having a flashforward produced by the new language given to humans by aliens as a gift, allowing her to “remember the future.” By this time in the movie, the audience knows that the narration has all along been following Louise’s personal experience of time, which is no longer lineal, but rather deconstructed and then fused into a synchronic experience of all things at once. Not by chance, the film unfolds onto itself in a circular fashion, ending as it began, with a reprise of Hannah’s story introduced now by Louise’s voice-over stating, “Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it, and I welcome every moment of it.”²⁰

What language is the one that the aliens share with Louise that changes the mind, granting such a courageous and unconditional assent to life? Stepping out of science fiction, what close equivalents can we retrace in philosophy and spirituality?

In the film, Louise Banks is an expert in linguistics hired by the American army to decipher the language of the aliens who landed with their spaceships on twelve different nations of the world. While the spoken language turns out to be indecipherable in the short span of time available to Louise, the written one seems more comprehensible. During several meetings taking place under strict military supervision in an alien spaceship, Louise is able to communicate with the aliens through a glass wall on which they write their graphemes in a sort of black ink secreted by their tentacles. The graphemes’ circularity reiterates the circularity of the aliens’ radially symmetric

anatomy. Any of their limbs could serve as an arm or a leg and with eyes on all sides, any direction might as well be “forward.” Hence, mirroring their morphology, their written language can be read in multiple directions which includes making diagonal connections between signs along the circumference of the single graphemes. This decentered structure, capable of conveying multiple meanings, soon becomes the very cause of an international crisis leading to a global conflict. When Louise, as requested by the US army, asks the aliens the reason for their visit, they answer by a grapheme that can be read both as “share tool” and “use weapon.”

At first glance, the aliens’ linguistic “gift” lends itself to a comparison with the platonic myth narrating Teuth’s offer of written language as a gift to the king of gods²¹ - presented as a supplement to memory, writing is eventually refused because it may just as well have the opposite effect of producing forgetfulness. In Derrida’s reading of the platonic myth, Teuth’s present is a *pharmakon* – a polysemic Greek word, meaning both remedy and poison.²² This polyvalence which, as pointed out by Derrida, is a structural property to all human language, seems to fully apply to *Arrival*’s highly polysemic graphemes and to the hermeneutic crisis they eventually produce in human reading. To establish contact and initiate communication with the aliens, the Chinese engaged them in a game, but the competitive context they created affected their reading of the aliens’ declaration of intent, misleading themselves into interpreting it as “use weapon” (wrong interpretation) rather than “share tool” (the aliens’ actual intention). Consequently, China and along with them the entire world prepare for a global conflict against the aliens.

So far, a semiotic approach to *Arrival*’s science-fictional language may be satisfactory, framing this hermeneutic crisis leading to the brink of interplanetary conflict as a smart example of the disastrous consequences that occur when humans fail to put text (the alien’s answer) into context (China’s competitive game). Nonetheless, the effects of the alien’s graphemes on Louise’s

mind produce a form of deconstruction that goes way beyond the injection of Derrida's pharmakon, leading to something more radical than dissemination of meaning.

The gift shared with humans is a tool capable of resolving all dualisms, transcending time by allowing them to perceive the present, past, and future as one, blurring any distinction between cause and effect. This is shown in the film on two different levels. On one hand, on the personal level of affection, through Louise's remembrance of her future motherhood and loss. On the other hand, on a geopolitical scale, through the way in which Louise is able to resolve the international crisis. She recalls and then successfully uses information she "will" learn during a conversation she will have had months later at a United Nations event. The collapsing of time and, along with it, the disruption of causal order induced by the linguistic "tool" the aliens shared with Louise lead to paradoxical consequences, such as "future causes producing past effects" and knowing destiny as though it were already written and yet being actively engaged in fulfilling it in the present time.

To better understand these paradoxes, we may take the Chinese background of Ted Chiang, author of the short novel "Story of Your Life"²³ on which the film *Arrival* is based, as an invitation to shift from Western philosophical and psychological traditions and integrate the analysis of this film by briefly introducing four important concepts that are present in Mahayana Buddhism²⁴: *Sunyata* (translatable as emptiness or voidness),²⁵ *Pratītyasamutpāda* (translatable as "interdependent co-arising"), the cosmological metaphor of the "Jewel Net of Indra," and the understanding of Samsara as "the moving image of nirvana."

In the *Heart Sutra*, bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara teaches the heart of *Prajnaparamita* (Sanskrit for "perfect understanding") by revealing all things' empty nature, which is expressed in Sanskrit with the word *Sunyata*. This word, as Thich Nhat Hanh²⁶ points out, refers to a very specific form of emptiness which he explains as, "being empty of a separate self, but [...] full of

everything in the cosmos.”²⁷ David Loy in turn translates it as being “pregnant with possibilities.”²⁸ In Avalokiteshvara’s teaching, therefore, all things are *sunya*, i.e., devoid of a separate being, but they are also full of inter-being. They co-dependently arise and manifest in mutual relationship. The deep realization of this leads to the understanding of *Pratītyasamutpāda*, i.e., the “mutual identity and mutual intercausality” of phenomena.²⁹ The Chinese Mahayana Buddhist school, Huayen, conveys these concepts in the myth of Indra’s Jewel Net:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering “like” stars in the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected *all* the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.³⁰

Arrival’s alien graphemes with the wonders of their infinite semantic possibilities stand as a possible rendering through science fiction of the multifocal complexity of Indra’s Net. The way in which this language informs the mind of those who practice it, granting an all-encompassing simultaneous vision of the universe, is close to the description of the spiritual powers developed by the mind of the bodhisattvas. As described in the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*,³¹ these spiritual attainments involve omniscience, i.e., cognition unbound by time and space:

All Buddhas [...] know all things of the past exhaustively. They know all things of the future exhaustively. They know all things of the present exhaustively. They know all principles of language exhaustively. They know all sentient beings’ minds exhaustively. [...] They know all phenomena come from interdependent origination. They know all world systems exhaustively. They know all the different phenomena in all worlds, interrelated in Indra’s net.³²

Such a state of enlightenment may be remote from the way many of us experience the world and assuming its existence and attainability, it definitely poses a series of problems in terms of its

narratability. In fact, how can one translate ultimate nondual reality into the narrative of human language which is weaved with the dualisms of time, identity, and causality? In other words, how can one translate nirvana into the language of samsara? Loy, paraphrasing into Buddhist terms Plato's definition of time as the moving image of eternity,³³ defines "life-and-death" as the "moving image of nirvana."³⁴ This, transposed to our case study, helps reformulate our interpretation of *Arrival's* narrative structure as an attempt to render through film the time-transcending gaze of an enlightened mind. It also allows us to appreciate the way Villeneuve depicts the enigma of the paradoxical coexistence, on one side, of Louise's awareness of her life as a whole and embracing "every moment of it," and on the other, of her passionate engagement in the course of the events.

The initial ambiguity between post-traumatic symptom and prophecy, intentionally used by director Villeneuve, is therefore resolved in the understanding that the tool shared by the aliens leads to a wider consciousness, bearing the gifts of a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of reality - just like the teaching of a bodhisattva. In his commentary on the *Heart Sutra*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

This text is not just for chanting, or to be put on an altar for worship. It is given to us as a tool to work for our liberation, for the liberation of all beings. It is like a tool for farming, given to us so that we may farm. This is the gift of Avalokita.³⁵ There are three kinds of gifts. The first is the gift of material resources. The second is the gift of knowledge, the gift of the Dharma. The third, the highest kind of gift, is the gift of non-fear. Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is someone who can help us liberate ourselves from fear. This is the heart of the Prajñāparamita. Svaha^{36!37}

Reprising Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of spiritual gift as liberation from fear, we may understand Louise's achievement of greater awareness as a gift that, together with her precognition, bears the fruit of a fearless gaze on life and death. This could be the interpretive key to understanding the courage of her choice to conceive despite being aware of her daughter's future illness and death.

Conclusion

If directors Von Trier and Villeneuve can play with the ambiguity that lies between post-traumatic symptom and precognition, it is because both phenomena entail a disruption of temporality that is formally rendered through narrative discontinuity. The relationship between trauma and prophecy should not be seen as an opposition or a mutual exclusion, but rather as a relationship of contiguity. This contiguity is made possible by the fact that, depending on a variety of factors such as individual disposition and sociocultural context, prophetic experience may be traumatic and depressing per se. Such is the case with *Melancholia* where the anticipated perception of a disaster has a “pre-traumatizing” effect, triggering depression and overturning trauma’s distinctive timeline, i.e., inverting the characteristic belatedness of post-traumatic symptoms into “beforeness.”

In *Arrival*, prophetic knowledge does not simply anticipate events ordered along a timeline. Rather, Louise’s precognition is the result of time’s most radical disruption. By virtue of her nondualist perception of the past, present, and future, the protagonist holds a holistic and equanimous outlook on life and death, combined with a compassionate participation in the chain of events. These qualities are compared in this article with the Mahayana description of the spiritual attainments of the bodhisattvic mind. In depicting a state of enlightened consciousness, Villeneuve’s narrative bears understandable approximations and ambiguities. In fact, unravelling a story based on the collapsing of time through film (i.e., moving image) entails embedding time-transcendence back into the very categories of the past, present, future, cause and effect, that the experience supposedly had collapsed. In other words, it means translating nirvana into the language of samsara. The puzzling ambiguity entailed in this filmic translation is both a source of entertainment and the inevitable product of linguistic limitations.

These two main case studies in film fiction are instrumental to highlighting an important point: the diagnostic categories of psychiatry and psychoanalysis commonly applied to dissociative phenomena fall short when applied to the narrative of non-pathological phenomena, such as the states of consciousness involved in oracular and meditative practices. These phenomena, produced by expanded awareness, invite a critical revision of both psychiatric universalism³⁸ and western centrism.³⁹ To those who welcome such an invitation, it may soon become clear that ultimately, what oracles in myth, religion or fiction, truly deliver before and beyond prophecies is an enigma about time, causality, and destiny. Indeed, just like trauma, it shakes the very foundations of thought.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.2.627-632.

² *Melancholia*, directed by Lars Von Trier (2011; Valby: Nordisk Film, 2012), DVD, 0:30:30.

³ (Translated by the author) Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), 63.

⁴ (Translated by the author) *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ Lars Von Trier, *Melancholia*, 1:06:50.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and melancholia," in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 205.

⁷ Lars Von Trier, *Melancholia*, 1:26:50 – 1:28:58.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955) 5:7-42.

⁹ André Breton in 1932, in the final act of a long and unsuccessful series of attempts to establish an alliance between Sigmund Freud and the Surrealist movement, wrote: "Freud is again quite surely mistaken in concluding that the prophetic dream does not exist – I mean the dream involving the immediate future – since to hold that the dream is exclusively revelatory of the past is to deny the value of motion." André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska Press, 1990), 13.

¹⁰ The inspiration for *Melancholia*'s plot comes from the personal experience of the director himself. In an interview, he states: "I think that Justine is very much me. She is based a lot on my person and my experiences with doomsday

prophecies and depression. Whereas Claire is meant to be a ... normal person,” and, “My analyst told me that melancholiacs will usually be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, partly because they can say: “What did I tell you?” he laughs. But also, because they have nothing to lose. And that was the germ of *Melancholia*.” Lars Von Trier, “Melancholia interview with Lars von Trier,” Made in Atlantis, interview by Nils Thorsen. Oct. 22, 2011. Accessed 15 Aug 2019. <http://madeinatlantis.com/2011/10/melancholia-interview-with-lars-van-trier/>.

¹¹ *Breaking the Waves*, directed by Lars Von Trier (1996; U.S.A.: October Films, 2000), DVD.

¹² *Dancer in the Dark*, directed by Lars Von Trier (2000; Burbank, CA: Fine Line Features, 2016), DVD.

¹³ *Antichrist*, directed by Lars Von Trier (2009; Valby: Nordisk Film, 2013), DVD.

¹⁴ *Nymphomaniac: Extended Director's Cut Volume 1 & 2*, directed by Lars Von Trier (2013; Paris : Les Films du Losange, 2014), DVD.

¹⁵ Lars Von Trier, *Melancholia*, 1:55:05 – 1:57:51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:58:43- 2:00:10.

¹⁷ *Arrival*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2016; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2017), DVD, 1:33:20 – 1:33:56.

¹⁸ This topic can be inscribed in a wider, gender-focused discussion on women’s divinatory practices, as well as women’s role in death rituals. See:

Margaret Alexiou, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition*, eds. Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous voices: Women's laments and Greek literature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The cue for passion: Grief and its political uses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The last word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Denis Villeneuve, *Arrival*, 1:33:56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:46:30 – 1:46:44.

²¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, transl. and ed. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin Classics, 2005).

²² Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. and ed. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61-17.

²³ Ted Chiang, “Story of Your Life,” in *Stories of your life and others* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002).

²⁴ The philosophical and spiritual complexity of the East and of Asia in general cannot be reduced to Buddhist nonduality. However, in the comparative discourse between different paradigms of time, Mahayana Buddhism provides an interesting contrast with the Western Christian eschatological tradition. The choice of Chinese Mahayana Hua-yen school as a comparative case study has a double justification: first, it is incredibly articulate in its description of the mental powers attained by the bodhisattvas; second, it draws a plausible (yet to be confirmed) genealogical background for Chinese American author Ted Chiang.

²⁵ This brief temporary translation, as highlighted in the following paragraph, must be integrated with further explanation to prevent certain fundamental misunderstandings.

²⁶ In this article, the use of quotes and references from Thich Nhat Hanh's translation and commentary to the *Heart Sutra* is justified partly by his proximity to the Hua-yen approach to the concept of *sunyata* and *pratityasamutpada*,

and partly by the fact that his English translation of the sutra honors both, a deep comprehension of meditative practice, and a responsible understanding of the linguistic and cultural challenges entailed by the process of translating expressly for Western readers.

²⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2009), 8.

²⁸ David Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism,” in *Derrida and negative theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 233.

²⁹ Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The jewel net of Indra* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010), 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ Also known as *Flower Adornment Sutra*.

³² Thomas Cleary, *The flower ornament scripture: A translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1986), 237.

³³ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, transl. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁴ David Loy, *Nonduality: A study in comparative philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), 224.

³⁵ Abbreviation for the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

³⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh translates the Sanskrit word *svaha* into English as: “a cry of joy or excitement, like ‘ah!’ or ‘hurrah!’ or ‘hallelujah!’.” Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

³⁸ The expression, “psychiatric universalism” indicates the tendency to extend the diagnostic categories of psychiatry and psychoanalysis to non-pathological cases.

³⁹ In this context, the expression, “Western centrism” stands for the tendency to reduce non-Western experiences and theories into Western interpretative categories.

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