This essay is concerned with the changing significance of apocalyptic fire in aesthetic representations of the sky. In contemplating the long history of this subject, it should be understood that the meaning of the word meteor was not restricted to “fireball” or “shooting star” until Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors in the 1590s. Mark Littman explains that since Aristotle’s book on Meteorology of 350 BC, the term had meant the study of “things that happen in the air,” which encompassed not only what we know as meteors of the kind that hurtle across the illustrations of many pages in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493) but also “clouds, wind, rain, snow, sleet, hail, lightning, thunder, halos around the Sun and Moon, rainbows, auroras, earthquakes, comets, and the Milky Way.” Of still greater pertinence to my theme is the fact that Aristotle’s meteors, in his expanded sense of the term, possessed a publicly intelligible narrative structure. Vladimir Janković explains it this way:

Aristotle’s explanations are narratives with an intrinsic diachronic dimension: the explanation of a meteor is equivalent to the process by which it comes into existence. In other words, each of the narratives construed a meteor as a contrived event which involves protagonists (elements, exhalations, vapors and other meteors) undergoing transformation and culminating in the production of the meteor in question. When Lucretius later wrote about things “happening in the earth and sky,” and “events” and “transactions” taking place in the heavens, he was voicing the notion that meteors occur in the same way as battles, epidemics, and theatrical plays. This early recognition of the temporal yet quantum character of meteoric appearances would continue to inform subsequent discussions and acquire prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the strictures of meteorological reporting demanded narrative form.

My concern is with the progressive breakdown of this intelligible narrative form from the eighteenth century onward and its restoration in quite recent cultural representations of apocalyptic skies—most particularly, through a detailed analysis of Lars von Triers’s film *Melancholia* (2011)—that reflect, I shall argue, a growing consensus about the fate of humanity in an era of global warming.

It is impossible to consider the loss, change, or return of apocalyptic representations of the sky without considering changes in the relationships between visual and verbal signifying systems themselves, though in attempting to interpret such vast historical processes, I will be able to trace only a few slender threads of connected change between highly selected examples from English, French, Italian, Australian, and Japanese cultures. Before pursuing my celestial theme, however, I must examine a broadly held view in the history of art, which is that intelligible public symbolism in Western art and architecture progressively broke down in seventeenth-century Europe as scientific empiricism and commercial privatization severed vision from the divine public ordinance of words.

One formulation of this thesis is an essay entitled “Ripa’s Fate” (1975) in which the Warburg scholar D. J. Gordon retraces Émile Mâle’s rediscovery in 1922 of “a kind of language of allegory with its own vocabulary and laws” that Renaissance artists employed as a matter of course to convey public meaning in their works by consulting a kind of dictionary of allegory whenever they had to personify an abstract idea. 3 Gordon recounts, “In the library of the Roman College of the Jesuits, Mâle found an Italian book, once celebrated, now deep in oblivion: the *Iconologia* of the Cavalier Cesare Ripa…. Instead of turning Ripa’s pages I began to read him with the greatest attention; and it was not long before I realized that with Ripa in my hand I could explain most of the allegories that adorn the palaces and churches of Rome.” 4 A currently more famous formulation of a similar but broader idea is Michel Foucault’s deductions concerning the episteme of the Classical Age in *Les mots et les choses* (1966), translated as *The Order of Things* (1970):

> In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude. 5

> …From the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified…. The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved. The primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer, in which the seen and the read, the visible and expressible, were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were separated from one another. The eye was thenceforth destined to see and only to see, the ear to hear and only to hear. 6

For representations of the sky, this meant that meteorological phenomena no longer possessed an innate narrative meaning arising from the preordained order of things, constellations could no
longer be personified as gods or animals determining human destiny through astrological influence, and regional weather could no longer be interpreted in terms of local folklore and legend. In tracking representations of the sky across Western history, I wondered whether it was possible to chart not just the decline of public meaning but the advent of visual meaninglessness: a sky without public resonance, a purely private or scientific, even nihilistic, sky.

One promising instance in which public iconography gives way to meaninglessness in representations of the sky is the contrast between William Hogarth’s last work Tailpiece, or the Bathos, which was “inscribed to the Dealers in Dark Pictures,” from 1764 (FIGURE 1) and Russell Drysdale’s Emus in a Landscape from 1950 (FIGURE 2). Tailpiece is the final print in the bound volumes of Hogarth’s collected engravings. It is intended to represent the extinction of all the artist’s ambitions and achievements at the end of life. Few works express the futility of existence more resolutely than Hogarth’s last plate, but the meaninglessness seems paradoxical and overdetermined, owing to a massive excess of symbols of extinction. Apart from the puns on a

---

**FIGURE 1.** William Hogarth, The Tailpiece, or The Bathos, or manner of sinking in Sublime Painting. 1764, etching and engraving, 31.8 × 33.3 cm. Royal Collection Trust. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2020.
shoemaker’s “last” and a cobbler’s “end,” there is the wreck of the church next to the wreck of the tavern with its “World’s End” pub sign showing the terrestrial globe bursting into flames. There are the blasted trees, the sinking ship, and the figure on the gallows—the only structure still required intact at this juncture, for “this it seems also the coming world cannot do without.”

Saturn, winged figure of death and god of Time himself, exhales a last breath of pipe smoke with the word “finis” inscribed on it without any atoning figure of resurrection—is not death supposed to be immortal? With an effect of extreme reflexivity, even vanitas signs are subject to destruction: the scythe is broken; the guttering candle ignites Hogarth’s plate in *The Times*; the crown, bottle, bell, rifle, bow, broom, hourglass, and palette are broken or worn out; and the clock lacks hands. Father Time’s last will and testament, slipping from Saturn’s hand, is signed by the three fates and bequeaths all to Chaos, not to the Sublime, for many of these symbols are intended to subvert Edmund Burke’s catalogue of sublime effects in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), which had Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) among its targets.

Thus the “broken, burning, discontinuous, and decaying objects, including shattered Lines of Beauty”—Hogarth’s serpentine line—scattered around the reclining figure of Time were

---

specifically illuminating Burke’s vision of the sublimity ‘in images of tower, an archangel, the sun rising through mists, or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs, and the revolutions of kingdoms.’ Most of all, for our purposes, the memento mori of the cloud, symbol of evanescence, is melting away. It is this feature on which Thomas Clerk’s summary of 1837 culminates: “To complete the whole, in the firmament above, the moon is darkened by the death of Phoebus (the sun), who (with his lifeless courses) lies extended on a cloud, while his chariot wheels are broken, and consequently the source of light is extinguished.” We recognize the chariot of Apollo approaching the end of day from the tradition of Nicolas Poussin’s *Diana and Endymion* (1628–30), but not only is Phoebus/Apollo fallen, his chariot in flames, and his horses literally knackered—so darkening the moon to extinction too—but the very genre of history painting is invaded by objects from the most trivial genre of still life, symbols though they are.

In the 1940s, the Australian painter Russell Drysdale was responsible for replacing the arcadia of pastureland encapsulated by the Heidelberg School with the searing heat and emptiness of the outback as a symbol of Australian national identity. In *Emus in a Landscape*, Drysdale’s twisted composition of abandoned corrugated iron dwellings and wooden props irresistibly recalls Hogarth’s diagonally joined verticals of rubble to define a stereotype of Australian futility and loss (dwellings abandoned because the gold ran out or the rains never returned) against the memory of a European image familiar to many English immigrants. The further difference between them is not only the evanescent cloud versus cloudless drought but a complete absence of any symbolism more specific in meaning than the forlornness of abandoned wood and iron. However, if the emus embody a modicum of consciousness, it is only because, as I was once delighted to read in a childhood encyclopedia entry on the brontosaurus, the creature’s brain was too small to be more than “dimly aware of its own existence.”

Christopher Heathcote observes that, as a result of Drysdale’s farming background and a commission to record scenes of drought for the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper in 1944, the artist’s early work shows an unusual ecological concern for the stricken landscape “due to decades of overstocking and poor land management.” He also observes that the apocalyptic tenor of his landscapes has more abstract inspirations: “A desert waste had been synonymous with vanguard literature and art for two decades at least. From T. S. Eliot’s world-weary verse to the sandy mindscapes of Salvador Dali, the wasteland was a metaphor for the meaninglessness of life. The artist looked out on the teeming world and saw a barren desert.” The paintings also respond to the deathly impetus of burnt corpses in the desert wars of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, where Australian forces had fought; the miseries of the Holocaust and Hiroshima; buried metaphors of convoluted limbs from the English wartime paintings of Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland; as well as what John Piper called “symbols for the distress of the modern world.”

Yet while Heathcote concentrates upon the English and wartime sources of Drysdale’s apocalyptic image of “a tree that appears petrified in its death agonies, one of its skinny branches

---

11 Ibid., 19.
12 Ibid., 19-21.
reaching to the right with open fingers,” it is worth adding a modish Continental impetus to the British background of the painting. Drysdale’s focused and socially well-connected European tour of 1938 took him to Paris in the very year that Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* was published. After Roquentin, the story’s narrator, dismounts from a tram and enters a park, he fixates on a tree root and experiences a dystopic epiphany that implicates the sky:

I drop onto a bench between great black tree-trunks, between the black, knotty hands reaching towards the sky. A tree scrapes at the earth under my feet with a black nail. I would so like to let myself go, forget myself, sleep. But I can’t, I’m suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth…. And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have *seen*.14

Roquentin requires many paragraphs to encapsulate the epiphanic insignificance of this event, as words peel away from things with an all-pervasive effect of nausea: “I couldn’t remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface.”15 From now on, the “key to existence” was absurdity: “Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent. Serpent or claw or root or culture’s talon, what difference does it make?”16 Words lose traction on things as their stable relations in the visual realm dissolve and nature loses the power to produce identity: “This root—there was nothing in relation to which it was absurd. Oh, how can I put it in words? Absurd: in relation to the stones, the tufts of yellow grass, the dry mud, the tree, the sky, the green benches. Absurd, irreducible; nothing—not even a profound, secret upheaval of nature—could explain it.”17 The pullulating detail makes no firm compact with the empty sky. The movement is downward rather than transcendental. Thus the knotty trees or tangled metal beneath Drysdale’s agoraphobic skies could as easily derive from Sartre as Moore or Sutherland or Piper’s characteristic imagery, for they are more than an expression of national nonidentity. For Drysdale, the outback served as a paradoxically fashionable and cosmopolitan expression of existentialist meaninglessness, in which Hogarth’s allegorical structures reinforce the transition in his work from a humorous, regional, vernacular satire of rural characters to a fully-fledged, globally portentous Outback Theater of the Absurd.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the overdetermined symbols of Hogarth’s apocalyptic *Tailpiece*, from which Drysdale departs, were engaged in their own flight from meaning. As Drysdale’s mettalics subtly remember and deviate from Hogarth’s jagged masonry, so Hogarth subverts visionary funerary monuments in Westminster Abbey, whose sources are “perhaps a cross between Louis-François Roubiliac’s Hargrave Monument, with images of Death and Time and tottering masonry… and [Michael] Rysbrack’s reclining Sir Isaac Newton.”18 Hogarth consciously departs from stereotypes of beauty and disorder, and his forms seek “to break down unities” and “fragment audiences, as the figures within the picture are fragmented.”19 For him, the “canonical sculptures of Western art” are “essentially empty signs waiting to be filled by the

---

13 Ibid., 22.
15 Ibid., 182.
16 Ibid., 185.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 197, 200.
existential interpretation of the first passerby on Hyde Park Corner. His intention is to infuse new, contemporary life into old moribund forms in order to revitalize English art” and so replace the detachment of Burke’s sublime with the actuality of Alexander Pope’s “sinking” into Chaos in *The Dunciad*. Even in the closing phase of his life, Hogarth’s trail of visual disintegration from the foreground to the sky is a form of positive action that strategically targets the “Dealers in Dark Pictures” of the inscription and the clichéd “Sublime Paintings” alluded to in the subtitle that he still felt sufficiently engaged with in life to feel they were ruining everything. Thus, while Drysdale was emptying out the meaning of the print, the print itself was embattled with an older order of signs. The decay of public meaning in apocalyptic skies has several forms and phases. It is characteristic of it that an era of more stable meaning is always subject to regression to a more remote past.

In the field of literature, the emptying of meaning in Sartre’s *Nausea* is not new. It tacitly recycled the linguistic and philosophical, fictional and existential crisis anticipated in the crucial European modernist text written in 1902 by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the fictional *Chandos Letter*, attributed to Philip, Lord Chandos, in correspondence with Francis Bacon, dated August 22, 1603. Just as Honoré de Balzac projected back into the seventeenth century his account of the tragic meaninglessness of art in *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1845), where the illusion perfected for so long by the artist Frenhofer reveals itself to others as nothing more than “a mass of strange lines forming a wall of painting,” so the retrospective dating of the *Chandos Letter* is important. The decay of public meaning is associated with famous players and set in an Arcadian past when “all existence” could still be conceived of as “one single entity,” where “there was no contradictions between the intellectual and the physical world, or between higher and bestial existence, art and not-art, solitude and company . . . I suspected that all was symbolic, and every creature was the key to another.” It is in these terms that Chandos seeks to apologize to Bacon for ignoring his encouragement to resume writing. He recounts a breakdown in his ability to communicate after becoming disillusioned with his early literary achievements. They remind us of Mâle’s nostalgia for the currency of Ripa’s *Iconologia* and of Foucault’s Classical episteme when the names of things were at one with what they designated: “I wanted to take the fables and mythological tales of the ancients, in which painters and sculptors take such endless and thoughtless delight, and interpret them as the hieroglyphs of an arcane, inexhaustible wisdom, a breath of which, as though from behind a veil, I sometimes thought I felt.” The hierarchy of meaning that supports these hieroglyphs is cognate in the *Chandos Letter* with the social hierarchy in which Chandos reluctantly continues to play his part as a leisured aristocrat and landowner. Once again the crisis of meaning manifests itself through intensely subjective experiences whose affect veers from ecstasy to despair, and in which the integrity of parts and wholes, people and their actions, microcosm and macrocosm, breaks apart as, once again, language sheers away from visual percepts. It is evident in “the way I had once seen a piece of skin on my little finger under a magnifying-glass to look like a field with furrows and hollows, so it was now with men and their actions…. Individual words swam around me; they melted into eyes, which stared at me, and

---

20 Ibid., 212, 214.
23 Ibid., 6.
which I had to stare back at; they are like whirlpools, it gives me vertigo to look down at them, they turn without cease, and transport you into nothingness.” At one point, the negative epiphany takes an apocalyptic form, as Chandos remembers Livy’s description of the destruction of Alba Longa and the vision of burning Carthage, “but it was more, it was more godlike, more bestial; and it was present, fully and exaltedly present” as something that “shakes me from the roots of my hair to the marrow in my heels.” According to Lowell Bangerter, “The Letter” evokes an age of great country estates and aristocratic leisure for interrelated translation, interpretation and imitation of the classics—enough intercultural study to risk what Elizabethans considered one major danger of scholarship, ‘melancholy.” Whether Chandos experiences excessive sympathy or terror, these intrusive episodes broach the proprieties of class and rupture the normative visual field in a manner that can only be expressed in “a language of which I do not know even one word, a language in which dumb things speak to me.”

Is it not counterintuitive, though, to think that shared meaning could deteriorate from a primordial state of plenitude when everything meant something? Does it not seem more likely in the case of the visual arts that they were once generally valued for their truth to appearances and have only grown “profound” in recent times? Or, as James Elkins puts it, have paintings “become dense with metaphorical meaning, even though very little has been said about what would once have been taken as their most obvious attractions— their technique or their powers of illusion”? I think not. Some time ago, I was teaching The Allegory of Good and Bad Government (c. 1338–39), the great instructional or celebratory fresco on three walls of the Council Room of the Palazzo Publico at Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. A student gamely challenged my claim that every detail in the fresco of The Effects of Good Government spoke of the benign consequences of wise government in the city of Siena and its surroundings. He asked what special meaning an old man sitting on a wooden bench conveyed. How could his casual presence be meaningful? Thankfully, an answer came to mind. It is only in a city where good government reigns that an old man can sit peacefully reading a book as new buildings rise on the skyline. So it is with other representations of the sky.

In European art, the prevalence of serene skies reminds us that there was also another less traumatic route to meaningless skies than Hogarthian satire or post-Romantic existential angst. A good example of the crossover from public iconography to subjective reality is Claude Monet’s serial representations in the 1880s of the changing volume, tone, and color of the west

24 Ibid., 11.
27 Hofmannsthal, Lord Chandos Letter, 20. Lost faith in the hierarchies of celestial allegory takes a distinctly different form in late nineteenth-century England, where homoerotic, and indeed necrophiliac longing for those who formulated Renaissance allegory presents an alternative to Hofmannsthal’s exhilarating despair at allegorical meaninglessness. See, for example, Walter Pater’s 1893 description of Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola who “lays hold on every sort of figure and analogy…Everywhere there is an unbroken system of correspondences. Every object in the terrestrial world is an analogue, a symbol or counterpart, of some higher reality in the starry heavens, and this again of some law of the angelic life in the world beyond the stars… Above all, we have a constant sense in reading him, that his thoughts, however little their positive value may be, are connected with springs beneath them of deep and passionate emotion; and when he explains the steps by which the soul passes from the love of a physical object to the love of unseen beauty there is a glow and vehemence in his words which remind one of the manner in which his own brief existence flamed itself away.” Walter Pater, The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text, ed. Donald L. Hill (Oakland: University of California Press, 1980), 35–36.
façade of Rouen Cathedral as the sky changed every aspect of it in each painting of the series.28
Painted from the secular setting of a rented lingerie shop window opposite the monument, the
ever-changing atmosphere rendered the enduring Christian symbolism of the cathedral unintelligible. It is a long step from the religious awe with which John Ruskin's eye drifts up the façade of an English Gothic cathedral toward the sky in *The Stones of Venice II* (1853). He describes “looking up at its deep-pointed porches and the dark places between their pillars where there were statues once, and where the fragments, here and there, of a stately figure are still left, which has in it the likeness of a king, perhaps indeed a king on earth, perhaps a saintly king long ago in heaven; and so higher and higher up ...”29 Fifteenth-century Italian sky painters tended to depict serene weather with small clouds and unlimited visibility. The serenity of skies in religious paintings by Piero della Francesca or Fra Angelico persisted into the tranquility of eighteenth-century skies by Claude Lorraine and nineteenth-century French Impressionist painters in which meaninglessness set in in earnest.30 Even so, those Renaissance skies bore strong narrative meanings. The clouds in Fra Angelico's *Descent from the Cross* (1443) indicate a drop of temperature coinciding with Christ's death,31 while Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Infant Christ Sleeping on the Cross with Two Putti Above* (c. 1670) prefigures the crucifixion not only by the cross on which the infant sleeps in deathly premonition but also by the gathering storm clouds above him.

In Western traditions from the late eighteenth century onward, an interest in the most violent expressions of nature imagined from the evidence of volcanic eruptions found in newly discovered archaeological sites at Pompeii and Herculaneum are presaged by paintings of the clouds of war on sea and land rising from any number of religious or commercial scenes of war. It also coincided with early representations of the human-fashioned clouds of the industrial revolution and smoke from trains and steamboats combining the hot and cold extremes of fire and snow.32 It is hardly surprising that humanity's increasing impact on the environment is reflected in modernist art that deforms the sky's natural characteristics into compositional quirks so that

28 David Gervais gives an excellent digest of this transition in nineteenth-century British and French culture in the first paragraph of “Between Worlds: Delacroix and Painting” in which Delacroix serves as the pivotal last practitioner of fluent iconography before literary painting cedes to impressionism: “No painter was so inventive in matching new ways of painting with a new subject-matter, yet he accomplished this while continuing to work within the Renaissance tradition.” David Gervais, “Between Worlds: Delacroix and Painting,” *Cambridge Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2000): 267.
31 Ibid., 442.
what is level becomes lopsided in the cloud of Henri Matisse’s *Luxe, Calme and Volupté* (1904); solid becomes planar in Gino Severini’s *Urban Train Arriving in Paris* (1915); and vapor hardens in Fernand Léger’s *Soldier with a Pipe* (1916) or René Magritte’s *Castle in the Pyrenees* (1959), in which a giant rock with a castle atop floats in the sky. Meanwhile, modernist architecture took the parallel course of industrializing the sky as a manifestation of human will and technological progress, as if the cloud banks native to Brasilia had been artificially produced from Oscar Niemeyer’s bowl-shaped Chamber of Deputies structure set on top of the Brazilian National Congress building at Brasilia (1957–64).

Perhaps these are, after all, visions of the sky in which fire and smoke reflect a shared, global ideology of progress in industrial and scientific interventions upon nature. This would be consistent with the evolution of meteorology from the eighteenth century onward from its embodiment in a human “culture of providentialism and an ethos of locality” to a physically based “knowledge of globally evolving systems, the locality becoming part of a larger entity, not a domain of its own. A scrutiny of local weather, whether in the form of a forecast or a series of observations, mattered only to the extent to which the atmosphere could manifest itself in a place. A rain-gauge in Cornwall was not intended to describe Cornwall, but to aid a construction of a map of European isolines.” If so, then in modernist art and architecture the general consensus became inflected by individualistic and highly idiosyncratic conceptions of aesthetic creativity. In the rest of this essay, I wish to examine the conditions for a new universal meaning for the sky in contemporary representations, one that depends not on human progress mediated by individual creativity but on the immanence of shared human tragedy through global warming. The fact that the human race faces extinction as a result of its own actions leads, on the one hand, to the revival of older apocalyptic iconographies, returning fatalistic certainty but doom-ridden grimness to imagery of fiery skies. Lars von Trier’s film *Melancholia* will bear the burden of my argument because it constitutes an extreme and highly provocative expression of this tendency that draws consciously upon a wide variety of old-world visual culture and iconography. The déjà vu familiarity of its copious pictorial references is itself an expression of collective fatalism. Most of us are likely to “spot” a few of these pictorial allusions in the film, but the effect is enriched if, as I intend, a larger number of them are discovered and interpreted. On the other hand, the prospect of human extinction at its own hands leads to an altogether more open-ended and uncertain tendency in contemporary art. This depends not on the deployment of familiar conventions but on novel forms of imagery that stimulate spectators into projecting interpretations upon a sky charged with the paradoxical effect of a double bind, an impasse, a contradiction, or a dilemma. Such will be the case with my final example, An Te Liu’s *Cloud* installation of 2008.

Firstly, von Trier’s film *Melancholia* traces the contrasting reactions of two sisters and their family to the dawning realization that planet Earth is about to be destroyed by collision with the planet Melancholia, a looming blue presence throughout the film. The depressive sister Justine welcomes the event and grows steadily more capable and serene, while her initially sensible sister Claire progressively deteriorates into hysteria as the inevitable conclusion approaches and all her attempts to control the situation become futile. Von Trier has claimed that global catastrophe is
merely a metaphor for his own clinical depression, but that would leave many of the film’s most striking features unaccounted for. Though the film has attracted a great deal of serious attention from philosophers, psychologists, and cultural historians, I shall argue that the range, complexity, and narrative integration of its apocalyptic symbolism deserve further investigation. What is at stake is whether Justine’s illness can be understood merely in terms of modern medical discourse on depression or whether it answers to an older symbolic order. My answer is that the film gives deliberately contradictory answers to this dilemma. If the tenor of the film harks back to something richer and vaguer than anything in the current bible of psychological diagnosis, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1952–2013), the transformation of Justine’s mania in the first chapter into clinical depression explored in the second chapter is certainly consistent with current symptomology. It is tracked with scrupulous conviction that includes the personality style of her nihilistic and vindictive parents at her wedding celebration, the event that constitutes the first chapter of the film as a biting comedy of manners, filmed with “the jerky dance of Trier’s handheld camerawork” in a familiar, documentary style that contrasts utterly with the grandiose, remote views and slow pace that predominate in the second chapter, which breaks off from the first as if it belonged to a different film. Her parents’ sniping at each other, and particularly her mother’s spiteful envy of her daughter’s ability to attract men—what she calls her “wobbling”—are the specific triggers of Justine’s depressive episode after they separately ignore her appeals for help and affection. In purely rational terms, the wedding is seen to trigger a breakdown long ago prepared by bad parenting. As such, it has nothing to do with supernatural happenings in the sky outside the hothouse mansion.

Just as its modern psychology is authentic, nothing in the film is scientifically inconsistent with the last hours of a planet set to collide with another: birds falling dead from the sky, difficulty in breathing an atmosphere sucked away by the gravitational field of another planet, car batteries losing their charge, etc.; these are all phenomena based on scientific research, according to the film’s “extras.” On the other hand, Justine possesses indisputable supernatural powers of prophecy and insight that qualify her as an allegorical personification of the planet Melancholia, a gift she proves to Claire by accurately stating the exact number of beans (678) placed in the jar for guests to estimate as a sideshow amusement at the wedding. (Her declaration comes as a shock because we know this number from a source she had no access to.) “I know things,” she says, as if she had privileged supernatural intuition that the world will end. Depression seems quite the wrong word for the many heroic and creative old-world traits of melancholia she exhibits during her fixation on the alien planet and longing for the firestorm it will bring.

Though utterly nihilistic in her skeptical denial of the continuance of life on Earth or its existence anywhere else in the universe, she has a morbidly religious awareness of original sin: “Earth is evil; we don’t need to grieve for it,” she says, a sentiment that the comedy of manners at the wedding feast has already inclined us to accept. Justine acts as the director’s surrogate here, and given her conviction of human evil, it is perhaps surprising that the film steers firmly away from an easy critique of the Anthropocene—science’s name for the present geological epoch in which humans are acknowledged as a main determinant of global catastrophes previously regarded as acts of God according to a natural science hitherto split off from human agency. In the film,

however, cosmic catastrophe cannot be blamed on humans, as nuclear apocalypse or pollution could have been,\(^{37}\) for to do so would have foreclosed the deeper resonances of meaning in a film whose factual narrative is strongly resisted by the uncanny viewing experience. Yet the sheer oddity of many of its meteorological events cannot but remind us of the unprecedented weather phenomena of our own time that few still doubt is a result of human-caused global warming,\(^{38}\) particularly since the film was launched after a long series of “apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic” and “end of the world” movies symptomatic of the anxieties of our Anthropocenic era.\(^ {39}\) A potent symbol of human technological hubris is presented toward the beginning of the film by a God’s eye view down onto the stretch limousine that, for all its size and power, is unable to negotiate the tight bend of the single-track lane that is taking the married couple to their wedding reception. Limestone blocks set into the verge of the road as a rudimentary safety barrier help to ensure the car cannot get round the bend. There is something symbolic about this too. Justine seems to have planned this impediment to matrimonial punctuality—she knew the car would not fit—and later her sister will drive a pathetically small car round the same bend through heavy rain in the opposite direction, past the same limestone blocks acting as a safety barrier, as she makes a futile dash to escape the impending catastrophe. The blocks are even more symbolic of futile precautions at this point. Careening into a gully or driving away at top speed hardly matters when the sky is delivering an end to the planet. Their different behaviors on just that stretch of road beneath different skies is enough to differentiate Justine’s personality from Claire’s.

It is difficult to convey the hypnotic visual qualities of the film, whose sublime grandeur is its chief merit in my view, though it cannot be divorced from the program of “meaningful meaninglessness” I am about to unfold in the context of its increasingly menacing sky. If we associate Justine’s medical condition with the meteorological accuracy of planetary collision, then a rational reading grates against a supernatural reading in the mind of the viewer: a secular, sensible, scientific, and medical interpretation conveyed by psychological realism contradicts an allegorical, supernatural, early modern interpretation evoked by the anachronistic resonance of the visual symbolism. Phil Hutchinson reads *Melancholia* as a film whose “allegorical status is up front” because it straightforwardly addresses generic themes “and then proceeds to shed light on these by exploration… [of] the metaphors that might be employed in the depiction of those themes.” This is the reverse of the approach used in a series such as *The Wire* in which general themes emerge indirectly and in retrospect from metaphors embedded in the behaviour of its characters.\(^ {40}\)

Many commentators have detected the pervasive relevance of Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) to the film.\(^ {41}\) Except for the dark light emanating from the strange comet (a harbinger of doom) behind the brooding alchemist and defeated reasoner featured in the


\(^{40}\) Phil Hutchinson, “Life is a Journey,” *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, 17 (2015), 82.

engraving, the image is not referenced as directly as several other famous works of art in the film yet remains its guiding theme, as if its suggestions had been scattered across it in anamorphic perspective. At times, when Justine wanders aimlessly over the golf course to escape the wedding reception, the winged figure of the angel in Dürer’s print seems to supply postures of brooding contemplation. Justine’s attitude often conjures up the same quietly introspective but intensely apprehensive, despairing, restless, hollow, longing state of mind as the angel, affirming once again the director’s readiness to amplify Dürer’s sensibility through her character.

If the black comet in the sky of *Melencolia I* is relevant both to the name of the approaching planet and the astrological nature of its influence, the engraving might also offer an interpretative strategy for the entire film, according to whose scholarly approach we choose to decode it. Twice already, with Drysdale and Hogarth, we have seen a straightforward allegorical allusion give way to a more open mode of interpretative play, which undermines the fixed correspondences between word and image that Mâle and Foucault attributed to an earlier age. According to Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville’s account of Erwin Panofsky’s celebrated interpretation of the image, “Melancholy is intellectualized by reference to the arts, and Geometry is humanized by reference to the temperament.”

This sounds unacceptably pat for the open play of meaning that postmodernist hermeneutics tends to require of great art these days, whereas Aby Warburg’s interpretation of *Melencolia* struggling “between reason and demonic forces” seems more acceptable to us. Warburg’s struggling would be an interesting way of characterizing the sisters as “psychomachia,” personifications of good and evil fighting for conviction in the viewer’s soul; the reasonable Claire triumphing to begin with and the demonic Justine taking over from her at the end. Walter Benjamin’s concern, as Iversen and Melville express it, “not only with the iconography of the subject but also with the form of the allegory and its reception” provides a good fit for the modus operandi of the whole film. However, as Iversen and Melville continue to argue, the obscurity of the engraving is intrinsic to the way we are supposed to understand it:

> The ambiguities, the piece-by-piece accumulation of meanings are intrinsic to the form of the allegory. … *Melencolia I* is not just a representation of intense, conflicted thought: it is also an occasion for it…. the task of interpreting is less a matter of deciphering the meaning of a text and more like an encounter with an enigmatic object that brings us up against the limits of interpretation. If the viewer of Dürer’s print does not experience this moment of dejected frustration, it seems fair to say that he or she has failed to encounter it as a work of art: our response should oscillate between the ecstasy of meaning and the abjection of nonmeaning.

So it is with the film. This reflexive view of how iconography discharges meaning changes the hypothesis we started with, that stable meaning is unsettled as theology gives way to science and romanticism in celestial envisioning. We have seen a regress of uncertainty in the meaning of skies as we moved from Drysdale back to Hogarth and from Sartre back to Hofmannsthal. The unraveling of certainties is regularly pushed back to unravel certainties in earlier times.


43 Ibid., 50.

44 Ibid., 52.

45 Ibid., 53.
An intensely Warburgian and Benjaminesque moment of backward pushing that feels pivotal to the meaning of the film is when Justine, an advertising agent with a higher artistic calling, feels compelled to change all the books in her sister’s art library from a monotonous display of progressive modernist works by Kazimir Malevich to doom-laden, mostly early modern illustrations of paintings by Brueghel, Millais, Goya, Caravaggio, Bosch, and other representatives of pre-Enlightenment worldviews. The effect of substituting a rich medley of works by these artists for the singular display of works by a Russian Supremacist driven by collective hope for humanity’s future is vital to the central impact of the scene, which takes us well beyond a spot-the-picture game for art house aficionados. Rather, it comes laden with the sense of an interpretative key to the whole film. It flirts with the possibility of a return to the traditional values of death, disaster, and metaphysical certainty as owned by the director as well as the character. It is Justine’s angry act of rearrangement (accomplished with almost superhuman rapidity) rather than the diverse subject matter of the artworks that counts, for it resembles nothing so much as Warburg’s juxtaposition of images in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29), which formed the “cultural memory bank of images” whose “anachronisms disrupt the temporal linearity of historicism.”#46 Equally it chimes in well with the lost scrapbook of images that Benjamin collected to transpose Freud’s “theory about the individual’s relation to infantile experience to the collective or social plane and then [use] it as the basis for a nonlinear historiography.”#47 Justine’s portentous intervention in the art library rejects her sister’s forward-looking, optimistic conception of culture in favor of something ancient (or, rather, timeless) and pessimistic.#48

In retrospect, the episode teaches us how to read the metalevel pattern established in the magnificent opening sequence of the film. That consisted of an introductory sequence of an intensely strange and beautiful montage of sixteen hyperreal shots that succeed each other in hypnagogic slow motion before the coherent narrative of the wedding opens in the first chapter of the film. (A film as a three-section book is another anachronism.) Though some sequences are entirely original, the montage includes another anachronistic medley of paintings and film memories of which many are to do with aberrant imagery of electricity and fire in menacing skies. “Setting up *Melancholia* as an entelechy — that is, with its end in its beginning,”#49 they prefigure the apocalypse in ways we never see again in the film, as if they were unwitnessed by any human eye or belonged, like outtakes better than the film itself, to a different version of the world’s end. Actually, they supplement rather than contradict it. Their chaotic and surrealistic unreality hardly promises stability of meaning, yet they convey the prophetic certainty and characteristic power of biblical “types” foreshadowing “antitypes.”#50

The first sequence in the montage shows Justine against the sky with lank and sodden hair that could allow us to mistake her for the dark and disheveled angel in Dürer’s print. But the referentiality of the image is capacious, since others have seen in it the influence not of Dürer but the languorous woman with closed eyes in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Pre-Raphaelite painting of

---

#46 Ibid., 56.
#47 Ibid., 56–58.
#48 It could be objected that Justine’s inclusion of a modern drawing of a stag raising its antlers to a tree in winter snow (by an artist I have not identified) weakens this interpretation, but it also ensures nonlinear, anachronistic serendipity in the selection.
#49 Moldovan, “*Melancholia, a Case for Cultural Memory,*” 337.
Beata Beatrix (c. 1864–70), a figure of impending death to whose lap the Holy Spirit flies in the form of a bird with a poppy in its beak. This parallel chimes in with (but is also subverted by) the dead birds that rain down beside Justine when she has opened her eyes. Certainly, the sundial in the next slow-motion scene, set in the garden of the mansion where the wedding will be held, could have been inspired by Rossetti’s sundial in the same painting. The meaning of the sundial is changed, however. In the painting, the shadow cast by the dial points to Beatrix’s time of death. In the film, the dial casts a double shadow from the extra planet that shatters the linear progression of time itself. 51

After the sundial, a painting in the “atlas” of art books that Justine reassembled in her sister’s library provides the third sequence in the opening montage. We see a reproduction of Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s Hunters in the Snow (1565) darken and burst into flames, its topmost edge curling over with heat like the turned corner of a Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts canvas, in which the fold typically symbolized the transience of art. Is this a permutation of the original painting’s reflection on the reverse climate change of its own day, for Hunters in the Snow accurately records glaciers reaching the edge of Antwerp, Belgium, at the beginning of a minor Ice Age, 52 while dejected hunters return empty-handed after a hunting expedition beneath forbidding gray skies?

The sky features again in the tenth sequence when Justine slowly raises her bent arms on the golf course as she watches in wonder as electricity streams from her fingertips as it also does from the pylons behind her. This startling imagery has the tenor of Ripa’s Iconologia, such as the icon of inner fire issuing from the head of Ouroboros the World Machine, a symbolic device for regulating transitions of the humors (earth, air, fire, and water) on which the balance of world and human mood depended in early modern schemes of the emotions. The jolting discontinuity of these sequences reinforces their sense of supernatural symbolism, for all their closeness to meteorological facts.

It is sustained in the sublunary sphere of the next sequence, in which Justine is seen in her bridal gown and veil struggling to advance across a forest clearing restrained by fibrous tendrils that entangle her waist and ankles. A bridal dress, typically associated with hope and fertility, is here connected with bondage and death. We might think that the meaning of this image seems exhausted by its role as a type of Justine’s inner emotional struggle at her wedding, where she tells her sister, “I’m trudging through this gray woolly yarn, things clinging to my legs. It’s really heavy to drag along.” Is this resistance to movement, so characteristic of the paralysis of will suffered by depressives, 53 not enough to explain it? But a far wider allegorical dimension of meaning opens up when Jacek Malczewski’s Painter’s Inspiration (1897) is identified as the direct source of the scene. In that painting, the artist cringes before his easel, doubled up with despair as he imagines his wife as a visionary personification of Poland, his encumbered homeland, restrained by ropes and weights (Figure 3). It might seem no more than accidental coincidence that in 1900 Malczewski also painted a vision of Poland tearing itself apart called, simply, Melancholia, but coincidence becomes intentional when the latter painting makes a subliminal appearance in the film as one of the entries in peripheral vision on the internet that comes up when Justine’s sister

Claire googles the trajectory of the doomed planet to test her husband’s false scientific reassurances about their safety.

Later in the film, Claire witnesses Justine reclining naked in what seems like the toxic wasteland of a river bank, touching herself and erotically bathing in the deathly light that emanates from the approaching planet: “She worships the planet; even more, she imagines herself the bride of Melancholia.” Again, the referentiality is capacious. In one sense she is a satanic counterpart to the bride of Christ in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* (1647–52) where the dreaming saint is repeatedly pierced by the angel’s spear as she lies prone on her rocky cloud beneath golden rods of light in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. But under the eroticized gaze of her sister there is an alternative, homoerotic source that is just as convincing and just as subversive, though by way of gender-bending rather than sacrilege. This is yet another allegorical painting, Anne-Louis Girodet’s proto-Romantic *Sleep of Endymion or Endymion: Effect of the Moon* (1791), in which Endymion’s androgynous body is bathed in the light that streams from the lovesick goddess Diana. Having offended Juno, Endymion, the most beautiful of mortals, is put to sleep without losing his youth. The chaste Diana is overwhelmed by his beauty and visits him nightly in the form of a moonbeam. In the film, Endymion’s gender changes to female so that

![Figure 3](image_url)

*Figure 3.* Jacek Malczewski, *Painter’s Inspiration*, 1897, oil on canvas, 63 × 80 cm. Raczyński Collection, National Museum, Kraków. Laboratory Stock, reproduced with kind permission.

54 Gordon, “Bride of Melancholia.”

Justine gains agency—as her sister looks on voyeuristically in deep, but eroticized alarm—by actively soliciting and reveling in the deathly light that falls from the planet whose goddess she represents yet longs to unite with. Quite apart from the double source in Bernini, Girodet’s painting may be a richly ambiguous allusion in itself. Roland Barthes had illustrated the painting in his introduction to S/Z (1970), the book that anatomizes Balzac’s short story about the painting, in which Sarrasine, the artist, falls for Zambinella, who is eventually revealed as a castrato. Peter Brooks reflects on Barthes’s interpretation of the story and the painting:

In the title, the S of Sarrasine and the Z of Zambinella are separated by a slash mark that represents castration, but also something more: the breakdown of the “wall of antithesis” that undergirds all meaningful structures, that indeed makes meaning-making possible. If you abolish difference—in the first instance, gender difference, indeed anatomical difference—you risk the collapse of an edifice of traditional meanings, rules, prohibitions, categorizations. Barthes implies that not only Balzac but classical Western culture more or less depends on the concept of antithesis, and that anatomical difference is at least the symbolic foundation for it.56

As here explained, the Barthesian context of Girodet’s androgynous moon-bathing image helps us to put gender at the heart of the film’s preoccupation with signifying systems. In most lights, Justine stands for the traditional symbolic foundations of things, yet her gender characteristics are as mutable as Endymion’s. She has a weak father and a viciously cruel mother, as if their gender polarities are twisted against conventional expectations. Her nephew calls her Aunty Steelbreaker, which is hardly a feminine moniker. She squats upon and rapes a male underling in a golf bunker, while fixing an implacably determined gaze on her sovereign planet in the night sky. She decimates her macho and manipulative boss by eventually finding an offensive legend for the promotional image he has been nagging her for throughout her wedding.57 The advertising slogan she comes up with when she confronts him is the single word “nothing,” which sums up her estimate of him and his advertising company. In a further display of traditionally unfeminine characteristics, she ferociously beats her horse Abraham when he refuses to cross the bridge out of the estate to the public realm of the village. Since this crossing is denied three times, twice by Abraham and then by the golf buggy when its battery expires, the bridge takes on a mystical quality that paradoxically denies transcendental escape to all who try to cross it. Transcendence is denied on every occasion—albeit supernaturally. One such occasion is when Justine claims higher authority to assert that “life is only on earth, but not for long” on the question of extra-terrestrial existence. Even the alterity of the exotically oriental front room enclave overlooking the garden is denied, for this is where the sisters must contemplate the manner in which the sky will deliver their deaths. The thirteenth sequence of the opening montage jumps forward to a view of this room after they have abandoned it. A burning bush is seen through the window, but if it symbolizes God’s promise to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, then the only promised land it leads to is the destruction that Justine seeks. In furthering her androgynous characteristics, Justine is both very weak and very strong, both a child and an iconoclastic rebel. Yet in medieval

and Renaissance cosmology, the light of a planet determining the virtù of a human soul is at the foundation of astrological character formation. This suggests that the disasters confronting our materialistic world (of which global warming is only one of many) provide von Trier with a new consensus on which to return to widely shared public meanings held latent in the European iconographical tradition. True, a good measure of Romanticism is thrown into the mix to temper severely nihilist “truth” with the sentimentality of John Everett Millais’s Ophelia (1852–52), Rossetti’s Beatrix, and the swelling tide of Richard Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde (1859). Thus, once again, apparently stable meanings are not without their complications. The fiery apocalyptic sky that approaches toward the end of the film is not one that will uphold the astrologically determined identity of things but rather one that brings an end to all distinctions.

Bourgeois consolations and the reassurances of science are already among the first casualties of the encroaching sky that dominates the third and final chapter of the film. Justine bitterly rejects the consolations of Claire’s farewell plan: “You want me to have a glass of wine on your terrace? How about a song? Beethoven’s Ninth? . . . Do you want to know what I think of your plan? I think it’s a piece of shit.” This also helps to undercut the consolations offered to the viewer by the nostalgically sentimental soundtrack and the luscious art and landscape imagery. The reassuring toys of capitalist science—as pathetically worshiped by Claire’s husband, John—will share the same ruthless fate. He is constantly tinkering with his powerful telescope to impress his son, Leo, with astronomical knowledge. But the son outstrips him with a puny wire that eventually proves that Melancholia is advancing upon, not receding from, planet Earth, ensuring its destruction. That this effective investigative instrument is a wire circle fashioned by a child undermines scientific hubris through a brilliant application of traditional iconography. A planet bursting from a circle evokes the vanitas image of Homo bulla, the symbol of the infant sitting on a skull blowing bubbles through a pipe, symbol of the evanescence of life itself. The event is already presaged by the release of paper sky lanterns into the night sky of the wedding ceremony, one of which ominously catches fire. Leo probably took the wire from one of these lanterns to make his loop.

In the final sequence, Justine’s melancholic acceptance of death enables her to show kindness to her loved ones by supporting their delusions while remaining free of them herself. Throughout the film, Leo has been hankering for Justine to help him build a cave of dreams to hide in. Justine tells him that this was what his father had forgotten when he—cruelly—told him that the end was nigh (then cowardly committed suicide after stealing the sleeping tablets his wife was storing for the whole family). Justine helps Leo build a teepee out of shaven sticks, in which the family sits before they are consumed by the final flash of fiery sky. Rather than a return to universal meaning, this is negative iconography that dramatizes the futility of a prehistoric shelter—or any symbolic artifact—against the aberrant force of nature. Apocalypse is itself a negation of human conception in the final sequence of the opening montage when the colliding planets double up as sperm and ovum (a shot that took six months to engineer). This dynamic image of simultaneous conception and destruction—Eros and Thanatos—ruptures stable semiotic relations between microcosm and macrocosm. Had there only been time to cover the teepee with cloth or had the protagonists been able to keep their eyes closed at the end (which close

58 Among countless examples, see the beautiful engraving by Karel van Sichem of Homo Bulla, circa 1617.
59 A particular scene from the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1490–1500) that features gigantic birds and diminutive humans around a lake suggests John’s descent into hell when Claire’s empty bottle of pills is discovered in a drawer beneath the image.
examination shows they cannot), then the manifold symbols in the film might have stayed more secure. Or we could think of the cave in the abstract and contemplate it platonically as "some homogenized universal version of logos where all truths, mentally coordinated, vaguely become one," remembering that a cinema is itself a darkened cave whose walls flare with meaningful illusions. But that would be to ignore the destruction of the cave in the final all-consuming holocaust. Yet from all the examples I have dwelled on in this essay, from Hogarth to von Trier, the destruction of symbols would appear to have a broad-ranging, long-established meaning of its own. It may indeed amount to a negative theology of longing, the despair that must precede any answered prayer, and indeed Romantic music persists after the screen has darkened and the credits are rolling up, though that might be merely a sardonic reminder that no audience escapes denialism and "No artist tolerates reality."

In my final example, I argue the opposite case for a certain stability of meaning in representations of apocalyptic skies that nevertheless depends on a large measure of undirected, imaginative projection by spectators. An Te Liu's *Cloud* is an installation of 136 units of air purifiers, ionizers, sterilizers, washers, humidifiers, and ozone air cleaners in various shades of white plastic, suspended from the ceiling and running continuously at the *11th Venice Biennale of Architecture* in 2008 (Figure 4). As such, the subject matter at first glance seems entirely contemporary. Like *Melancholia*, however, *Cloud* draws emphatically on older cultural traditions, not the Western tradition of allegorical skies we have been considering but rather the Eastern tradition of eremitic landscape painting and poetry that signifies withdrawal from the urban world of human affairs to the enchanted realm of cloud-capped mountains where the gods live. Who, however, would retreat to a majestic realm of electrically whirring white goods such as these? Escape from industry has been blocked at its farthest point of refuge: the sky. There can be no doubt in this instance, as there was in *Melancholia*, about the relevance of global warming to the artwork, though there is plenty of room for cognate themes as well.

Another difference from the film is that the installation has no fixed allegorical meaning but rather leaves spectators to find meaning in it, yet a wide range of possible interpretations shares the common quality of paradox. I arrived at this conclusion after holding a number of question sessions about it to see if groups of mostly young undergraduates could come to a consensus about its significance. On the whole, they did. I asked them: How is the installation like a sky? The answer was that the forms are aloft, seemingly unsuspended, and have a white color roughly consistent with clouds. The units are clouds, moreover, that carry electricity (like thunderclouds). So how is the installation unlike clouds? It is mechanical rather than natural; its forms are static, opaque, and rectangular, not wispy, diaphanous, nor curved. Neither do they change their shape as clouds do. Their off-white tones are fixed, with colors and shapes that do not evolve and change

63 For an excellent discussion and pictorial survey of the eremitic tradition, see Liu Yang, *Fantastic Mountains: Chinese Paintings from the Shanghai Museum*, with Edmund Capon and Stephen Little (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004).
as clouds do. They are apparitions in a sky that neither blows nor whistles nor delivers thunderclaps but hums electrically. Rather than driven by the wind, these clouds generate it. So is the installation art? Yes, because it is purposeless, as Immanuel Kant said art should be, not like air conditioners, except when they are skied aloft like this.

For in this case, the machines are deprived of their main function: to cool, heat, or purify human-formed interiors for comfort, yet they also refine upon nature as art does by purifying air. But no, it is not art because its conspicuous and purposeless wastefulness is ugly and immoral. But once again it is art because it allows us to perceive a series of forms in a new light so that they deviate from their sources in “reality,” though it also make us see ordinary things in new ways and from new angles, for we read not only clouds into the installation but also an inverted view of a cityscape in the style of the modernist architect and town planner Le Corbusier. If we imagine we are looking down rather than up at it, the assemblage resembles a streetscape, “not least because its mostly rectangular, squat forms and vents evoke the cool, sober designs of modern apartment blocks, and the squeaky clean future they promise.”

The plastic forms also convey Kant’s higher aesthetic level of purposeful purposelessness, for in losing their customary utility,

---

these machines call out of us a reformist impulse to stop wasting energy. Are the meanings of the installation stable and publicly accessible then? Yes, because it asks us to contemplate conservation issues aesthetically by showing that art can be just as wasteful as commercially useful objects. It invites us to participate in a sense of responsibility for this waste by enjoying its ambivalence as yet another kind of imaginative play between reality and fiction.

It is important to the higher meaning of the work that the installation is not run by an ecologically blameless machine such as a wind turbine outside the building. That would have eradicated its menacing, reforming impetus. It would also have stifled our need for this dystopian intrusion into the sky to incite an imaginative repurposing of human endeavor. Cloud lends a profoundly ironic time element to the term “temporary installation” since the artist’s instructions dictate that the power units must be kept “running continuously” for as long as the exhibit lasts. Such monotony is different from the rising crescendo of narrative time in Melancholia. It is a longer, relentless, agonizingly-even-toned long fuse that blends aesthetic pleasures with ethical anxiety to provoke awareness of the way our need for aesthetic purity is consistent with polluting the environment. And through another turn of paradox, this relentlessness conveys a menacing sense of transience. Art issues cannot be distinguished from life issues in this piece but together pose consistently meaningful questions to a broader public constituency than the art world. To assume the voice the piece might put into our minds: How long can a machine last? How long can the planet stand our abuse? How long will it stand us? How long will the power supply last? How long will the sky hold up?  

65 Only at Perm Modern Art Gallery, Russia, when I gave a version of this essay as a lecture on 21 June 2018, did several members of an audience conceive of the installation (perhaps on the pattern of a 5-year plan) as futuristic technology for resolving climate crisis.