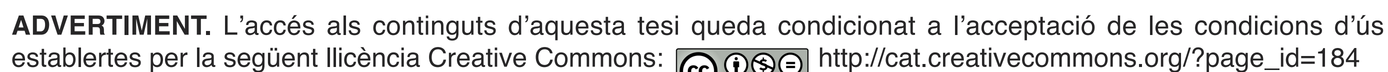

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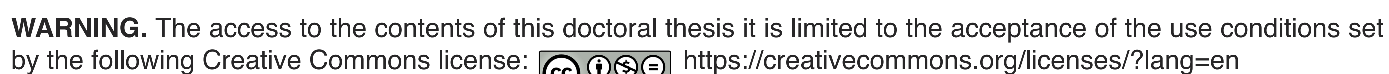

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PhD Dissertation

Apocalyptic Cinema as an Earnest Thought of Death
Kierkegaard and *Melancholia*

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Écoutant, en effet, les cris d'allégresse qui montaient de la ville, Rieux se souvenait que cette allégresse était toujours menacée. Car il savait ce que cette foule en joie ignorait, et qu'on peut lire dans les livres, que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais, qu'il peut rester pendant des dizaines d'années endormi dans les meubles et le lingue, qu'il attend patiemment dans les chambres, les caves, les malles, les mouchoirs et les paperasses, eu que, peut-être, le jour viendrait où, pour le malheur et l'enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse.

La Peste, Albert Camus

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To my family, for their unconditional love and support, and for creating everyday new occasions for me to be grateful to them. Especially to my mother, for her endless sacrifices, which I do not deserve.

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In loving memory of my grandparents.

Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to argue the potentiality of some apocalyptic movies to be a special occasion to think earnestly about one's own death in the terms explained by Søren Kierkegaard in the discourse "At a Graveside" (1845). In order accomplish this, I will first examine Kierkegaard's thoughts on death in his corpus, in which he criticises the external understanding of death and underlines its inexplicability and its irreducible subjective aspect. In this section I will focus specifically on what is stated in the aforesaid discourse. Second, I will defend cinema itself as a privileged medium to convey the apocalyptic imaginary. Third, I will examine the field of apocalyptic movies in order to define a type of cinema—which will be called *montrage* apocalyptic cinema—that, in the light of Kierkegaard's thoughts on death in "At a Graveside", will be considered as a special occasion to think earnestly about one's own death. In this regard, I will argue that, for their features—which revolve around the essential ambiguity of our existence—, these apocalyptic films have the capacity to allow us to subjectively confront and appropriate the thought of one's own death. And finally, I will analyse Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) as a paradigmatic example of this type of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema.

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Abbreviations of Søren Kierkegaard's works

English translations

CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. and ed. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)

CD *Christian Discourses* and *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an actress*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

CI *The Concept of Irony*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments*," 2 vols., trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

EO *Either/Or*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)

EPW *Early Polemical Writings*, trans. and ed. Julia Watkin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

FSE *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!* trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

FT *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)

JP1 *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers: Vol. 1, A-E*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967)

KJN1 *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks: Vol. 1, Journals AA–DD*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble and Brian Söderquist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

KJN2 *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks: Vol. 2, Journals EE–KK*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, Vanessa Rumble, Brian Söderquist and George Pattison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)

PC *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991)

PF *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)

PV *The Point of View: On My Work as an Author, The Point of View for my Work as an Author, and Armed Neutrality,* trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

R *Repetition*. See *Fear and Trembling*

SLW *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)

SUD *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)

TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

WA *Without Authority*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

WL *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995)

Introduction

1. Methodological introduction

1.1. Genesis and objectives

This dissertation emerges as the product of two intuitions and a personal conviction in relation to philosophy itself that here I will attempt to convey in a philosophical reflection. In the first place, due to a very personal and a longstanding concern for the thought of one's own death, I have always had the intuition that—at least in my socio-cultural context—there is a vast number of people that do not think about death as their own death. For as long as I can remember, the idea that we are all going to die, and that this can happen at any moment, generates in me an ambiguous thought that mixes fascination with fear. Indeed, one of the most fundamental defining characteristics of human beings is that we live with the knowledge that we are mortal. However, I believe that it is legitimate to ask if we actually feel that we are mortal—that is, if we think about death not as something external, but as something that will affect us personally and inevitably. If this question is legitimate, it is because there is an essential difference between an abstract knowledge and an existential knowledge. This difference was illustrated by Tolstoy when writing about Ivan Ilyich, an individual who used to think about death as something that only affects others, and who was unable to accept his impending death upon realising he would die within a few days as the result of an illness. The following fragment of Tolstoy's story highlights this difference between an abstract knowledge of death and a personal appropriation of the thought of one's own death:

> The example of a syllogism which he had learned in Kiezewetter's *Logic*: "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had seemed to him all his life to be true as applied to Caius but certainly not as regards himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal, was perfectly correct; but he was not Caius, nor man in the abstract: he had always been a creature quite, quite different from all others (…) And Caius was certainly mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my thoughts and emotions—it's a different matter altogether. (Tolstoy 1960, 137)

Here Tolstoy depicts the intuition that I was mentioning—namely, the possibility that some people might think about death as the death of some person in general but not as their own death. In some sense, as Spinoza explains in his *Ethics*, "we feel and know by experience that we are eternal" (1988, 607-608). In this particular sense, my research is

also inspired by an assumption and a conviction: the assumption is that, because of this feeling of eternity, we run the risk of thinking about death from the abstract point of view that all humans are mortal, and thus we think of it externally but not existentially; and the conviction is that we need to approach death as a personal confrontation with one's own mortality, understood as our untransferable and essential condition.

The second intuition originates in the former, as well as my own personal interest in cinema. It may be articulated as the potential for some apocalyptic movies to make us move from the abstract and external understanding of death to an existential and subjective one. Indeed, it is well established that cinema has the potential to tell us things about ourselves and to make us confront, understand, and perhaps rethink our own ideas and emotions, being the thought of death one of the most universal and common. In this regard, when underlining fear and anxiety as essential elements in horror films, Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz note that "there is something mysterious about the fact that audiences, first of all, derive enjoyment from exposure to fearful and anxiety-inducing performances and, second of all, that they desire reexposure to these stimuli again and again" (2009, 15). This observation—which, from my understanding, also applies to some apocalyptic movies—brings us back to an idea that has already been noted and that constitutes an essential element of my intuition about apocalyptic movies: the ambiguous feeling of attraction and repulsion that some people experience when confronted with death, especially in relation to disasters—which in the end are a minor form of apocalypse. Therefore, the second intuition from which my dissertation stems is that a certain type of apocalyptic films which revolve around the essential ambiguity of our existence can be a special occasion to think about one's own death from a subjective point of view. And at this point it must be noted that if I write that they can become "an occasion" it is because I do not affirm that these type of films—which will be defined further on—necessarily generate in the viewer the understanding of death as one's own personal and untransferable death. Such an affirmation would be precipitous and even absurd, not to mention that it would imply a type of psychological approach far removed from the philosophical perspective that I will maintain throughout this dissertation. In the end, it is impossible to control the viewers' interpretation and the effect that a film has on them: while, when watching a horror movie, some may experience fear, others might laugh as if the film is a comedy. What is important from a philosophical perspective is that I will posit and defend that

some apocalyptic films have the potentiality to create the conditions to generate the aforesaid thought of one's own death.

Finally, the personal conviction regarding philosophy that I have mentioned is that one of its more important tasks is self-knowledge—in other words, to follow the advice of the ancient Greek maxim *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* ("know thyself"). Hence, I have desired to write a thesis about a topic that I was personally touched by. This statement might sound hollow insofar as it is presumable that everyone who attempts such an important endeavour does so because he has a strong interest in the subject. However, it sometimes happens that, for one reason or another, the researcher gets lost in abstract speculation. For this reason, my aim was to write an academic dissertation about something that helped me to learn more about myself. And although I will not claim that some apocalyptic movies necessarily generate in the viewer the earnest thought of one's own death but that they can create the conditions to awaken it, I do not consider myself so different or special as not to think that my research can also be an occasion for others to subjectively approach the aforesaid thought. In the end, there seems little point in trying to understand something without understanding oneself. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his journals, "[i]n relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who has built a vast palace while he himself lives nearby in a barn" (KJN2, 279). Therefore, according to him, "[s]piritually, a man's thoughts must be the building in which he lives—otherwise it's wrong" (279). In other words, there is no thought if the thought is not lived.

This leads us to the choice of the theoretical framework that will be used to defend the claim that some apocalyptic movies are an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death. I understood from the beginning that Kierkegaard's philosophy would be the perfect tool to approach my subject of study. On the one hand, he had an intense and enduring concern with the way philosophy approaches truth and existence. As we shall see further on, he believed that, in relation to ethico-religious issues, every individual has to find a truth that is truth for him. That is to say, we must not ignore the relation between truth and the individual who searches for it—a search that requires passion and commitment. On the other hand, two of the most present and remarkable topics in Kierkegaard's corpus are anxiety and the thought of one's own death. For all this, I was interested in approaching his ideas on these topics, and in using them to philosophically develop the intuition about apocalyptic movies that, as mentioned above, originated the

present dissertation. Therefore, the aim of my work is to account for Kierkegaard's thoughts on death and anxiety to defend that some apocalyptic movies—that I will define as *montrage* apocalyptic movies—have a philosophical value as an occasion to think earnestly about our own death in the terms explained in "At a Graveside", a discourse in which he examines our relation with death and exposes that to understand it as the main human condition is not the same as to understand it as my own particular personal condition. From this perspective, I will attempt to defend that *montrage* apocalyptic movies may be a significant driving force for philosophical thought—in relation to the earnest thought of death—and not just to create cinematographic thought of aesthetic pleasure. In other words, I will attempt to build a theory that defends the possibility to think, neither *about* nor *from* apocalyptic cinema, but *in* or *through* apocalyptic cinema.

1.2. Structure, state of the art, limits, and exclusions

In order to develop this objective, this dissertation is divided into a thematic introduction and three chapters. With the intent to contextualise the possibility that some apocalyptic movies could be an occasion to stimulate the earnest thought of death, it is first important to ask if this thought is a challenging one for individuals in our socio-cultural environment. Therefore, the thematic introduction starts by approaching the subjective experience of death through examining the issue of whether death is taboo in contemporary Western societies. In this regard, it must be noted that I do not intend to address cultural nor social specificities of any kind. The aim of my research is not to approach the subjective experience of death from a historical, sociological, or psychological perspective. I am well aware that this experience might depend on factors as varied as the historical, religious, and cultural context, the concept of individuality, and even the life-view of each human being based upon his particular circumstances. However, due to the length limits imposed on a dissertation like this one, my purpose is to restrict the object of study and to examine the thought of one's own death from a very specific philosophical perspective—namely, Kierkegaard's approach in the discourse "At a Graveside". Certainly, a particular historical and cultural context is required, and thus I will start the thematic introduction with a brief historical context of the changes that the relationship of individuals with death has recently experienced in contemporary

Western societies. However, this development will be limited to Kierkegaard's understanding of the thought of one's own death.

For this reason, the second half of the thematic introduction will be an approach to Kierkegaard's philosophy. In this section, I will first address his authorship, the issue of indirect communication, and the hermeneutical problem that arises when dealing with his texts. Secondly, I will attempt to synthesise some essential topics of his works that, from my perspective, are requires to illuminate his understanding of the thought of one's own death, such as existence, the single individual, subjectivity, truth, and anxiety. And finally, I will defend Kierkegaard's thoughts on death as an original key strain in the history of philosophy of death that places between brackets the possibility of post-mortem subjectivity and insists on the impact that the thought of one's own death might have in the life of individuals. In this regard, it is important to underline that my approach to Kierkegaard will be philosophical and not theological, and, more concretely, that I will attempt a non-religious reading of the central Kierkegaardian concepts that I will use in this dissertation. In any case, I will develop this explanation further when dealing specifically with Kierkegaard's texts. Moreover, it is also relevant to note that, if it seems that my voice takes some time to appear, it is because my aim is not to make any specific contribution to Kierkegaardian studies, but to use his concepts to approach the possibility of the earnest though of death in relation to some apocalyptic movies. Needless to say, in the process of introducing the aspects of his philosophy that are central for my research, I will position myself in a certain reading and understanding of them, making this way several philosophical claims. However, my voice will become more present as upon approaching the topic of apocalyptic cinema.

Furthermore, from a thematic perspective, it must be remarked that the scope of this dissertation does not extend to a consideration of other philosophical contemporary works that have also approached the topic of death in terms that relate in one way or another to Kierkegaard's perspective in "At a Graveside", such as Freud's *Thoughts for the Times of War and Death*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Levinas' *God, Death, and Time*, and Derrida's *Aporias*, to mention some of the most influential. Although I will mention some of these works, along with others, I intend to focus on Kierkegaard's approach for the reason that my research is not a philosophical comparative of the philosophy of the thought of one's own death, but an analysis of apocalyptic cinema through "At a Graveside". Due to the advisable and conventional length limits of a PhD

research, I have preferred to focus on the philosophical framework in an attempt to exhaust the possibilities of a concrete text rather than to examine and compare several works from different authors, because such an examination and comparison would have resulted in a mere factual summary of ideas on the thought of one's own death. To rearticulate a foundational element of interest, I will use Kierkegaard's ideas in "At a Graveside" to examine the possibility that some apocalyptic movies have the potentiality to create the occasion for the earnest thought of death. Moreover, at this point it is also important to stress that although some Freudian categories—such as the "uncanny" (*unheimlich*)—may appear useful for my purposes here, the psychoanalytic approach does not take part of the theoretical framework of this dissertation. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, I prefer to stick to Kierkegaard's perspective, because its philosophy will prove itself to be a fruitful and sufficient tool to approach the subject of study of this dissertation. Secondly, opening the door to Freud or Lacan's concepts would have compelled my research into another field of study. Indeed, psychoanalysis is a vast domain by itself that demands a certain specific vocabulary to which we would have to be familiarised with in order to use it to approach apocalyptic movies, and such task goes beyond the limits of my research. Thus, to iterate once more, I will not evaluate the subject of my dissertation from a psychological perspective, and I do not intend to uncover what is really in the depths of everyone's mind regarding the thought of one's own death—if that is possible at all. For all this, I prefer to approach my topic from a strictly philosophical perspective.

With these qualifications in mind, the first chapter of this dissertation contains a thematic reading of Kierkegaard's corpus that seeks to be a review of his thoughts on death in those works in which death has an important role. I will not attempt to extract a unitary 'Kierkegaardian philosophy of death', but instead to contextualise the ideas on death in "At a Graveside" by searching for relations and contrapositions with the earnest thought of death as exposed in the aforesaid discourse. This means that, from all the topics about death that can be found in Kierkegaard's corpus, I focus on those that Kierkegaard develops in "At a Graveside". For this reason, as well as for the limits and exclusions explained above, I have neither included a state of the art in relation to contemporary philosophical discussions on the thought of one's own death, nor an exhaustive analysis of those Kierkegaardian studies that are focused on death in the totality of Kierkegaard's authorship. Instead, I have approached secondary

Kierkegaardian literature that comments on both the form and the content of “At a Graveside”, because it has allowed for deeper analysis into the main theoretical framework that I use to build my proposal.

In the second chapter I analyse apocalyptic cinema with the aim to define what I will call *montrage* apocalyptic movies, which will be defended as an occasion to think earnestly about one’s own death in a similar manner that Kierkegaard’s “At a Graveside”. In order to achieve this, I will first approach the apocalyptic literary genre, its process of secularisation, and its pervasiveness and penetration in contemporary popular culture. Secondly, I will further delve deeper into my subject of study by defending cinema itself as a privileged medium to convey the apocalyptic imaginary, by making a brief thematic review and classification of apocalyptic films, by examining the relation between them and the thought of one’s own death, and by defining the characteristics of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema. Finally, I will elaborate the reasons that have influenced me to defend this type of apocalyptic cinema as a special occasion for the earnest thought of death as described by Kierkegaard in “At a Graveside”. As in the second chapter, the state of the art is limited to the secondary literature that helps me to expand upon each aforesaid topic. This means that I will neither engage in discussions about the potentiality of cinema to stimulate certain emotions in the viewer nor about its status as philosophical thought.

In relation to its status as philosophical thought, an approach to this topic would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, I will assume as a basic premise that cinema, as well as written works, has the potentiality to become a driving force to generate philosophical thought. It seems quite obvious that, while some movies do not actualise this capacity, others do. Even more, taking into account that death seems to be an experience that exceeds any theoretical attempt to grasp it, and thus philosophical discourse encounters a barrier that cannot be overcome, *montrage* apocalyptic cinema will be defended as an occasion to realise this limit and to appropriate subjectively the thought of one’s own death. In other words, I will examine in which sense some apocalyptic movies can help us to think the unthinkable in a particular way that parallels Kierkegaard’s “At a Graveside” and is unattainable for a certain type of philosophy—a philosophy that, as we will see, Kierkegaard criticises. From Kierkegaard’s perspective there is no thought if the thought is not lived, and I believe that some apocalyptic movies can help the viewers to subjectively appropriate the earnest thought of one’s

own death. Hence, to reduce the scope of my field of study, I will approach relevant philosophical works which support the aforesaid statement—namely, that *montrage* apocalyptic movies have the potentiality to become a special occasion to generate philosophical thought in relation to the earnest thought of death.

Regarding the potentiality of cinema to stimulate emotions in the viewer, my approach, as stated, is not psychological. Moreover, I am not proposing that cinema stimulates emotions, but that a particular type of apocalyptic cinema might become an occasion for the earnest thought of death. To my current knowledge, there are no other academic works that attempt to use "At a Graveside" for a study of apocalyptic cinema, and thus there is no specific literature on this topic. At the same time, my topic is neither the apocalyptic imaginary in general, nor its relation with mass culture in Western societies. Therefore, although I will introduce these subjects in order to contextualise my research, I will not write a specific review of the state of the art in these fields of study. However, I will approach supporting secondary philosophical literature on cinema that supports my argument for the potentiality of some apocalyptic movies to create the narrative and aesthetic conditions which would stimulate the earnest thought of death.

Finally, in the last chapter, I will analyse Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* through the theoretical framework constructed in the preceding sections. This analysis will serve to defend *Melancholia* as a paradigmatic example of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema—that is, the type of apocalyptic cinema that, as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", constitutes a special occasion for the earnest thought of death. In order to further properly define my line of research, a few clarifications must be made. Firstly, this dissertation does not aim at finding the thoughts of Kierkegaard in the narrative of the film. Instead, it uses the ideas found in "At a Graveside" to analyse the movie as an occasion for the earnest thought of death. That is to say that although I will sometimes interpret the behaviour of the characters from a Kierkegaardian perspective, this is not my primary goal. My dissertation is not about the alleged philosophical content of the film, but about the possibility that *Melancholia* has a philosophical value as a special occasion for the earnest thought of death in the Kierkegaardian sense. Secondly, and for the same reason, I do not intend to determine the cinematographic value of Trier's film from an aesthetic perspective. Rather, the objective is to examine the films philosophical value in relation to the topic at hand. Thirdly, although the title of the film is *Melancholia*, I will not address this psychological condition. Certainly, I will sometimes comment on it

and I will seek its relation with certain aspects of Kierkegaard's works, but only insofar these comments and relations help me to enlighten the possibility of the movie as an occasion for the earnest thought of death. As stated, my approach is not psychological, and I am not interested in analysing Trier's film as a representation of the melancholic state. While such a project would be interesting, it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation. It should not be forgotten that I will analyse *Melancholia* as a paradigmatic example of the theory on apocalyptic cinema that I have been trying to construct. In other words, the analysis of this film is not the main goal of my dissertation. And finally, by the same token, it must be underlined that this research is not focused on Lars von Trier's filmography. As with other issues, I will make some references to Trier's work, but only insofar they help me to defend *Melancholia* as a paradigmatic example of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema. For all this reasons, I have primarily approached the secondary literature that examines *Melancholia* from the philosophical perspective; and more concretely, from that philosophical perspective that runs parallel to mine—that is, those analyses that do not intend to find the philosophy of this or that author in the movie, but to discuss its philosophical value as a driving force to stimulate the reflection on one's own death.

1.3. Final methodological considerations

The fact that this dissertation is constructed at the intersection of philosophy and cinema—being this way an academic two-headed monster—has certain consequences both in relation to the form and to the content that need to be explained. Some of them have been already clarified when exposing the exclusions. In sum, as noted, the object of study has to be clearly delimitated in order to approach the topic without going into excessive details in relation to both cinema and philosophy. Much has been written about Kierkegaard as well as about the potentiality of cinema to stimulate philosophical knowledge, though this dissertation is neither about the one nor about the other field of study. Therefore, it intends to maintain a difficult interdisciplinary equilibrium that might become challenging for a researcher focused exclusively on either of the two aforementioned areas. Because of this, as well as for the complex nature of Kierkegaard authorship, this methodological introduction is followed by a thematic introduction to such an important topic for the purposes of my research.

Even more importantly, if so far I have neither mentioned any of the names that will form part of the secondary literature nor the state of the art in each field, it is because this will be specified and developed in a corresponding section of this dissertation. Indeed, in the first part, I will approach the secondary literature about Kierkegaard needed to build the theoretical framework that will be used to examine apocalyptic movies. And in the second part, I will analyse in each corresponding category—apocalyptic literature, its secularisation, and its penetration into popular culture; apocalyptic cinema in general; *montrage* apocalyptic cinema in particular; and *Melancholia* as a paradigmatic example of it—the works that helped me defend the main thesis of my dissertation of the main thesis of my dissertation. Moreover, during the development of this work, more minor methodological decisions will be specified when necessary.

Furthermore, it must be clarified that, insofar as this research is not about the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, I have used the Hong translations of his works. If my dissertation was a philosophical or theological investigation about Kierkegaard in order to make a certain contribution to the Kierkegaardian studies, I would certainly have attempted to develop the necessary competence to read Kierkegaard in Danish and to use the *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS) edited by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre. However, for the purposes of my work, the linguistic nuances are not relevant enough as to use the original Danish. Needless to say, on the few occasions that these nuances have been relevant, I have drawn on the Danish language in order to make the pertinent clarifications. However, these few occasions do not justify the use of the SKS edition. Additionally, with respect to the English translation, I have used the Hong edition since it is the edition of reference for English Kierkegaard research, despite the existence of other translations of particular works, and despite the fact that some specialists could rightfully argue that in some cases these translations are more accurate. Yet for the sake of consistency, I have preferred to utilize the Hong edition, which for me has been the most accessible both physically and philosophically. Finally, I want to clarify that if the present dissertation, despite the fact that it is focused on cinema, does not uses frames or images of the movies mentioned, it is simply because they would be perhaps complementary but not essential for the defence of my thesis. In such cases where in which I discuss relevant scenes or sequences of the films utilised for this

dissertation, I include the cinematographic reference in a footnote to help the reader to access, if deemed necessary, the specific content.

2. The thought of one's own death

2.1. Awareness of mortality

Mortality is a defining characteristic of existence—perhaps, *the* defining characteristic. Not surprisingly, it is one of our fundamental concerns, if not the greatest one. In fact, death is so important in our lives and so threatening for individual and social structure that, as Peter Berger said, "[e]very human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death" (1967, 51). For this reason, it has been a central topic in the history of human storytelling. However, in the last sixty years studies relating in very varying ways to death have grown significantly. Sociology, psychology, and medicine have carried out numerous investigations related to hospices and palliative care, education and support for the dying, euthanasia, the fear generated by death, and the consequences for medical staff of working with the presence of death.

In other words, as concerning any other object of study, we can approach death from several points of view: the process of dying, social rituals, attitudes, the death of the other, etc. Here, specifically, I am interested in the reflection about one's own death in the sense stated by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". The fact is that if we have to remind ourselves that we are mortal—as Kierkegaard points out—is perhaps because there is a taboo of death, something that many academics have argued. Although for Kierkegaard the issue is not if death is a matter of taboo but of not being able to earnestly thing death—that is, to think death[1] as one's own death—, first it will be helpful to examine the debate on the taboo of death in order to understand if there is such a taboo. Indeed, since the mid-1950s, after the publication of Geoffrey Gorer's "The Pornography of Death" and Philippe Ariès' *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, some academics have discussed if death is really a taboo in our cultural context, and if our societies are death-denying. And part of this

[1] Although the expression "to think death" is not common in English, it is the one adopted by the Hong edition to translate the Danish expression *at tænke Døden*.

literature—which I will address in the following—has created the conventional wisdom that death is the great taboo of our day.

On the one hand, it is difficult to deny that in everyday life there is a lack of public discussion about death and that this subject tends to generate discomfort and even rejection. But on the other hand, its presence in the media is continued, literature is growing increasingly, there are more academic programs on human mortality and more concern about how to take care of the dying. This suggests that attitudes and narratives about death are changing and that taboo, if it ever existed, is vanishing.

In order to offer an overview of one of the main themes of this work, I will briefly outline some of the most influential theories about the alleged taboo of death. The goal of this section, however, is not to demonstrate whether we live in death-denying societies or not, but to examine the arguments of proponents and opponents of this thesis. This will help us understand to which extent the social changes of the last century have made it harder for individuals to think about their own mortality.[2] In this sense, it is important to note that, in this analysis of the proponents and opponents of the taboo thesis, I will shift the perspective from a psychological and sociological approach to an existential and ontological one.

2.2. Death as taboo in contemporary Western societies

Of all the proponents of the thesis that in our cultural context death is taboo, the most quoted—at least in the Western academy—are the mentioned works of Gorer and Ariès. Gorer's "The Pornography of Death" rapidly became a reference and spread the idea that death has replaced sex as the major taboo topic in contemporary Western societies. Gorer argues that in the twentieth century "there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more and more 'mentionable,' particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more 'unmentionable' *as a natural process*" (1955, 50). Before that, at least during the

[2] Before that, two basic concepts should be clarified. In an anthropologically strict sense, the concept "taboo" refers to something vehemently prohibited or forbidden. This prohibition is usually supernatural and is based on the belief that the object of taboo is too sacred or too accursed for individuals to deal with it directly. However, here I will use the concept in a broader sense, namely, as something that creates discomfort and is not easily mentioned in conversations. As for the concept "denial", its habitat is usually psychoanalysis, a doctrine that, as stated, is not included in the theoretical framework of this research. Therefore, even if I will make reference to it when mentioning the theories of academics that have used it to describe a particular attitude towards death, I would rather work with "taboo" than with "denial".

Victorian era, death was a natural part of daily life: people were used to witness other peoples' death, children were encouraged to think about it, cemeteries were the centre of old villages, death was considered edifying, etc.

According to Gorer, the reasons for this shift are the following. On the one hand, without the belief in the after-life—which, he asserts, is very uncommon today —the natural process of dying is too difficult to contemplate or even to discuss (51). On the other hand, the development of preventive medicine and the improvement of public health have reduced mortality amongst the young to such degree that the experiences related to death and bereavement amongst them have become unusual (51). At the same time, Gorer assures, violent deaths have increased in a quantity never seen before (51). In his opinion, these facts explain why death has a fundamental and growing role in mass fiction: the same prudery that impedes conversations on the natural process of dying has lead us to a pornographic way of reconciling ourselves with the inevitability of death (51). In other words, the preoccupation about the natural process of dying has become morbid. And according to him this is problematic, because the contemporary preoccupation with death is not realistic, as it was before, but unrealistic, voyeuristic, and immature (52). Thus, Gorer concludes with a moral advice: "If we dislike the modern pornography of death, then we must give back to death—natural death—its parade and publicity, re-admit grief and mourning. If we make death unmentionable in polite society—'not before the children'—we almost ensure the continuation of the 'horror comic.' No censorship has ever been really effective" (52).[3]

Like Gorer, Philippe Ariès affirms that death has replaced sex as the main taboo. In the historical analysis *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, he describes the evolution of attitudes towards death, from tamed death in the Middle Ages to forbidden death in contemporary Western world. Ariès concludes that

[3] Gorer's thesis has been very influential and has received much and diverse criticism. Some critique has historical concerns: idealisation of Victorian mourning rituals; the difficulty to consider death as taboo bearing in mind the great number of publications about the topic after World War I and II; and the differences and improvements between today and Gorer's time. There is also the issue about the Freudian psychoanalytic background when he suggests that repressed feelings are expressed in pathological ways. As I see it, even if we accept that there is a cultural norm that inhibits us to express bereavement in public—which is not clear—, this does not necessarily indicate psychological repression. And finally, the supposition that our societies are interested in disasters, horror comics, war images—or even apocalyptic movies—because death is taboo, should be analysed more carefully, for the simple reason that, one way or another, humanity has always been interested in death. Moreover, I would not dare to point to all these contemporary fantasies as morally wrong fictions, and I certainly would not claim that the interest in them is immature in all cases, insofar as it seems a generalisation. As mentioned, here I will defend that some of these fictions can be used as an occasion to think earnestly about death. In any case, we shall see the critiques of the taboo argument more accurately in the following section.

the general attitude of our societies is characterised by fear and embarrassment: “Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden” (1974, 85). Death, says Ariès, threatens culture. Therefore, it must be tamed. In ancient days, this was achieved through religion and rituals. But the social changes in the last centuries—basically, individualism, romanticism and secularism—have left the contemporary individual without the tools to deal with death. Because of this, people tend to reject it and hide it.

Until the eleventh century, death was a familiar and tamed phenomenon (58). There was a rich structure of public and private rituals that helped people to deal with death. The dying person used to pass away in his room surrounded by relatives and friends of all ages in a ceremony presided by himself. According to Ariès, death was faced without despair and accepted with resignation as the collective destiny of the species (55). But during the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was a fundamental change: the interest for individuality and the destiny of the dying were accentuated—as evidenced by the personalisation of the graves and the interest in the decomposition of the body. Furthermore, Ariès says, people discovered their own death. The process of dying became the privileged place where “each man would discover the secret of his individuality” (51-52).

The next shift in the attitude towards death came about between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when the concern changed from one’s own death to the death of the other (56). For Ariès the explanation lies, among other things, in the eroticism of death—which originated in the Gothic sensibility—, the fascination of Romanticism for the beauty of the deceased—which helps to convert death into a rupture that, as the sexual act, pulls the individual out from his everyday life—, the increasing difficulty of the mourners to accept the death of the other, and the worship of the cemeteries.

However, all these changes occurred slowly. By contrast, in our time and just in a third of a century, “we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings” (85). Indeed, he argues that, in the twentieth century, Western societies are experiencing a rapid revolution related to secularisation, institutionalisation, and medicalisation of death. The fading of the old death rituals hampers the acceptance of our biological reality and, in Ariès’ opinion, individuals become unable to come to terms with their own mortality. Because of this, societies have a double will of protection. On the one

hand, people tend to withhold from the dying the severity of their condition to avoid them the suffering that implies the imminence of their death. On the other, in order to not disturb the society with the discomfort and embarrassment caused by the presence of death, the dying are isolated in hospitals, hospices, and nursing homes, where death has become a technological process determined by medical decision (103).[4] By these means, death loses a dramatic quality that could upset the family and friends of the dying. The last service of the doctors is to provide an acceptable death—that is, a death with a minimum of disruption of daily life that can be tolerated by the people present. It is expected that the patients have the delicacy and the courage to die quietly and that their relatives avoid excessive emotional reactions, which no longer inspire compassion but discomfort. In other words, the living are deprived of their mourning and the dying of their own demise.[5]

2.3. Critiques of the taboo argument

After Gorer's and Ariès' works, the thesis of a death taboo in Western societies became almost a cliché.[6] However, since the end of the twentieth century several critiques have

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[4] To describe this phenomenon, some sociologists have argued that in contemporary Western societies death has been *sequestered*. See, for example, Giddens' *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) and Mellor's and Shilling's *Modernity, self-identity and the sequestration of death* (1993).

[5] Like Gorer, Ariès has received a lot of criticism, above all regarding methodology, because his division of attitudes towards death in historical epochs in Europe seems to disregard cultural, religious, gender, and class issues. For example, Walter notes that Ariès' investigation is mainly focused on documents about the rich, forgetting that "[t]he poor have always been buried without much ritual, and are probably dispatched with more respect in modern welfare states than in any other epoch" (1991, 297). However, as mentioned, I shall address this criticism in the next section.

[6] Although an overview of this topic would go beyond the limits of my investigation—insofar as the aim of this section is to provide an introduction to the thought of one's own death in contemporary Western societies—, it is worth noting some of the prominent researchers who have also proposed the taboo thesis. For instance, Ernest Becker asserts in *The Denial of Death* (1973) that all societies are fundamentally death-denying, that the fear of death is universal, and that denial is the major way of coping with it. Therefore, according to him, denial is not a specific modern condition, but *the* human condition. Similarly to Ariès, Ivan Illich defends in *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, the Expropriation of Health* (1976) that Western societies are death-denying mainly because of medicalisation of death and the individualism of the twentieth century. Moreover, the clinical field has also contributed to the debate, especially insisting on the fact that not to talk about death has a negative effect on dying patients. In *The Meaning of Death* (1959), Herman Feifel confirms that, according to his experience, patients want to know that they are dying and want to talk about their thoughts and feelings, but they have difficulties to express it because it is evident that, in doing so, they disturb the living. This idea is also defended by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (1970), where she claims that our society has imposed the taboo of death on its individuals. She notices it, for example, in the difficulties that people have to talk with children about death, because they assume that it would be too difficult for them to bear. Finally, although psychoanalysis is not a part of my theoretical framework, it is fair to mention that many of these works—especially Gorer's and Becker's—have strong echoes of Freud's theories on death. In *Thoughts for the Times of War and Death* (1915), Freud explains that the traditional attitude towards death of what he calls "the civilised man" was to remove it from everyday life and to avoid thinking of it as one's own death. According to him, we fear our own death so much that we are unable to imagine or to conceive it. Denial is then an evasion of the idea that our ego will be annihilated at some point. On an unconscious level, all humans are convinced of their immortality. However, Freud asserts that, as a result of the massive mortality and

appeared. Even Ariès notes in *Western Attitudes toward Death* that the increase of literature on death suggests that it is becoming a topic that might be talked about.

In "The denial of death thesis: sociological critique and implications for palliative care", Zimmermann and Rodin analyse the main arguments for the taboo theory—the lack of conversation concerning death, the medicalisation of death and the segregation of the dying—and conclude that this thesis, if not false, is at least too simplistic. On the one hand, regarding the difficulties to talk about death, they consider that it is not enough to conclude that we deny its existence, because death is a disruptive topic and it always will be, and therefore, "[t]o expect that we will speak of death as easily as about any other subject is an unrealistic and undesirable expectation" (2004, 123). And, on the other hand, although it is evident that the dying are progressively segregated and that death has become increasingly medicalised, these facts do not prove a new attitude of denial. For Zimmermann and Rodin, segregation is a matter of efficiency that comes from our busy and individualistic societies: most people do not have the time or the resources to take care of their dying relatives. Concerning the medical aspects of the matter, Zimmermann and Rodin consider that it is true that scientific developments may encourage denial in the sense "that technology may be used to cure disease and to prolong life and we may be led to the idealistic conclusion that *all* diseases may be cured and *all* lives prolonged" (127). However, the use of technology "may also promote 'acceptance' of death in that the increased ability to prolong life has lead to discussions of when such 'heroic' measures are appropriate" (127). That is, the increasing ability to prolong life creates an intense debate among patients, doctors, family members, and society in general that compels us to talk about death. Therefore, if medicalisation and segregation can support both theses, to describe a society as death-denying or death accepting is oversimplified.

As a possible precursor to Zimmermann and Rodin, Blauner does not seem to consider medicalisation as necessarily reflecting denial, insofar as he affirms that it is a matter of functionality. Historically, he argues, all societies develop strategies to contain the disruptiveness of death. Contemporary Western societies achieve this goal mainly

destruction of WWI, we no longer can maintain our former denial attitude, and thus we are paralysed, because we have not yet found a new one. Along the same line, some years before, he argued in *Further remarks on the neuro-psychoses of defence* (1896) that the development of modern civilisation requires the suppression of death anxieties so that they do not disturb our everyday life. Hence, individuals have developed a psychological defence mechanism called substitutive formation to unconsciously substitute these anxieties with alternative objects.

through bureaucratisation, which is not a deliberate attempt to deny death but our characteristic form of regular and predictable social structure (383-387). According to Blauner, the change of social structure also explains the fact that contemporary passage rituals are less elaborate than in the past (387-389). Thanks to modern medicine and public health, today most people die at a relatively old age. Thus, we do not miss the deceased as much as in the past centuries, when people used to die young and the survivors needed elaborate mourning rituals to come to terms with their loss. Nowadays, bereavement is especially difficult, because we experience grief less frequently but more intensely (389). However, when people die, contemporary societies organise proper memorial services (383). Therefore, contrary to Gorer's thesis, the supposed lack of bereavement is a matter of social structure rather than a dysfunctional denial attitude. From this perspective, today death can be hidden but not denied.

That said, one of the consequences of this contemporary social organisation is the physical and emotional isolation of the dying. Elias also insists on this, arguing that isolation is not the result of a new attitude of denial but the effect of our social, structural conditions. In short, he affirms that people before the twentieth century were less likely to die isolated simply because they did not live alone as much as we do nowadays (2001, 18). Regarding death conversation, although today it is certainly more difficult to talk about it, he maintains that human beings have always repressed the consciousness of our finiteness (35). As Blauner, Elias remarks that nowadays death is usually expected as the end of a long life (48). Against Ariès, he denies that medieval death was domesticated and peaceful. On the contrary, existence back then was often violent, brief, and uncertain, especially compared to our relatively foreseeable contemporary lives (12-13). Hence, we see unpredictable and violent deaths as something rare and experienced by others and, unable to face the inevitability of our own death, we experience severe difficulties to come into contact with and to know how to behave in front of the dying and the mourners (10). But, again, this inability emanates from the social structure and not from a new and deliberate attitude of denial.

In summary, as Kellehear notes, "societies do not deny death but instead organize for it and around it" (1984, 720). He refutes that we live in death-denying societies, criticises the use of the term denial, and discusses the main arguments that, according to him, support the denial thesis: fear of death, medicalisation, and the twentieth century crisis of individualism. Regarding the term "denial", Kellehear argues that it is not an accurate

and meaningful scientific category (714). Firstly, the use of a psychological term to describe sociological phenomena tends to polarise the discussion and leads to personalisation of social systems in an artificial way. To confuse descriptions of individual motivations with explanations of public behaviour brings about a reductionist analysis of relations between individuals, society, and death. And secondly, it is not clear whether academics use the term to talk about the same thing or not, in the sense that objects of avoidance can be different, as for instance the prospect of annihilation or the evasion of ambiguous social relations. Hence, this concept has no explanatory value in terms of describing societies. As for the arguments to support the thesis that societies are death-denying, one of the most common is the one defended by Becker: the fear of death is universal and the most efficient way of coping with it is denial. For Kellehear, the main premise of this argument is a simplistic generalisation that does not take into account cultural, class and gender differences (713). According to him, although people do fear death, this fear is not universal, insofar as the fear of death is better understood as a fear of dying and this is determined by the predominant images of dying, which are culture-bound and thus not universal (715). Regarding medicalisation, Kellehear argues basically on the same note as Zimmermann, Rodin, Blauner, and Elias: today people die in hospitals and nursing homes not because society denies that they are dying but because social conditions have changed (716-717). Finally, Kellehear criticises the use of the term "denial" to argue, as Ariès and Illich do, that the alleged twentieth century crisis of individualism has deprived the individuals of a "good death"—that is, the ritualised control of their own death. For Ariès, this control today belongs to the medical-scientific community, and the concept of the "good death" has been substituted by the "natural death", a medically controlled death that finds us in an advanced age. According to Ariès, this dispossession is another consequence of the loss of autonomy of the twentieth century citizen. Kellehear questions the three main points of this argument. Firstly, he denies that the alleged crisis of individualism implies diminished levels of individual autonomy; on the contrary, the growing individualism of Western societies contributes to the resistance to conformity, as in the insistence on patient rights in a traditionally conservative and authoritarian institution such as medicine (718). Secondly, he affirms that the medicalisation of death does not come from any specific political ideology, and thus it is not a measure of the supposed diminished levels of independence we have in life but, if anything, a measure of our relationship with medicine (718). And thirdly, he asserts that it is not true anymore that the contemporary

individual does not preside over his own death: today individuals and associations are working to recuperate a "good death" (718), whether at home or in a hospice, and precisely thanks in part to the individualism mentioned before.

For all these reasons, Kellehear maintains that "there is little indication of a theoretical or empirical nature to believe that we are a 'death-denying' society in Aries' and Illich's terms" (718). Individuals have different public and private attitudes towards death: fear, sorrow, acceptance, anger and, among many others, also denial. Societies, however, do not deny death but organise for it. In Kellehear's words, they "exert forms of social control through sanctioning different types of myths and rituals toward it; culturally determine the conditions, circumstances and sometimes the nature of death; set in motion processes of conflict, reintegration and adjustments of roles" (720).

To complete this brief review of some of the criticism that the taboo argument has received, it is worth mentioning Walter's point of view. While he acknowledges Kellehear's contribution for pointing out that the concept of denial cannot explain how societies operate, Walter also contests that Kellehear does not "explore the related concept of taboo, nor asks why so many people should believe society is death denying if it is not or could not be" (1991, 295). Still, Walter believes that the taboo thesis, as it is usually formulated, lacks in subtlety and needs to be updated and refined with age, gender, ethnic and class considerations. Hence, he criticises some arguments of the taboo thesis and provides six alternatives in order to comprehend in more detail the complexity of our attitudes and practices towards death. To begin with, he asserts that, although there was a taboo among white middle classes, it is now disappearing, as evidenced by the large number of academic articles on this topic that have been published since the late 1960s (293), and in the changing and more expressive attitudes towards death (297). Further, as Blauner, Walter argues that, due to low death rates and hospitalisation of the dying, bereavement is a rare experience in contemporary Western societies and, therefore, death is not forbidden but just hidden (300).[7] Moreover, he

[7] From here, he points out the possibility that, if there is a taboo, it is limited to the professionals of medicine and media—the two institutions that, like clergy before, have most power to interpret and ritualise death for us—, insofar as, according to him, in both professions death is an embarrassment (302-303). However, this argument is highly questionable. One the one hand, doctors and nurse practitioners deal with death every day and thus are accustomed to it. In fact, on the contrary, I would argue that, if there is one area in which death is not taboo, it is precisely the medical field. And on the other, although it is true that journalists work in an environment that tends to be superficial and to promote youth, glamour, and health, it remains no less true that the media have a tendency to broadcast death news.

affirms that, as a consequence of the various ways in which death can be perceived—biomedical, psychiatric, secular, religious, etc.—, our discursive experience of death is fragmented and thus the usual embarrassment when people talk about death is not a matter of taboo but of confusion (303-304). He also raises the possibility that the denial thesis could be too simplistic, and that all societies must both accept and deny death: deny it to carry on with our daily life and accept it in order to be realistic. This argument[8] explains the difficulties that ensue if one wants to close the taboo debate, because both contenders can choose opposed examples in order to justify their theses (305). And finally, Walter maintains that it is the modern individual, not societies, who cannot cope with death, insofar as in contemporary Western societies the threat constituted by death is viewed mainly from the point of view of the individual (306).

2.4. The contemporary episteme of death

For all that we have seen in the above, it seems that, the taboo of death is not a specific characteristic of contemporary Western societies. However, just because our societies are not death-denying, that does not mean that the thought of one's own death is not troublesome for individuals themselves. Following Bendle, we may conclude this chapter by saying that what is specific of our society is a new 'episteme of death' that was born due to industrialisation, Fordism and World War II (2001, 349-354). Death has become an institutionalised, medicalised, bureaucratic, and technological process administered by professionals. While traditional epistemes were rooted on religion and philosophy, our episteme of administered death follows a scientific and economic rationality, which, in Bendle's opinion, dehumanizes and desacralizes the process of dying and involves a shift from a moral to a technological comprehension of death (361-363). In this context, individuals are no longer considered capable of dealing with death. Because of this, instead of an encounter with the singular truth of their own death, the dying find themselves immersed in a highly complex industrial process (363).

Therefore, even if is not taboo, the personal and subjective confrontation with one's own death—which is the topic of my research—remains highly problematic. In fact, the aforesaid social changes that affected our societies in recent centuries have created the conditions for individuals to have troubles thinking about and confronting their own

[8] Also defended by Dumont and Foss in *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial* (1972).

death. If we approach this issue historically and sociologically, maybe the taboo critics are right when affirming that there is no death taboo. However, if we approach death from an existential point of view it does not seem that the issue can be so easily dismantled. Despite the efforts to externalise and sanitise death—which, as we will see, Kierkegaard criticises intensely—, people do fear death.

Bendle's approach through Heidegger's *Being and Time* helps us to underline this essential difference between an external point of view versus an existential and subjective one—which, again, constitutes the centre of my investigation. According to Bendle, "[c]ritically, the Heideggerian analysis allows us to see how the contemporary episteme of death is intrinsically unable to comprehend the singular nature of human death because it does not observe the 'ontological difference', that is, it knows nothing of, nor does it recognize, the distinction between the ontological and the ontic" (2001, 364).[9] From this perspective, Bendle understands that the "contemporary episteme of death is constituted exhaustively by the factual, the ontic, that which is at hand; in the case of human beings these are seen—*can only be seen under the current episteme*—as naturalistic bodies embedded in a utilitarian universe, to be used and disposed of as required" (364). Thus the important issue for us here is that, as Bendle affirms (365), this contemporary episteme does not take into account the irreducible singularity of death; it only understands individuals as dead bodies that have to be administered and managed. That is, using Heidegger's terms, it only approaches death from an ontic point of view. However, from an ontological perspective things are quite different, because for Heidegger what characterises the Dasein is that "in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" (1962, 32). Indeed, the way of being of Dasein—what is constitutive of it, the ontological structure of human being—is being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). Hence, the concern for death becomes a radically subjective issue—that is, becomes a concern for one's own death.

For Bendle, Heidegger's approach to death in *Being and Time* helps us to understand "the nature and crucial weakness of the contemporary episteme" (2001, 365), which is to leave aside the essential singularity of death "that cannot be grasped by those sciences, technologies or discourses that remain only at the ontic level" (365). What is

[9] For Heidegger, while "ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them" (1962, 3).

more, "Heidegger's insight directs our attention to such occlusion of thought, to the singularity of human mortality that *cannot even be thought* within the current episteme of death (365). The importance of *Being and Time* notwithstanding, this critical consideration and its implied subjective approach to death had already been pointed out by Kierkegaard, not least in his piece entitled "At a Graveside", the discourse by which Heidegger's reflections on death seem to be inspired or even based.[10] In opposition to the impossibility to think about human death of contemporary episteme and its economical administration of it, Kierkegaard's discourse stresses the importance of thinking death as one's own death and its singularity and irreducibility. It could be argued, then, that the appropriation of death of the contemporary episteme is just an institutionalised appropriation of the death of the other, which stands in the way of a subjective appropriation—that is, an appropriation of death in a Kierkegaardian sense. And this explains why "At a Graveside" is the main core of my research. I understand that Kierkegaard's approach to death through the earnest thought of it—which, as mentioned, consists in thinking death as one's own death—can contribute with something vital in contemporary debates on the issue. I will furthermore defend the thesis that, in opposition to the so-called contemporary episteme, in an era in which societies tend to sanitise death or even to eliminate it from everyday life, some apocalyptic movies can constitute an occasion to confront and appropriate the thought of one's own death, its singularity and irreducibility. In order to do that, I will first examine the issue of death in Kierkegaard's text corpus, which criticises the abstract or logic understanding of death, claiming that it ignores its irreducible personal aspects.

[10] In this regard, there is a significant footnote in *Being and Time* placed immediately before the chapter on death that suggests the influence "At a Graveside" had in Heidegger's conception of this topic: "Thus, there is more to be learned philosophically from his 'edifying' writings than from his theoretical ones—with the exception of his treatise on the concept of anxiety" (1962, 494).

3. Approach to Kierkegaard

3.1. Authorship, indirect communication, and the hermeneutic problem

As we will see in the next chapter, death is indeed a recurring theme in Kierkegaard's authorship.[11] According to Mjaaland, it "is one of the most influential, controversial and most commonly misunderstood" (2006, 359) topics of his work, and "his way of thinking about death is decisive for the interpretation of other key concepts, such as existence, truth and repetition" (359) as well as otherness. However, as it happens with the rest of topics of his works, rather than a systematic and monolithic claim on death, Kierkegaard exposes several ideas from different authorial voices. From the *Symparanekromenoi*—the Community of the Deceased or the Fellowship of the Dead—in the early pseudonymous *Either/Or* to the late *For Self-Examination*—where Kierkegaard explains his notion of the Christian as someone dying to the world—, there is a remarkable diversity of reflections on death. Because of this variety, the relation between these polyphonic materials is not immediately clear and it has to be approached carefully. This explains why Mjaaland affirms that Kierkegaard's thoughts on death have sometimes been misunderstood, because in his corpus, despite the fact that we may find some solid and repeated ideas, there is not a monochromatic approach.

That being said, from his observations on death, the one that interests me the most is the earnest thought of death as exposed in the discourse on an imagined occasion "At a Graveside", which, consists in thinking death as one's own death rather than observing it from an abstract and external point of view—that is, as something that occurs to others. Despite the particular nuances of the several reflections on death in Kierkegaard's multiple voices, the one in this discourse does not stand alone, because

[11] As a biographical note with no methodological intentions, it is worth remembering that in Danish the surname "Kierkegaard"—an earlier spelling of "Kirkegård"—means "churchyard", "graveyard" or "cemetery" being the primary connotation. Actually death had a decisive presence in Kierkegaard's life. His father's first wife died childless and then he married his maid and distant cousin. They had seven children. But Søren's father was convinced he was damned because when he was young, exhausted after hours of tending sheep, he cursed God. He believed that all his children would not survive Christ's age. As it would turn out, only Peter—Søren's older brother—and Søren himself surpassed the age of thirty-three. Søren was the youngest and was confronted with the deaths of almost all his close relatives. He was six when his brother Michael died at twelve of a brain haemorrhage after a school accident, and nine when his eldest sister Maren Kirstine died at twenty-five of nephritis. Later, in 1932, his sister Nicoline Christine died after childbirth when she was thirty-three. His brother Niels Andreas died in 1833 in New Jersey at twenty-four. Søren's mother died in the summer of 1834 of typhoid. And finally, Petrea Severine, his youngest and closest sister, died in 1934 at the age of thirty-three, also after childbirth. Hence, it is not strange that a philosopher so familiarised with death would have a notable lifelong preoccupation with it. Actually, Søren died young himself when he was only forty-two, on the 11th of November, 1855. The only surviving Kierkegaard sibling was Peter Christian, who died in 1888.

the claim to think death as one's own death is transversal in his authorship and is directly related to his way of understanding philosophy as subjective or existential thinking. The essential issue is not to ask ourselves what death *is*—because death itself is inexplicable—but to consider how we relate to it, and specifically how we relate to *our own* death.

For these reasons, and despite the differences between Kierkegaard's reflections on death—from the late works, in which the thought of death is more attached to a Christian framework, to the ones that as "At a Graveside", as we shall see, have a more immanentalist approach—it should be useful for this investigation to contextualize the earnest thought of death. In order to accomplish this, I will make a brief review of these various ideas in those texts in which death has a significant importance. Therefore, in the last part of this section I will pursue Kierkegaard's assertions on death and, to the extent possible, I will relate these ideas with the earnest thought of death.

But first, considering that Kierkegaard's texts are the main theoretical framework of this dissertation, I shall start with a succinct summary of some of his basic philosophical contributions, especially those related to death. I am well aware that the task of attempting such introductory presentation is always bold regardless of the philosopher. In Kierkegaard's case, furthermore, for the reasons stated, the task is even more difficult. However, it is necessary to contextualize my field of study. Hence, in order to do that properly, I must begin by introducing the fundamental hermeneutic issue when interpreting Kierkegaard's authorship and when relating to the polyphonic contents of his works. In any case, despite the difficulty of such task, this preliminary clarification is important not just to contextualise the issue of death but also to set out my own methodological standpoint.

Indeed, Kierkegaard wrote an astonishing number of pages divided between those signed under his own name and those attributed to a dozen different pseudonyms. There is a general consensus that, while the former are religious meditations with an edifying purpose, the latter contain Kierkegaard's most essential contributions to philosophy, such as the concept of subjective or existential truth and the notion of the single individual. Between 1843 and 1846, and again between 1849 and 1850, pseudonymous works or what he called the works given by his "left hand" (PV, 36) alternate with edifying discourses or works given by his "right hand". This plurality of voices

constitute a singular strategy of communication through which Kierkegaard criticised the pretension of objectivity of classical metaphysical speculation, focusing on what in his opinion philosophy had abandoned as insignificant crumbs: the concrete existence of the single individual. In both *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments"* and *The Dialectics of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication* (of which the latter was published posthumously), Kierkegaard tries to explain the difference between objective and subjective truth. The former is truth understood as the adequacy between thought and being, is related to the *what*, and is usually transmitted by means of direct communication. In contrast, subjective truth is understood as the subject's appropriation of it and is concerned with the *how* and with the problem of authority—that is, that no one has a particular authority on the matters at hand. Subjective truths are fundamentally of an ethical and religious nature (SKS 7, 181), demand indirect communication—which, in Kierkegaard's case, plays with passion, seduction, irony, and a very personal poetic style—and require the subject's embodiment of it. As Laura Llevadot notes (2007, 436), while objective truths are hypothetical truths—in the sense that they are a recreation of reality by means of imagination and representation—,subjective truths are subjective experiences of the truth. The form of communication that corresponds to the former is what Kierkegaard calls a communication of knowledge (*Videns Meddelelse*), which is focused on the *what*, and the one that corresponds to the latter is a communication of capability (*Kunnens Meddelelse*), which is focused on the *how*. According to Llevadot (436), in the case of subjective truths the form is actually the message—the *how* is the *what*—in the sense that ethical and religious truths cannot be communicated objectively because the subject may perceive it as a knowledge that he does not have to embody. Thus Kierkegaard understands that ethical and religious communication cannot be just a cognitive exercise: they demand actualisation in the individual's life. In Kierkegaard's own words, "[a]ll communication of knowledge is in the medium of imagination", while "[t]he communication of capability is in the medium of actuality" (JP1, 651).

As suggested above, this distinction between objective and subjective truths and Kierkegaard's interest in ethico-religious issues pushed him to a singular strategy of communication that includes the pseudonyms. Kierkegaard created a multitude of characters that embodied different existential positions or life-views. Under those several pseudonyms, he was making himself invisible. As such, the attention is focused

on the content and not on the author. In this regard, I want to clarify that, as Perarnau notes (2005, 74), it would be a mistake to establish a correlation between styles of communication and authorship, considering that, while indirect communication is given by pseudonyms, direct communication is given by the works signed under his own name. Kierkegaard himself did not establish that correlation. Here I will consider the author Søren Kierkegaard as another pseudonym. However, I will return to this issue further on. For now I just want to underline that what truly matters for Kierkegaard is not the particular writer behind the books—who does not pretend to be an authority—, but the dialectical tension of ideal possibilities that the poetic ideality of the author offers to the reader, who has the task of making a leap and actualise them into existence. Ultimately, Kierkegaard followed Socrates' method: while the latter dedicated his life to accompany others into the exercise of seeking the truth for themselves, the former's indirect communication aimed to convert his texts into occasions that aroused the passion of the reader and pushed him to make decisions by himself.

However, the art of moving others without putting the author in a position of authority is paradoxical and ambiguous. As pseudonym Johannes Climacus notes in "An Understanding with the Reader", an appendix of the *Postscript*, the figure of the teacher runs de risk of interfering in the personal freedom of his readers or students (CUP, vol. 1, 620). And one of the maximum expressions of this difficulty is to write books about Christianity, which postulate that Christianity cannot be learned in a book. Kierkegaard's pseudonymity, then, is also a method to deal with this paradox. John D. Caputo explains it in an illustrative way:

> Can there be an existential *theory?* Can there be an *objective* presentation of the truth that is true for me? It is one thing to tell yourself this sort of thing in a journal, but quite another to write books about subjective truth. How do you write a book that tells the reader to find the truth for themselves and not to find it in a book? Would not such a book contradict itself just by being written? Kierkegaard's first strategy in dealing with this problem would be to attribute the "theory" to a pseudonym. (Caputo 2008, 15)

Nevertheless, as usually happens when your intention is to hide something, the more you try to set aside the figure of the author, the more interest you get in it from the readers. Kierkegaard, aware of the biographical gossip and the variety of interpretations that his strategy would generate, wrote about his authorship sporadically. In "A First and Last Explanation", a brief text added under his own name at the end of the

Postscript, he admits being the author of all the pseudonymous works, but only in a legal and literary sense. After underlining that his "pseudonymity or polyonymity has not had an *accidental* basis in my *person* (…) but an *essential* basis in the *production* itself" (CUP, vol. 1, 625), he clarifies that pseudonymous opinions should not be identified with his own opinions. In this sense, Kierkegaard makes clear that he is an author of authors, each one of them with a distinct personality: "That is, *I* am impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors,* whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also" (625-626). Therefore, according to "A First and Last Explanation", there is not a single word in the pseudonymous works that could be attributed to the man Søren Kierkegaard. And he asks that if anyone quotes a passage from the books, the credit has to be given to the respective pseudonymous author.

That being said, it also has to be mentioned that in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, at the end of the sentence in which he establishes the difference between works of the right versus of the left hand, he declares that "they all or almost all took the left hand with their right" (PV, 36). Hence, it seems that when Kierkegaard interpreted the totality of his authorship he saw a certain unity and coherence related to the purpose of edifying in a religious sense. In short, it would appear that he understood himself as a religious author (PV, 23). While insisting on the fact that pseudonymous works were written without any authority to point the reader towards a more spiritual existence—because a direct communication would have provoked rejection—he declared that the aim of both philosophical and religious texts was the same: to point towards the essence of Christianity, drawing attention to the "illusion that in such country all are Christians of sorts" (23), and, as Perarnau explains (2005, 82), to put the readers in a contradictory situation which can only be avoided if they decide to appropriate the truth by themselves.

However, the issue is whether Kierkegaard's statements about his own authorship have to be considered as a valid hermeneutic position or not. Can we trust the assertions of himself as an author by someone who tried so hard to hide himself as one? And thus, should we understand him as a religious author? Soon after the publication of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard wrote in his diary:

> After my death no one will find in my papers (this is my consolation) the least information about what has *really* filled my life, find *that* script in my innermost being that explains everything, and which often, for me, makes what the world would call trifles into events of immense importance, and which I too consider of no significance once I take away the secret note that explains it. (KJN2, 157)

It seems, then, that Kierkegaard wanted to hide the master key to access his work, if there is any—or perhaps because that which constitute the innermost stirrings in a man cannot be stated. Does this mean that everyone who attempts to penetrate his texts is doomed to hermeneutic failure? To dwell upon such a complex question would be the topic of another dissertation. Hence, I shall confine the perspective of my research to the generally accepted methodological idea that maintains that there is not a master hermeneutic key—or, in other words, that there are a variety of them.

Precisely because of this hermeneutic variety and as a consequence of this authorial diversity, stylistic richness, and the essential paradoxical component of his work, one of the main concerns of Kierkegaard's readers has been how to read it. As Deuser and Cappelørn state, any reading of his corpus implies a preliminary methodological decision (1996, 1-3). In that respect, Clair summarised in the introduction of *Pseudonymie et paradoxe* (1976) some of the principal hermeneutic positions that have been used to approach Kierkegaard's corpus, each one with its advantages and drawbacks. In the context of my research, the two positions that interest me the most here are the thematic reading and Clair's own proposal[12]. The former because it can

[12] Apart from these two, Clair describes another four hermeneutic approaches. Firstly, he mentions a biographical and existential reading (1976, 13) that searches in Kierkegaard's life the key to interpret his production. One of the pioneers of this approach was Peter Andreas Heiberg's *Bidrag til et psykologisk Billede af Søren Kierkegaard i Barndom og Ungdom* (1895). Although this kind of reading can help us to discover and recognize influences and turning points in Kierkegaard's work, its main problem is that it can easily become a simplistic psychological interpretation, which digs into the life and experiences of the individual but forgets essential elements of his work that cannot be reduced to any particular external occurrences—such as indirect communication. Additionally, it has the tendency to seek a unity in Kierkegaard's corpus, something that obviates the structure and diversity of his work, disregarding the *how*. Secondly, Clair notes a psychoanalytic and psychiatric reading (14), which has the same blind spots as the biographical one. A paradigmatic example of this approach would be Margarite Grimault's *La mélancolie de Kierkegaard* (1965). These first two hermeneutic positions are relatively close, and for both it should be considered that to deepen into biographical details of the author does not necessarily imply to facilitate a better understanding of his writings. Hence, although they offer useful information, an investigator committed to the content and form of Kierkegaard's works needs to go further. Thirdly, Clair notes a social and political reading (14), which, in order to improve our understanding of Kierkegaard, provides a critical perspective that takes into account his cultural context and the historical, political, social and economic conditions in which the corpus was elaborated. This means, for example, the study of Romanticism and Idealism, the knowledge of Copenhagen, Denmark and Europe during his time, and the comprehension of the features of the bourgeois society and the Church of Denmark. The awareness of this background is indeed important, not just because Kierkegaard was shaped by his context, but because he reacted against it. An example of this approach is represented by members of the Frankfurt School—like Hermann Schweppenhäuser's *Kierkegaards Angriff auf die Spekulation* (1967) —, who tried to highlight the commercial and bourgeois background of our author in order to contextualise his alleged social conservatism and individualism, as well as his final dispute against the established order. As such, this manner of reading becomes an

help clarify the methodology of the chapter on Kierkegaard's ideas on death, while the latter position is close to those that follow a literary approach, and as such can facilitate an understanding of Kierkegaard's texts beyond the framework of a religious author. With this in mind, I shall proceed to summarise the thematic reading and Clair's structural approach.

The thematic reading described by Clair (1976, 17) leaves aside external factors such as Kierkegaard's biography and focuses on the concepts used by him: studying them throughout his authorship, trying to relate them to each other, and seeking a holistic conceptual identity. Therefore, contrary to other readings, this approach deals exclusively with the texts at hand, although not yet *qua* text, meaning that it does not take sufficiently account of the structure and diversity of Kierkegaard's corpus, disregarding which (pseudonymous) author has written which text and how it is written. According to Llevadot (2005, 2), the majority of philosophical readings have followed this conviction or methodology, Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* being one of the most noteworthy examples.

The deficiencies of the hermeneutic positions that Clair examines led him to make his own proposal: a structural reading (1976, 21) based on the internal architecture of the corpus that studies Kierkegaard's texts *qua* text and interprets his works philosophically. Even though this approach does not exclude the advantages of other readings, it stands out because of its strong commitment to the literary status of Kierkegaard's production, which basically means to consider irony, pseudonyms, and indirect communication not just as a secondary element but as a constitutive principle.

Clair's criticism and structural hermeneutic position is close to other positions that one may find in continuation of Derrida's deconstruction. In this vein, during the 1970s there flourished a reading that sustained the claim in "A First and Last Explanation"—that Kierkegaard himself was strictly the occasion of the advent of the works, not a monolithic author that defended a systematic doctrine. This approach focuses on the *how* of the text and brings light to the aforementioned paradox of moving others without

extended version of a biographical approach. Fourthly, Clair also mentions a historical and genetic reading (15) that considers Kierkegaard as a polemic writer and tries to understand him in relation to the dialogues with his influencers, both antagonists such as Hegelian thinkers and references such as Socrates. Some examples of this approach can be found in Walter Ruttenbeck's *Sören Kierkegaard Der Christliche Denker und sein Werk* (1929) and Walter Lowrie's *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (1938).

putting oneself as a writer in a position of authority. Derrida calls it the paradox of the gift, which is the problem of giving a gift without creating dependence in the receiver: "*At the limit, the gift as gift* ought *not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor*. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift" (1992, 14). The balancing act is to help readers to be independent and stand on their own without the author's assistance. As Begonya Saez argues in relation to "The Seducer's Diary" and Kierkegaard's own literary practice, which she calls aesthetic action or *actio(nes) in distans*, Kierkegaard

> reader is carried along into the ethical by the distant or indirect action of the text, by its (rhetorical, that is, magnetic) power, and not by the author's authoritative intention, never mind how poignantly present his intention might be in the reader's mind. In short, the text seduces the reader in that it deceives him/her into what it creates, namely a new reality (fiction), in that it opens up a new world of possibilities and indirectly demands a reaction from the reader to the existential proposal it makes manifest. I shall call this textual performance the *ethical seduction*, and I shall accuse Søren Kierkegaard of being its artificer. (Saez 2000, 86)

What Stapp explains about the gift of love in his dissertation on Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* can also be applied to this authorial paradox. A true gift, writes Stapp, should not be part of an economy of exchange, "must not allow the giver a sense of accomplishment or superiority, and it must not create a feeling of indebtedness on the part of the receiver. In either case, the supposed gift is an illusion, and only a common exchange transaction has occurred" (2009, 177). Even though escaping from the economy of exchange is extremely difficult, if not impossible, Stapp indicates that to attempt such avoidance, "the gift requires the apparently impossible condition of escaping recognition both of the giver and of the recipient" (179). Therefore, the author's assistance or gift must be unnoticeable for the reader.

This hermeneutic approach that puts the emphasis on the literary perspective was also defended by Louis Mackey.[13] In *Kierkegaard. A Kind of Poet*, he declared that Kierkegaard "must be studied not merely or principally with the instruments of philosophic and theological analysis, but also and chiefly with the tools of literary

[13] Even before that, it was put forward by Georg Brandes in *Søren Kierkegaard. En kritisk Fremstilling i Grundrids* (1877), by Walther Rehm in *Kierkegaard und der Verfűhrer* (1949) and by Jean Wahl in *Études Kierkegaardiennes* (1967).

criticism" (1971, x). From this position, Mackey concludes that, when an author constantly hides himself behind such a variety of masks, as does Kierkegaard, even his direct statements written under his own name cannot be trusted (1986, 188). Thus, in the end, the author Søren Kierkegaard understood as a united subject becomes an absence or a constant evanescence (187), and Kierkegaard's self-interpretations cannot be read as statements about his intentions as a philosopher or theologian, but rather as a literary expression of how he wanted to be understood. Hence, even the Søren Kierkegaard that signs under his own name should be considered as another pseudonym. As his brother Peter Christian commented, "one could indeed almost come to imagine the possibility that even that which appeared with the signature 'Søren Kierkegaard,' might not unconditionally be his last word (but a point of view)" (Kirmmse 1996, 149). Therefore, as Perarnau also states (2005, 83), Kierkegaard's claim in *The Point of View for My Work as an* Author—which, as we have seen, suggests that he understood the totality of his authorship with an edifying purpose in a religious sense—is not to be interpreted as a transcendent perspective that unifies his corpus, but rather as another perspective in the Kierkegaardian symphony. This hermeneutic position, engendered through Derrida's deconstruction, has been brought to its utmost consequences by Roger Poole, who criticises as a "blunt" reading every

> reading that refuses, as a matter of principle, to accord a literary status to the text; that refuses the implications of the pseudonymous technique; that misses the irony; that is ignorant of the reigning Romantic ironic conditions obtaining when Kierkegaard wrote; and that will not acknowledge, on religious grounds, that an "indirect communication" is at least partly bound in with the *pathos* of the lived life. (Poole 1998, 60)

In short, Poole qualifies as blunt readings those interpretative positions that read Kierkegaard's corpus as a manual of philosophy or theology without paying attention to its essential literary attributes. The problem, says Poole, is that a significant part of the secondary literature has unfortunately been "an almost uninterrupted series of attempts to look into the mirrors of the aesthetic texts and to find there Kierkegaard's view of X" (1993, 7). In order to do that, aesthetic devices have been disregarded as a nuisance and it has been assumed that behind his multilayered authorship there is just one self that intends to communicate a single teaching. In other words, priority has been given to the content, and the form has been forgotten: the *what* has overshadowed the *how*. For Poole, Kierkegaard must be read as neither philosopher nor theologian but as a writer,

and pseudonymous opinions should not be considered his own points of view. From this perspective, to ask for "the meaning" of his corpus is too simplistic. Poole argues that Kierkegaard's rhetoric strategy constantly displaces the meaning and brings out multiple interpretations. His non-referential style of writing demonstrates "that all we are ever offered in a text is an endless succession of signifiers, whose place or context in a matrix of sense can never be finally established" (9). In this sense, Kierkegaard anticipates Derrida and Lacan and reveals that language cannot refer in the way needed to communicate truth. Therefore, the aspiration to find a unitary meaning throughout his authorship is extremely questionable, because "Kierkegaard writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some 'meaning' that could be directly appropriated" (7). The question that we should address to the text is not what it exactly means but how to read it.[14]

To sum up, Poole follows the path of Clair's structural reading but takes it one step further and presents a postmodern and deconstructive Kierkegaard that, instead of offering a doctrine, bespeaks the boundaries of language. In the end, according to Poole, if we pretend to understand Kierkegaard as a unitary author that communicates a unitary doctrine, we will bump into a mystery. This is because of the writing, which is not just a matter of style but the very foundation of Kierkegaard's work. After all, as pseudonym Victor Eremita seems to insinuate at the preface of *Either/Or* when, as the editor of the book, he relates that he found the papers by opening the writing desk [*secretair*] violently with a hatchet, the attempt to penetrate the secrets of any text involves destroying it through analysis. Eremita summarizes it with a statement of principle: "these papers, as is ordinarily said of all printed matter, are silent" (EO, vol. 1, 12). Hence, if we follow Clair, Mackey, and Poole, it seems that to analyze Kierkegaard's self-interpretations in order to find a monolithic author who offers a single doctrine with an unequivocal meaning instead of a variety of existential positions is not the most fruitful methodology.[15]

[14] See also Roger Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading: How to Read and Why," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2002): 395-442.

[15] Poole's position has its own opponents, C. Stephen Evans being one of the most notorious. Contrary to those who do not give credit to Kierkegaard's understanding of his own work as an author, Evans bases his reading in *Kierkegaard. An Introduction* (2009) on the conviction that there is a coherent and unitary line of thought in his authorship, which corresponds to Kierkegaard's declared intentions in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, considering that he was fundamentally a religious writer with a clear task: "to introduce Christianity into

Finally, to end this review of the main interpretative approaches to Kierkegaard's authorship, it is worth mentioning that Saez suggests what she calls an aesthetic reading (1998, 13), which emanates from both Clair's structural and Poole's deconstructive readings. To avoid confusion, she notes that this approach is neither a thematic reading of a supposed Kierkegaardian art theory nor an existential and phenomenological reading about the aesthetic sphere of existence in Kierkegaard's authorship. According to Saez, it is a hermeneutic standpoint that, as the structural reading, studies the text *qua* text or conceptual framework, and additionally, as the deconstructive reading, studies the text *qua* discourse or communication. It does so by taking into account both structure and content from a perspectivistic point of view that helps us to highlight the numerous existential positions articulated by Kierkegaard's corpus. In other words, this approach understands Kierkegaard's work as a communicative praxis, respects its aesthetic, poetic, and rhetoric expression, and avoids the interpretation that searches a monolithic content. As is the case with the poet, Kierkegaard's arguments cannot be considered the basis of a theoretical doctrine; instead, their form pushes the readers to embody the arguments, which can be appropriated by the readers with existential approval or rejection.

As indicated above, the basic aim of this exposition of the main hermeneutic positions is to clarify the methodology that will be used in the present investigation. For the purposes of my research, I will use a methodology that, to one degree or another,

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Christendom" (PV, 123). According to Evans, this does not make Kierkegaard less interesting for those who have no enthusiasm for religious faith, but rather makes Poole's postmodern view impossible to maintain consistently. Evans agrees that Kierkegaard is conscious of the boundaries of language and knowledge and that he bespeaks them, "but he is equally far removed from a philosophy that denies the value of rigorous thought and careful distinctions" (2009, 13). This is a strange claim, since, as far as I am able to see, the aforementioned proponents of other methodological approaches do not deny that Kierkegaard is a rigorous or careful writer and philosopher. Evans accuses Poole of carrying out a simplistic reasoning because, according to him, to affirm that true statements cannot be made is to make a statement, and to say that language cannot refer in the way needed to communicate truth is also to make a reference. To Evans this postmodern hermeneutic position, which highlights the literary status of the texts, reduces Kierkegaard to an object of aesthetic appreciation. Evans finds this to be a superficial shortcut in the sense that it "allows a person to enjoy the style and literary techniques of Kierkegaard without fear of being challenged by Kierkegaard as one human person speaking to another about issues of ultimate importance" (13). In other words, Evans holds that due to a radical emphasis on form, a reading can overlook what is most interesting about Kierkegaard's work: the possibility to confront my ideas and my life-view with "someone whose voice can challenge my beliefs and assumptions, and even the way I live my life" (14). As we have seen, what Clair, Mackey, and Poole have in common is that their readings blur the figure of the monolithic author. In Evans' opinion, this is less interesting than to "talk" with a real human being. Yet I would argue that his claim is questionable, because he assumes that we can only be challenged by Kierkegaard if we understand him as a monolithic author with a unified message, when in fact each pseudonym can be considered as a particular author with whom we can confront our own life-view. It seems that what Evans defends is that if we forget the alleged religious coherence in Kierkegaard's work we miss the upbuilding discourse in the background, grasping only a partial and reduced version of his corpus. However, there is no reason to believe that a polyphonic understanding of it cannot offer the same, even a much greater, existential challenge.

proceeds as a thematic reading, because, although my main theoretical fundament will be “At a Graveside”, I shall survey the thought of one’s own death in Kierkegaard’s corpus at large. In the end, based on the above, it could seem that the reading of Kierkegaard’s corpus puts the interpreter in front of a crossroads: overlook its polyphony trying to find thematic and philosophical unity in the diversity of the *what*, or approach every pseudonym as a personal author with a particular point of view, considering at the same time the *how*. However, I understand that this strict division is too simplistic. After all, content and form cannot be kept apart. Therefore, we should not feel obliged to choose between a formalist approach and a content approach. In this sense, as it will be noted further on, by conducting a thematic approach—that is, taking into consideration the manner in which the thought of one’s own death takes shape in the different writings—I will not disregard aesthetics, insofar as it is vital to understand Kierkegaard’s thematic content. Certainly, as noted by Mackey, the problem of thematic readings is that they run the risk to decontextualise concepts spread through multiple works with different characteristics, presupposing a Kierkegaardian system whose parts can be elucidated from the acceptance or rejection of the whole. This way, thematic readings can become a compendium of alleged lessons that Kierkegaard repeatedly said he did not want to offer. As for Mackey, to “write a compendium of Kierkegaard’s doctrines by means of a review of his works is like summarizing the philosophy of Shakespeare by means of a survey of the plays” (1971, ix). However, my goal is not to defend the existence of a homogeneous philosophy of death in Kierkegaard, which would be in harmony with an alleged Kierkegaardian system, but to build a useful theoretical framework for this research. In this process, I will try to take into account the polyphony that characterises Kierkegaard’s corpus.

In this sense, I do not intend to be faithful to a supposed intention in Kierkegaard understood as a monolithic author—after all, it would be methodologically awkward to elaborate a dissertation based on the intentions of the author, which cannot be known, instead of basing it on the texts, which is what we have—but to profit from the ideas on death expressed by the different pseudonyms, in order to apply them to another object of study: apocalyptic movies in general and Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* in particular. More concretely, I will base my investigation on the ideas of the thought of one’s own death as exposed in “At a Graveside”. In order to do so, I will seek relations and establish ties between the various references to death in Kierkegaard’s text corpus,

comparing them and always relating them to the extent possible with “At a Graveside”. While respecting the form and putting concepts into context, I will attempt that this respect does not become an obstacle for the flexibility needed to convert these spread ideas into a fertile interdisciplinary instrument.[16] In the end, as Foucault said in an interview regarding the use of Nietzsche’s philosophy: “For myself, I prefer to utilize the writers I like. The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest” (1980, 53-54). From this point of view, whether the interpretations that Kierkegaard made of his own work were a kind of retrospective falsification or, on the contrary, an effort to show his truth about Christianity, is of no importance. What concerns me here is the text and how it helps me to expand the discussion of apocalyptic movies.

This leads us to the question as to whether Kierkegaard should be read as a religious writer or not. In the section dedicated to “At a Graveside,” I will attempt a non-religious reading of this discourse. In the end, as Perarnau argues (2005, 78), for a work to be religious is not enough to assume that the author is so, because one thing is the accomplishment of the work and another, quite different, the alleged intention of the author. According to Perarnau, to affirm the religious nature of a work based on the alleged intentions of the author implies to commit the intentional fallacy. In Kierkegaard’s case this is extremely relevant, granted that we follow Perarnau in asserting that we cannot trust his own reflections concerning his authorship, since they are just another point of view. In the end, hiding himself as an author, Kierkegaard leaves the meaning to the reader. Therefore, as Perarnau states (83), the decision to accept the author’s word corresponds to the reader, because he is the only one with the ability to appropriate it. From this perspective, Perarnau argues (83), the reader recognises himself as an active subject that is required and able to give meaning to the

[16] However, it has to be underlined that, although I am convinced that the differences between the pseudonyms have to be respected, due to practical reasons I will sometimes attribute ideas to Kierkegaard, especially in the introductory part when presenting some basic concepts that are necessary to contextualise my investigation. In so doing, I am simply indicating that in referring to ideas that occur in the authorship at large, one must refer to the writer at large, regardless of the status of such author and regardless of his presumed relation to the content.

work, and not merely as a passive subject that accepts a given meaning.[17] With this in mind, I will try to offer a reading of "At a Graveside" that does not rely on a religious pre-given.

3.2. The single individual: subjectivity, truth, and anxiety

There is an entry in Kierkegaard's journals which is particularly significant for the purposes of the present dissertation. On July 29th 1835, two days before the first anniversary of his mother's death, and when all his siblings except Peter Christian were already dead, a twenty-two years old Kierkegaard explains his experience on one of his favourite spots, Gilbjerg Hoved, a small cliff near Gilleleje, in Northern Zealand. Writing about the tranquillity of the landscape, he notes: "the few dear departed rose from the grave before me, or rather it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether" (KJN1, 9). And just three days after this melancholic experience, Kierkegaard wrote the sentence that is usually quoted to explain his entire project as a person and as an author: "What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do…* the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*" (19).

Although biographical data do not support my investigation, those journals' entries help us understand the important presence of death in Kierkegaard's works and its connection with the main topics of his philosophy, such as the ones most relevant for my work: subjectivity, truth, anxiety, and the single individual. As it has been said, and as we shall see further on in more detail, Kierkegaard affirms in "At a Graveside" that, in contrast to the multiple and variable moods in relation to death, the earnest thought of death consists in thinking of oneself as dead. In other words, he insists on the necessity of thinking death not from an abstract point of view, not as something that occurs to others, but to think it from one's own existence, to think it from the point of view of subjectivity, to think it *as one's own death*. Therefore, it will be useful to make a brief survey of the aforementioned themes, remembering that these reflections are a synthesis of what is expressed by different pseudonyms.

[17] It is worth mentioning that, for Perarnau (2005, 83-84), this framework of interpretative freedom is a literary parallel of Kierkegaard's existential dialectics, in which—as we shall see in the next section—the individual's existence is not a finished fact that can be objectively and definitely explained, but rather a possibility open to constant realisation.

Kierkegaard impelled himself to seek a truth which was truth for him, a truth for which he could live and die. This understanding of truth is significantly far away from the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian conception of philosophy, understood as the science that seeks the first universal and objective principles. In contrast, Kierkegaard made great efforts to move away from any speculative and systematic philosophy which strives to reduce reality to a conceptual system that ignores what cannot be universalised and forgets the existence of the single individual. Rather, he turned towards the ultimate paradox of thought, which, according to Climacus, consists in "to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think" (PF, 37). Thus Kierkegaard focuses on what Climacus called the crumbs of philosophy: the subjective, concrete and unique existence of the single individual. In other words, the crumbs that, according to Climacus' critical approach, Hegel's system leaves aside. Indeed, Kierkegaard believed that major problems are not solved through supposedly objective thinking, but through a passionate act of existential choice. For Climacus, "the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow" (37). As Thomte points out in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, "Descartes's apparently epistemological problem is for Kierkegaard an existential one; that is, the solution of doubt lies not in reflection but in resolution" (CA, ix).

Therefore, in Kierkegaard's works, existence is above all the concrete reality of each particular individual, not just an abstract concept applied to human beings in general. Everyone that exists is confronted with the confines of their essential thinking—that is, thinking not relating to matters of facts—and to their subjectivity. This is where the matters of importance become important: by becoming important to someone, by appropriation. And to exist is to be an individual—or better said, individuality springs from and to existence in its becoming.[18] If existence is not an abstract idea but the existence of the single individual, then thinking is not just the objective thought of speculative philosophers, but subjective thinking. As we have seen before, Kierkegaard understands subjectivity as truth. In other words, subjectively speaking, there is not truth if there is no passion and no compromise. Each individual must find a truth that is

[18] However, it is important to note again that this is just an attempt to introduce the philosophy of an author that is precisely characterised by pointing out the difficulty of thinking philosophically about subjectivity, and thus to underline that something always escapes that kind of inquiry.

truth for him. To believe that philosophy is an impartial and objective contemplation of the world is to ignore the relation between truth and the individual who seeks it. This does not mean that all objective reflection is out of line—it too has its place, but not its subjective importance. Therefore, before asking about the truth, the individual must interrogate himself about his own relationship to it.

From this perspective, Kierkegaard's philosophy is a lived philosophy, in the sense that it points towards problems that arise in the existence of the single individual. Indeed, one of the major criticisms made by him against philosophers with objective and systematic aspirations is the impossibility to live according their speculative philosophy:

> In relation to their systems most systematizers are like a man who has built a vast palace while he himself lives nearby in a barn; they themselves do not live in the vast systematic edifice. But in matters of the spirit this is and remains a decisive objection. Spiritually, a man's thoughts must be the building in which he lives—otherwise it's wrong. (KJN2, 279)

Thus existence is the mode of being of the individual who does not get lost in abstract speculation, who is responsible for his own existence. In fact, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus defines the self as a "relation's relating itself to itself" (SUD, 13). There is an existential self-reference, not just a cognitive one. Anti-Climacus writes: "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" (13). Hence, we are neither animals nor angels: our existence is a never-ending process of becoming in a constant dialectic tension, because our vital task is to learn how to play with those oppositions. The key to this game is freedom: we exist in time and constantly face new possibilities among which we have to choose in a constant and passionate commitment to ourselves and to our own singularity**.**

In a similar vein, according to pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, an individual is born as individual through the bound to himself when faced with an infinite array of choices. In other words, what makes us individuals is the exercise of freedom. The original condition of the experience of this freedom is anxiety. Therefore, anxiety is the

fundamental experience of existence that determines us as human beings, an experience that arises when the individual is faced with possibility.[19] Like Anti-Climacus, Haufniensis understands human being as the synthesis between the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite, necessity and possibility. In this context, anxiety is the "dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis, and freedom now looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself" (CA, 61). This constitutive experience challenges our explanations, providing us with a sense of fragility and showing to us that we cannot have solid answers. Kierkegaard's authorship confronts us with the demand to question what it means to be a human being. Here anxiety is the main affect that places us into this constant struggle.

Moreover, for Haufniensis, anxiety generates in us "*a sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*" (CA, 42). Consequently, it is an ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion that we experience when faced with the abyss of possibility. What is more, it stems from us: "He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down" (61). And this experience of the possibility of freedom is the birth of the self. Precisely because its object—that is, possibility—is indeterminate, a nothingness, anxiety must not be confused with fear, whose object is a concrete and defined threat, like a pain or a danger: "I must point out that it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (41). What is threatened in anxiety is nothing concrete, but the whole existence of the individual, which points towards the future and is exposed to nothingness. Hence, this experience of freedom cannot be defined through psychology or abstract thought. While fear is a physical experience and a psychological state, anxiety is an ontological experience characterised by ambiguity and indeterminacy that expresses our finitude. As such, Haufniensis' approach to anxiety is not a psychological one in the

[19] Being the fundamental experience that determines human beings as human beings, it should be noted that it is not quite accurate to treat anxiety as a concept. As Tsakiri explains, that "would amount to failing to acknowledge its 'abysmal' qualities. In Kierkegaard's formulation, anxiety by its nature stands beyond definition, making the task of giving it a proper definition almost impossible" (2006, 19). Therefore, although Haufniensis, in his spirit of provocation, refers to it as a concept, anxiety is rather the foundation of all concepts. In his own words, "anxiety makes its appearance [as] the pivot upon which everything turns" (CA, 43). Again, this is related to Kierkegaard's fight against speculative and systematic philosophy and his own emphasis on the single individual.

contemporary sense, but a phenomenological one based on an ontological conception of human being.

The ambiguity of anxiety manifests itself in the possibility of sin, because the individual feels attracted to the possibility of sinning that stems from freedom and, at the same time, experiences repulsion. That is, the individual becomes anxious when faced with the possibility of becoming guilty. Haufniensis, by grasping the instant preceding sin's coming into actuality, when anxiety reaches its climax, understands that, for their lack of ambiguity, selfishness or concupiscence cannot be the presupposition of sin. Anxiety, by contrast, is dialectic ambiguity to the maximum. However, being the presupposition of sin, this does not make it its cause or essence. Anxiety rises up in front of nothingness as the original condition of the experience of freedom. When an individual is born as individual, human beings are fitted in anxiety. Out of this, as a condition, emerges any sin. We become anxious, then, for the possibility of sin. In this sense, guilt makes us lose the state of innocence: "Just as Adam lost innocence by guilt, so every man loses it in the same way" (35). Sin is the unobservable space between innocence and guilt, and anxiety is the state before the fall of freedom into guilt; that state in which the former is as close as possible to the latter. Anxiety, then, is the reality of freedom as infinite possibility. The individual becomes anxious in front of his own possibilities. However, it is not a matter of choosing between good and evil: "The possibility is to *be able*" (49). The dizziness of freedom appears when the individual observes its infinite possibility and clings to finitude.

Therefore, the source of anxiety is not something external but the human condition itself. We become anxious of our possibility, for the fact that we are able, that we can become. Anxiety is linked to possibility as an ontological structure. It is a feeling of possibility: the terrible things of life "always become weak by comparison with those of possibility" (157). For this reason, anxiety is anxiety for the future, not the past: when we say that we are anxious by past events, we are actually anxious by the possibility that they would happen again: "The past about which I am supposed to be anxious must stand in a relation of possibility to me. If I am anxious about a past misfortune, then this is not because it is in the past but because it may be repeated, i.e., become future" (CA, 91). Insofar as anxiety has its source in us, Haufniensis makes clear that it constitutes us: neither angels nor fools suffer from anxiety. In short, anxiety is an expression of the human condition, an ontological feature of human being that individualises us. As we

have seen, while fear menaces concrete and radial aspects of one's existence, anxiety constitutes a threat to the basis of it. For all this, anxiety is not a particular mood among other moods, such as sadness. This aspect is highly relevant for my research, because what characterises the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside" is also that it is not a mood among other moods, such as sorrow for the death of another. In this sense, it seems that there is a connection between anxiety and the earnest thought of death. We shall return to this issue further on.

Ultimately, the Kierkegaardian concern for the existence of the single individual—the constitutive freedom, commitment to choice, and actualisation of possibilities of each individual, and the thought of his own death—seem to point to a fundamental issue: humans are finite beings who live suspended between this life and eternity. According to Caputo, Kierkegaard's reasons for this emphasis on the single individual are mainly religious—that is, they are the reflection on a religious subjectivity—and are inspired by the model of Augustine, Luther, and Pascal, "who were the first ones to describe the scene to which Kierkegaard always returned—the personal self standing alone before God (*coram deo*), its eternal fate hanging in the balance" (2008, 3). Building on the common and well established presupposition of a religious unity in his corpus, Caputo affirms that, for Kierkegaard, to be a self "means to live in the white fight of eternity, where there is no deceiving God" (3). In contrast to Hegel's project, Kierkegaard does not intend to reconcile the abyss amid time and eternity, because that would erase the tension and the passion that define us as human beings. This infinite qualitative difference is intensified by true Christianity, which represents the paradox of the appearance of eternity in time. Therefore, for Caputo, "[t]he delicate art of Christian existence is to maintain our equilibrium when that force hits, to move through life under the simultaneous flow of time on the one hand and the shock of eternity on the other" (19). Because of this, according to Caputo, Kierkegaard believes that "to give up the deep divide between time and eternity is to give up Christianity itself, which is the faith that God became man, that the eternal has come into time in order to give humanity eternal life" (20).

From this perspective, what individualises us is the confrontation with eternity, which I here propose to understand as the absence of time and existence without any particular theological content. The important claim for my investigation is that anxiety opens us up to this absence of time and existence. Tillich's view of anxiety—which, as Thomte

notes (CA, xvi), is somewhat parallel to Kierkegaard's—helps us understand the connection between anxiety, one's own death, and eternity. For Tillich, "[a]nxiety is the self-awareness of the finite self as finite" (1951, 192). In front of the abyss of possibility, the individual becomes aware of his own finitude. This idea—to which we shall return later when digging into the connections between anxiety and the thought of one's own death—had a significant influence on philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre. However, they left aside the religious substrate and replaced eternity with death. Due to both methodological and philosophical reasons, I will also concentrate this investigation only on the earnest thought of death, which, in my opinion, can have the same transforming power even without the horizon of eternity understood in a Christian manner.

3.3. Kierkegaard as a key strain in the philosophy of death

In order to contextualise Kierkegaard's vision on what in "At a Graveside" he calls the earnest thought of death, I will first make a general overview of philosophical ideas on one's own death that influenced him in some way. To do this, I will make use of Buben's dissertation "The Existential Compromise in the History of the Philosophy of Death" (2011), which divides the philosophical dealings with death into two key strains—the Platonic and the Epicurean—in order to argue that there is a third overlooked alternative represented by Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger.

This classification into three strains is based on the combination of three key positions: fear of death, the relevance of death in everyday life, and the continuation after death of some kind of subjective experience. According to Buben, the majority of philosophers who advocate for some form of post-mortem subjectivity also defend the importance of death in everyday life, and those who reject the former also reject the latter. While the first ones form part of the Platonic strain, the second ones represent the Epicurean strain. For Buben, both groups promote to overcome the fear of death, arguing that it is just the separation of the soul from the body, "but one makes this change by trading fear of death for potential misery in life and hope for something better later on, and the other by trading fear of death for relative tranquility now and no hope for a future life" (2011, 65).

However, as is the case in Buben's work, my project likewise focuses on a third strain that places between brackets the possibility of post-mortem subjectivity, embraces the fear of death, and insists on the importance of the thought of one's own death in the daily life of individuals. For Buben, as already mentioned, the lead representatives of this strain are Kierkegaard and Heidegger. According to him, these two philosophers "allow death to penetrate and interact with one's existence in a way that the Platonic and Epicurean strains do not" (8). And this is the key argumentation for my investigation, because I will try to argue, by way of Kierkegaard's statements concerning one's own death, that some apocalyptic movies can have a philosophical value as an occasion to think earnestly about death in a way that has a decisive impact on one's own life. However, in order to do that and to expose properly Kierkegaard's understandings of death[20], it will be helpful to summarise the main characteristics of the Platonic and the Epicurean strains, according to Buben.[21]

Buben extracts the Platonic notion of death through arguments from *Apology* and *Phaedo*. During his trial in *Apology*, Socrates affirms that he is not afraid to die because human beings do not have enough knowledge to clarify whether it is a good or a bad thing. People fear death as if they were sure that it is something terrible, but this is due to ignorance, which makes them pretend to know what they do not know. Socrates argues that, even ignoring what death could be, there are only two post-mortem situations: either the individual ceases to be or the soul migrates to another similar existence. Given that both situations are good, there is no reason to fear death. Plato dismisses the former and elaborates a metaphysical theory that affirms the latter.

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[20] Heidegger's ideas of one's own death—as well as those from other philosophers influenced by or related to Kierkegaard, such as Sartre or Levinas—although commented at some point, will not be exhaustively discussed due to space limitations and for methodological reasons. Again, this is not a critical and comparative philosophical investigation about Kierkegaard's reflections on death, but an approach to some apocalyptic movies through Kierkegaard's reflections on death as exposed in "At a Graveside."

[21] I consider that this three-strain-division is more nuanced and fertile than the dual one that Julia Watkin exposes in "Kierkegaard's View of Death" (1990). Watkin explains that, regarding beliefs and attitudes about death, Kierkegaard distinguishes between the ones focused on life in this world—which she calls immanentalist—and the ones that presuppose a transcendent existence for the individual. Contrary to what she calls a "superficial reading" of Kierkegaard that leads to think that his point of view is immanentalist, she argues that his entire authorship is transcendentalist. Considering that the aim of my work is not to analyse Kierkegaard's ideas on death in order to find some kind of unity and coherence in his corpus and extract one unique lecture allegedly faithful to his intentions, but to use the earnest thought of death exposed in "At a Graveside" as an instrument to interpret apocalyptic movies, Buben's thesis is much more fruitful for my investigation. As Buben, I believe that there is more value in observing the way death is allowed to penetrate the here and now rather than to highlight the importance of beliefs related to the afterlife. In any case, I refer to Buben's critique of Watkin, which is summarised in this quote: "If one wants to make a list of who believes in heaven and who does not, then Watkin's account might be sufficient, but it simply is not nuanced enough to characterize accurately the philosophy of death, or Kierkegaard's place in it" (2011, 68).

Indeed, in *Phaedo* Plato develops the idea of the transmigration of the soul. His theory is well known. Every human being is made up of both body and soul, which are completely different substances: the body is subject to change, corruption and low desires; whereas the soul is eternal, immutable and seeks knowledge. Influenced by the Orphics and the Pythagoreans, Plato believed that the soul belongs to the divine and fell out to the visible world due to a punishment, where it is subject to reincarnation. In this downfall, the soul contemplates the Forms. As we see, Plato's conception of the body is highly negative: it is the prison of the soul, and drags it with its passions, hindering knowledge. The love of wisdom motivates philosophers to stimulate the soul at the expense of the worldly interests of the body. Therefore, as Kierkegaard, Plato considers the thought of one's own death and the exercise of such thinking an essential feature of both philosophy and life. However, there are significant differences between Plato's and Kierkegaard's thoughts on death.

Plato understands that the practice of death through philosophy consists of the mortification of the desires of the body and aims to the afterlife. Indeed, he offers several arguments in order to demonstrate the immortality of the soul. In this metaphysical context, death appears to be a great gain and there is no reason to fear it. On the contrary, death is the best thing that can happen to the philosopher, because the soul is then emancipated from the body, returns to its natural state, and is finally free to reach the true knowledge of the Forms. To struggle with the thought of death is the path to wisdom and knowledge. This is why Plato affirms that philosophy is a preparation for death (*Phaedo*, 64a). In contrast, as we will see, although Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside" rejects superficial moods—which, in some sense, can be related to the superficiality of bodily desires—, it does not rely on immortality. Instead of considering death as the aim of the philosopher, it approaches life through death, as an intensification of the former.

The Platonic strain, then, is characterised by considering that human beings have no reason to fear death since the soul will have a post-mortem and a perfect form of existence free from the bodily prison. According to Buben, this strain is taken up by much of the mainstream Christian tradition, starting with Paul, who took note of Plato's understanding of death. If Plato sees philosophy as a preparation for dying, Paul considers faith as the dying of the pre-Christian self and the rebirth as a Christian. The Christian tradition, as the Platonic one, encourages us to embrace the thought of death

and let us be changed by it. This has to be understood in two senses: first, the Christian must physically die to be born again in the eternal life; and second, one has to figuratively die to become free from the worldly sinful desires in order to live like Christ—an idea that, as we will see, Kierkegaard develops with the concept of dying to the world, especially in some of his middle and late writings, such as *Works of Love* and *The Sickness unto Death*.[22]

On the other hand, the Epicurean Strain affirms that death should not be feared because it is the end of personal or subjective existence. Its goal is to encourage a state of mind in which death means nothing to the individual. According to Epicurus' atomistic metaphysics, everything is composed of an agglomerate of undetectable and indivisible particles of different sizes and shapes that move and collide through empty space, assembling together temporarily and dispersing again. And this is what happens when a human being dies: the atoms—from the Greek *átomos*, "indivisible"—that constitute the body and the soul break up. Hence, the soul is not immortal and we cannot feel anything after death. From this point of view, there is nothing to fear in it, because there are no posthumous harms.[23] In the "Letter to Menoeceus", Epicurus expresses this idea as follows: "This, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are nonexistent" (1963, 180). Understanding this argument is fundamental to reach the good life (*eudaimonia*) of robust tranquillity (*ataraxia*), which is the basic claim of Epicurus' ethics.

According to Buben, the Epicurean strain is picked up by the Stoics. Although they had a great influence on Christianity, their views on death are similar to the Epicureans in at least two points: the absence of a clear notion of a subjective afterlife existence, and the will to reduce the significance of one's own death. They also reject the fear of death and the hereafter and believe that in order to attain *ataraxia* we have to accept it as a natural part of life. As for the modern era, Buben finds examples of this opinion on death in thinkers such as Montaigne, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.

[22] On this basis, Buben writes a brief and oriented review of some Christian philosophers that continued the Platonic strain, for example the ones mentioned before: Augustine, Luther, and Pascal.

[23] Epicurus' opinion on gods and religion also supports this idea. He does not deny their existence, but he defends a pure conception of them opposed to Homeric anthropomorphism: the gods are not like human beings and they are not interested in our affairs. Because they are happy in just being themselves, they neither judge our lives nor impose punishments on us. Thus, there is no reason to be afraid of the gods.

Finally, he affirms that the Epicurean position is the main one in our contemporary atheistic and technologically advanced societies.

Be that as it may, beyond Buben's specific—and possibly arguable[24]—examples, the important thing for us here is that, in summary, both the Platonic and the Epicurean strain encourage us to overcome the fear of death. Certainly, as Buben states, although both strains try to liberate the individual from the fear that the thought of one's own death tends to provoke, there is a clear difference:

> If what distinguishes the Platonic strain of the philosophy of death is an appeal to an afterlife and an attempt to make death seem important in the less than perfect present worldly life, then what signifies membership in the Epicurean strain is a denial of any meaningful post-mortem extension of particular subjective experience and an attempt to render death irrelevant in life. (Buben 2011, 29)

Now, in relation to my research, we must consider at least two important issues. On the one hand, although Plato's and Epicurus' assertions could be rather convincing, the fact is that, as we have seen before when discussing whether death is taboo or not in our contemporary societies—whatever the particular believes may be—, the idea of one's own death still appears to be extremely problematic for a great number of individuals. On the other hand, these arguments overlook a possibly positive impact of the thought of one's own death in the life of each individual.[25] In order to go deeper into these issues, I will expose Kierkegaard's opinions on the topic, which, in accordance with Buben's thesis, can be considered as a third and undervalued strain that does not avoid the fear of death and gives to the thought of one's own death a fundamental role in the daily life of individuals. The Kierkegaardian way of coping with death in "At a Graveside" is the key concept of my theoretical framework. As explained, in the following I will carry out a thematic reading to make a review of Kierkegaard's assertions on death in those works in which death has a significant role in order to relate them with the earnest thought of death as exposed in "At a Graveside". And for the sake of clarity, it is important to underline that, from all the topics related to death that can be found in Kierkegaard's corpus, in this overview I am going to focus on those that

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[24] Buben himself admits exceptions and acknowledges that the limits between these strains are not always clear, because they have historically influenced each other.

[25] Although it could be affirmed that Plato's opinions on death involve a positive impact on the life of the individual in the context of his ethics, it is, after all, related to the possibility of the afterlife.

constitute the core of "At a Graveside". Succinctly, these are the following: the opposition with Epicurus' proposition on death; the certainty and equality of death, the uncertainty of the moment, and the anxiety that arouses; the importance of fearing it; the criticism of the tendency to think that death will occur in a distant future and to forget that it is always possible; the retrospective power of the thought of one's own death that acts like a master and provides a life-view; this thought as an inward dance and an existential movement, not as an abstract thought; the necessity to think of one's own death in inwardness and not just when we are physically forced to do so; and the direct relation between the thought of one's own death and the commitment with one's own singularity.[26]

[26] It must be clarified once again that I am not attempting to establish a unified reading of Kierkegaard's thoughts on death considering his authorship as a whole that offers solid lessons about this topic. Instead, my aim will be to approach Kierkegaard's thoughts on one's own death in "At a Graveside" taking advantage of the several ideas on death that can be found in his corpus.

Chapter I: Death in Kierkegaard

1. Early writings

The first reference to death in Søren Kierkegaard's works—of the ones published before his own death—is found in *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), a review of Hans Christian Andersen's *Only a Fiddler* (1837). Focusing on what he believes are defects both of the novel and the author, Kierkegaard affirms that Andersen lacks any philosophy of life and criticises an alleged incapacity to express a proper life-view. Kierkegaard's opinion of the individual in this early writing implies that an authentic existence does not consist of the sum of a series of isolated and fragmented life episodes or ideas. On the contrary, a life-view is a "transubstantiation of experience; it is an unshakable certainty in oneself won from all experience" (EPW, 76), a retroactive and solid comprehension of oneself that goes beyond the fragmentary experience. And this proper understanding of the self "commences first (*demum* [at last]) at the hour of one's death" (77). Hence, there is no possibility of a life-view without the thought of one's own death. In Kierkegaard's opinion, the problem with Andersen is that he is characterised "as a possibility of personality, wrapped up in such a web of arbitrary moods and moving through an elegiac duodecimo-scale of almost echoless, dying tones just as easily roused as subdued, who, in order to become a personality, needs a strong life-development" (70). In other words, he criticises him for manifesting an elementary aestheticism at the mercy of external conditions—a state that he will describe in later works as despair—, and relates it to a distinction he makes in the preface between what in the discourse *To Need God* (1844) he will name the "first" and the "deeper self" (EUD, 314). While the former is the self subjected to the outside world, the latter is our "true home" or "ἄδυτον [inner sanctum]" (EPW, 56) where we seclude ourselves and shape "the deceitful flexibility of the surrounding world in such a way that it is no longer attractive to that first self" (EUD, 314). It seems, therefore, that even in this early work Kierkegaard points out, in the embryo stage, the retrospective power of death and the opposition between moods and the earnest thought of death that, as we will see in the section dedicated to it, he will develop in "At a Graveside".

In *The Concept of Irony* (1841), writing about Socrates' notion of afterlife, Kierkegaard insinuates again the idea of the importance of death in the individual's life-view. When examining the relations between Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, he affirms that the latter, in opposition to the former, "makes death the point of departure for a view of

life" (CI, 76). According to Kierkegaard, Plato's statement that life essentially consists in dying can be understood both morally and intellectually: while Plato saw it purely intellectually, Christianity understood it—not just but above all—morally. But leaving aside the particularities and differences between both visions, the issue here is that, as in *From the Papers of One Still Living*, the existential concern for a life-view stems from the thought of one's own death. Thus regarding the afterlife, it is important to stress that, as Socrates, Kierkegaard understands that the subjective interest of the individual in the afterlife has a decisive influence in his life. And this is relevant for us here insofar as the influence of the thought of one's own death in *this* life is a central point of the earnest thought of death as exposed in "At a Graveside".

Precisely the relationship with the afterlife is probably the subject of death that is given most weight in the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, published between 1843 and 1844. However, in these texts Kierkegaard also continues to develop his reflections on the influence of death in life, and covers several topics related to death from a Christian point of view. Due to my aim here, rather than the afterlife, I am more interested in the topics that will be picked up and examined in more detail in "At a Graveside": the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its moment, the anxiety that this uncertainty provokes, death's equality, and, again, the influence of the thought of one's own death in the life-view of the individual.

In *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience* (1844), Kierkegaard stresses that death "makes everyone equal, equally poor, equally powerless, equally miserable" (EUD, 185), something that he repeats in *The Expectancy of Eternal Salvation* (1844): "There must indeed be an equality, and what is more inconsolable than the equality in which people sometimes take refuge, the equality of death that makes everyone equally poor, and what is more blessed than the equality that makes everyone equally blessed?" (272). Kierkegaard suggests here an idea that he will develop in "At a Graveside": for the poor and the ones who suffer, the thought of death appears to be alleviating. However, in "At a Graveside" he also affirms that this equality is not real equality but just annihilation, and the attitude of those who wait for death is the cowardice of those who are more afraid of life.

Another topic that Kierkegaard mentions in *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience* is the certainty of death: "What indeed is this existence, where the only certainty is the only

one about which nothing can be known with certainty, and that is death!" (195). If in "At a Graveside" he will criticise the deception of the postponement—that is, the unjustifiable conviction that we still have some time to live—, here he speaks against hope, an "importunate pest one cannot get rid of, a cunning deceiver who holds out even longer than integrity, a cantankerous friend who always retains his rights even when the emperor has lost his" (195). Needless to say, hope and postponement are not identical. However the fact that Kierkegaard writes about it immediately after insisting on death's certainty could suggest that he is not just referring to general hope, but also to the concrete hope that the time of our death is still far away.

Having said that, the most developed subject of death in this discourse is also one of the most interesting for my research: the impact of the thought of death in one's own existence. At the beginning of the text, Kierkegaard explains the power of the imminence of death to change the life of those who have occupied it with vanities, and how they live more in the last few hours than in the rest of their lives. However, Kierkegaard stresses that this attitude should not be praised. The attitude that must be praised is the one that comes from inwardness:

> if a person discovered the danger while all speak of peace and security, if he discerned the horror and after having used the healthiest power of his soul to make himself fully aware of it, again with the horror before his eyes, now developed and preserved the same strength of soul as the one who fought in peril of his life, the same inwardness as the one who fought with death –yes, then we shall praise him. (EUD, 182)

Therefore, the authentic value consists in recognising mortality without being physically forced to face it, because security acts on human beings as a tranquiliser that dissipates the awareness of death. In this sense, Kierkegaard points out an idea that will be developed in "At a Graveside": the necessity to reflect on death as our own death and the impact that this though has in the life of the individual.

The thought of death has its moment in the limelight in *He Must Increase; I Must Decrease* (1844) as well. In this discourse, when writing about the single individual, self-knowledge, and John the Baptist's attitude of humble self-denial, Kierkegaard affirms that "the thought of death liberates a person, saves him from being a bond servant who wants to belong only to the earth, from being a cheat who does not want to

belong to God" (EUD, 282). Insisting again on the importance of the idea of one's own death, he reminds us that we begin to die at the very moment we are born. However,

> there are some people for whom the thought of death comes into existence with birth and is present to them in the quiet peacefulness of childhood and the buoyancy of youth; whereas others have a period in which this thought is not present to them until, when the years run out, the years of vigor and vitality, the thought of death meets them on their way. (EUD, 280)

Again, then, as in *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience*, Kierkegaard seem to note the importance of thinking about one's own death when in times of peace and tranquility, remembering that in the past people were used to think about their own death "until one was so quietly intimate with this thought that it did not at all disturb one's task in life" (EUD, 288). And according to Kierkegaard, "the person who in good time becomes intimate with the death-thought of self-denial; he, too, will have time to contemplate the fullness of the joy that is the incorruptible apparel of self-denial" (EUD, 288). This relationship between death and the attitude of self-denial is quite frequently found in Kierkegaard's works.

The influence of the thought of death in the life of the individual is also suggested in *Against Cowardliness* (1844), where Kierkegaard praises resolution: "There is indeed the danger of soul: that the world will come to be empty and everything a matter of indifference to you, life without taste and nourishment, truth itself a toilsome fabrication, and death a vague thought that neither alarms nor beckons" (350). Therefore, it seems that the power of the earnest reflection on death—to think death as one's own death—that penetrates and influences one's existence, is a constant topic in Kierkegaard's writings. This earnestness, as we shall see, is related to the practice of inwardness. In the upbuilding discourse *To Need God Is a Human Being's Highest Perfection* (1844), when mentioning the incipient idea of the Christian dying to the world, Kierkegaard points out the importance of "to esteem less and less the external, what life gives and takes, (…) but to be all the more concerned about the internal" (325). Although he relates this inwardness to the reflection on God, I believe its potential to influence the life of the individual remains intact even if the individual does not have a religious life-view. I shall return to this issue further on.

As we have seen, in the texts written under his own name in this early period, Kierkegaard examines death topics from a Christian perspective, especially related to

God and the afterlife. By contrast, in the early pseudonymous works, published during the same period as the upbuilding discourses, he approaches death from other points of view. The first volume of *Either/Or* (1843) shows reflection on death when life is seen from an aesthetic perspective. The aesthete wants to believe that enjoyment is the purpose of life, but, as stated in the "Diapsalmata", even "life's highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death" (EO, vol. 1, 20). Thus the aesthete sees that pleasure cannot be a univocal goal of life—for it vanishes as soon as one has reached it—and every human activity is meaningless because death is every human being's destiny at any, though uncertain, moment: "No one comes back from the dead; no one has come into the world without weeping. No one asks when one wants to come in; no one asks when one wants to go out" (26). According to Watkin, death seems to sabotage the meaning of life when seen from an aesthetic perspective: "The young aesthete (…) is 'through with life', speaking of it as a comparatively short activity that is 'empty and meaningless'—one might as well jump into the grave of the person one is burying, bury the entire human race as soon as possible" (1990, 66).

At this point, one alternative for the aesthete is to join the *Symparanekrōménoi*, the Fellowship of the Dead—literally, the ones that die together—, those who do not fear death and believe that the worst calamity is to live. Although Kierkegaard addresses this fellowship in the first part of *Either/Or*[27], the first time he mentions it is in an entry in his journals from January 9th 1838: "I was just searching for the right term to designate the class of people I would like to write for, in the conviction that they would share my outlook, and now I find it in Lucian: παρανεκροι (someone who, like me, is dead), and I would like to publish a journal for παρανεκροι" (KJN2, 99). The *Symparanekrōménoi* are the melancholic ones, those who live separated from others, without sharing joy or grief, accepting that existence is suffering and unhappiness, not pleasure, because they know that the recollection of happy moments dies with them. For all this, "[h]appy is the one who died in old age; happier is the one who died in youth; happiest is the one who died at birth; happiest of all the one who was never born" (EO, vol. 1, 221). As already mentioned, this attitude of not fearing death and desiring it will be criticised by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". However, as Watkin points out (1990, 67), it also has a positive consequence: it encourages a reflective state of conscious despair, which is

[27] More precisely in the three essays "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama", "Silhouettes. Psychological Diversion" and "The Unhappiest One".

better than the simple discontent concerning external factors of the unreflected individual.

In contrast to the immanentalist position of the aesthetic sphere, the second part of *Either/Or*, written by pseudonym Judge Wilhelm, reflects on death's capacity to give meaning to the life of the individual from an ethical-religious point of view. According to Wilhelm, death is a transition to the eternal life, which for him is the essential purpose of our existence. He says that each human being has the possibility to live a self-denying life, learning how to metaphorically die to one's own selfishness, which is the incipient idea of dying to the world that we have seen in *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience*, where Kierkegaard relates the thought of death with the attitude of self-denial, and also in *He Must Increase; I Must Decrease*, where he praises the humbleness of John the Baptist. In this way, through self-denial, the individual renounces the realm of immanence and all that it implies—for example, marriage—for the possibility of immortality. Therefore, although this ethical-religious position assumes the possibility of eternal life, it also shows, one more time, Kierkegaard's fixation to examine the influence of death in our understanding of life. As Stokes puts it, "Kierkegaard's project is entirely to look at death's place in the life of existing human beings" (2006, 399).

A similar idea of this dying to the world and to one's selfishness can also be found in Johannes de silentio's *Fear and Trembling* (1843). When trying to expose the nature of faith through Abraham's story[28] of having to sacrifice his son, de silentio differentiates between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith. The former infinitely renounces to the things that he loves the most, and keeps them intimately even knowing that they are impossible. The latter does the same but adds one more movement: he has the faith that, "by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible" (FT, 46), he will obtain them. Abraham, who obeyed God's command, suffering anxiety in silence and hoping by virtue of the absurd that he would recover Isaac, is the model and paradigm of this faith. Therefore, true faith is to give up everything one holds most dear in life. The horror is that Abraham is in this world. The hope to have Isaac back is not of another world—it is here. And the trembling of killing

[28] If I write "story" and not "experience" it is precisely because part of the problem that is taken up in the book is that we cannot in a sense understand, nor do we have access to, Abraham's experience.

him has to maintain the infinite importance of Isaac to Abraham in this world. Otherwise it would not be a sacrifice.

What is most important for my investigation here is that, as the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside", this renunciation to worldly attachments in *Fear and Trembling* penetrates into one's existence and has a decisive influence on it, because in "infinite resignation there is peace and rest" (45). Hence, it seems that if we want to have a proper existence, we must die metaphorically in one way or another: either giving up everything one holds most dear in life as in *Fear and Trembling* or, as in "At a Graveside", thinking earnestly about our own death. However, this either-or is not an opposition, insofar as both movements are related. Certainly, the background in *Fear and Trembling* is faith: the individual puts the meaning of his own life into God's hands, so that it is grounded on the eternal and not on the temporal self. Nevertheless, this dying to the world does not require faith in God, because it precedes it: "Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith, for only in infinite resignation do I become conscious of my eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by virtue of faith" (46). In other words, infinite resignation is the condition of the possibility of faith and it is "a purely philosophical movement that I venture to make when it is demanded" (48). To make this movement one does not need God, but the courage to renounce to temporality, finitude, the world: "every person who wills it, who has not debased himself by self-disdain—which is still more dreadful than being too proud—can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one to existence" (45). Thus, as the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside", this reconciliation, which infinite resignation provides, has a retroactive power that influences the individual's life.

Finally, it is important to remark that, according to de silentio, this means that we can have some sort of experience of death before dying: "Thus, if one believes that cold, barren necessity must necessarily be present, then one is declaring thereby that no one can experience death before one actually dies, which to me seems to be crass materialism" (46). He is referring to the infinite resignation, but the point for us here is that this idea advances the earnest thought of death that appears in "At a Graveside", because he seems to affirm that, if we consider death just as a material phenomenon and

we do not anticipate the possibility of our own death, then we will not grasp its capacity to change our lives at this very present moment.

Another way to experience or anticipate death before dying is found in *Repetition* (1843), where Constantin Constantius uses the language that is commonly employed to talk about death to characterise failed erotic love. Again, this poetical experience of death has the potentiality to change the individual's life:

> It may be true that a person's life is over and done with in the first moment, but there must also be the vital force to slay this death and transform it to life. In the first dawning of erotic love, the present and the future contend with each other to find an eternal expression, and this recollecting is indeed eternity's flowing back into the present –that is, when this recollecting is sound. (R, 137)

Perhaps even more to the point is a beautiful sentence that encourages interpreting life through death: "The person who has not circumnavigated life before beginning to live will never live" (R, 132). In other words, if the individual does not consider his life as a totality that includes death, he will not live a proper life. This idea is an anticipation of the retrospective power of death and the model of existential thinking—namely, a model of thinking related to inwardness and subjective appropriation—that the thought of one's own death stimulates and which Kierkegaard will expose in "At a Graveside".

Regarding repetition itself, Constantius sets out to investigate its possibility. One possible reading of his examination is that repetition is impossible in the aesthetic and the ethical spheres: while Constantius despairs of aesthetic repetition, the young man despairs of the ethical. Proper repetition—the one that, in contrast to recollection, looks forward by always having the past and the present alongside that which is to come—seems only possible in the religious sphere. In other words, worldly events cannot be repeated and true repetition is only related to eternity—without this meaning that the individual can let go of his existence while in existence, because, while repetition might be related to eternity, if it were not a relation to one still living there would be no repetition. However, I shall return to this in the section dedicated to "At a Graveside" to offer another explanation that links the earnest thought of death with repetition understood as an eternal present. For now, I just want to put the spotlight again on the ability of death to transform life.

In *Repetition*, as in *Fear and Trembling* and the second part of *Either/Or*, this life-changing potential of the thought of death comes from a metaphorical interpretation of dying: death as a self-denying attitude, as a renunciation of erotic love, marriage, and family. In sum, as dying to the world. Hence, it seems that it can be claimed that, in Kierkegaard's works, the anticipation of one's own death has a retrospective power: in these early writings, the anticipation takes the form of a metaphorical death, whereas in "At a Graveside" we find the exercise to think of oneself as dead. It is worth mentioning that Constantius defines repetition as the "actuality and the earnestness of existence" (133). Therefore, both repetition and the thought of one's own death are earnest existential—not just conceptual—movements that have an impact on our lives in the commitment with our own singularity. According to Constantius, the one who merely expects is a coward, and the one who just recollects is voluptuous. Only the one who wills repetition deserves to be called a human being. "But he who does not grasp that life is a repetition and that this is the beauty of life has pronounced his own verdict and deserves nothing better than what will happen to him anyway—he will perish" (132). Therefore, it seems that the earnestness to think of one's own death and the earnestness of repetition are parallel existential movements. I will delve into this parallelism in the section dedicated to "At a Graveside".

In the preface to *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), when Johannes Climacus—in a typical Kierkegaardian refusal of authority—affirms that he would be uncomfortable if anyone were to adopt his opinion just for the reason that it is his, he introduces the metaphor of the dance with the thought of death: "All I have is my life, which I promptly stake every time a difficulty appears. Then it is easy to dance, for the thought of death is a good dancing partner, my dancing partner" (PF, 8). This image appears again in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where Socrates is referred as a "solo dancer to the honor of the god" (CUP, vol. 1, 89), and, as we will see, also in "At a Graveside". Just like in this discourse, Climacus relates the thought of one's own death with earnestness: "I can stake my own life, I can in all earnestness trifle with my own life—not with another's" (PF, 8). It is important to remark that this dance is a "solo" dance, much like the "solo" of the thought of death in "At a Graveside". Indeed, what in this discourse differentiates the earnest though of death from the various moods on death is that earnestness comes from the thought of one's own death, not from whatever feeling we experience in front of the death of another human being. It is a "solo" dance

and not the usual Socratic public dialogue: the thought of death is a conversation with oneself in front of eternity and one's own finitude. As such, Climacus also considers that the thought of death is not just an abstract proposition, but an existential movement that has a crucial influence on the life of the individual.

Edward F. Mooney offers an illuminating insight into this "solo" dance of death. According to him, "Kierkegaard rejects the possibility that death teaches only fear and trembling, or only *through* fear and trembling. It does not paralyze, or serve as a counterweight to vivid life. The fluid, light steps of life are a dance with death" (2011, 134). The fact that the thought of death is described as a dance indicates that "[d]eath adds luster to *this* life" (134). In this sense, contrary to what one might think, we learn from death not just with fear but also with joy: "Perhaps the moral earnestness death brings in her train is a matter of lightness and grace, not puritanical fear, hard labor, and struggle" (134). As mentioned before, Plato understood philosophy as a rehearsal for death. At first sight, this rehearsal appears to be a purely self-reflective practice. However, introducing the metaphor of the dance of death, Climacus adds an existential movement to this reflection. In Mooney's words: "This secures the intuition that Socrates is more than a thinking-talking head. He will enact a flowing, embodied artistry that somehow is the expressive equivalent of dialectic and an expressive outpouring of a life-in-the-presence-of-death" (135). We shall see this topic again when examining death in the *Postscript*. Before leaving behind *Fragments*, however, it is worth noting that Climacus makes clear in a footnote that he believes that Epicurus' observation as to why we should not fear death—when I am, it is not, and when it is, I am not—is a "scant comfort" (PF, 95). This critique to Epicurus' claim is central in "At a Graveside" and it is repeated in the posthumous work *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, declaring that it is sophistry (147).

With respect to *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), there are several issues related to death that must be stressed. We have seen before that anxiety is "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (CA, 42), and, contrary to fear, its object—which is hardly an "object"—is nothingness. My basic aim here is to connect anxiety with death, and to understand it as an overture to one's own finitude. In this sense, Heidegger's reading of anxiety in *Being and Time* is pertinent here. Without quoting Kierkegaard, but following him, Heidegger considers anxiety as the basic state of mind that arises when we are faced with possibility. As such, we discover that there is one possibility that

escapes our choice, which manifests itself as the inevitable and always imminent destiny. Hence, anxiety situates us in front of the nothingness, which can be read here as one's own death. In this regard, Vasiliki Tsakiri provides an interesting interpretative key when suggesting that, because its object is nothingness, "anxiety is best conceptualized when considered in the context of the interplay between non-being and being which has troubled philosophy for years" (2006, 35). It is also worth mentioning Franz Rosenzweig, who, influenced by Kierkegaard (1970, 7), characterised an anxiety that pours out when faced with death, an anxiety that experiences death not as the Platonic division between body and soul—which is not Kierkegaard's framework—but as an "unthinkable annihilation" (3). As mentioned, anxiety constitutes a challenge to our explanations. In this sense, providing us with a fundamental sense of fragility, it opens us up to our mortal condition and pushes us to self-knowledge. Simon Podmore connects this to the ambiguity of death and our relation to it, which he explains through the sympathetic antipathy and the antipathetic sympathy that we experience faced with the abyss of possibility: "In this sense, death constitutes a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery to be both feared and desired. Death is the secret 'unknown' that simultaneously holds the key to self-knowledge, and also the self's own destruction" (2011, 45).

However, the most fruitful tool for my investigation is Tillich's interpretation of anxiety, which helps us to connect anxiety with death, and *The Concept of Anxiety* with "At a Graveside". According to Tillich, "anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing. The same statement, in shorter form, would read: anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing" (1980, 35). He clarifies that existential is "not the abstract knowledge of nonbeing which produces anxiety but the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being" (35). However, it should be pointed out that, while Kierkegaard considers that anxiety—as well as existence—is exclusive of human beings, Tillich holds that in some way all living beings experience it (36). This essential difference is evident when Haufniensis suggests in a footnote that there are different degrees of death and of the anxiety related to it: "It is true in a deeper sense that the higher man is valued, the more terrifying is death. The beast does not really die, but when the individual is posited as individual, death shows itself as the terrifying. The anxiety of death therefore corresponds to the anxiety of birth" (CA, 92). Buben, after noting that this last fragment of *The Concept of Anxiety* may have had an important

influence on Heidegger, argues that Kierkegaard is not only "implying that physical passing away is somehow distinct from meaningful death, but he is also pointing out that unless humanity is understood in the proper way, human existence runs the risk of having no more meaning than that of animals, whose births and deaths seem relatively insignificant" (2011, 73). The issue here is that only beings that have a self can be troubled by the future, and in this sense the temporal foundation of the self is the origin of the concern for death. As we have seen, and bearing in mind that "[t]he possible corresponds exactly to the future" (CA, 91), Haufniensis considers that anxiety is always anxiety about the future. Considering anxiety as related to possibility, if the individual is anxious about the past, it is just because it might be repeated. From this point of view, to the self "the future can in a certain sense signify the whole" (89). And for this reason, as Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen remarks, "death, considered as the eventuality of the uttermost coming of the future, is allotted an immense significance to the entire existence of the self" (2014, 262). However, Michaelsen notes that "[s]ince the care about the next day is generated and suffered by the self, it cannot be overcome by the self itself, unless the self relates itself to something outside itself" (2014, 255). My proposal will be to consider that this "something outside the self" could be the earnest thought of death as exposed in "At a Graveside", a thought that has a retrospective power by which learning to die becomes learning to live.

Another comment on death in *The Concept of Anxiety* that is worth highlighting, is connected to sin. Haufniensis' book revolves around anxiety as the presupposition of sin: "Anxiety is the psychological state that precedes sin. It approaches sin as closely as possible, as anxiously as possible, but without explaining sin, which breaks forth only in the qualitative leap. The moment sin is posited, temporality is sinfulness" (CA, 92). What interests me here is that, in the footnote following this statement, Haufniensis affirms that "[f]rom the determination of the temporal as sinfulness, death in turn follows as punishment" (92). This is related to God's veto against eating from the tree of knowledge. This prohibition, as well as any other subsequent prohibition, awakens the desire of transgression and provides knowledge of freedom. Hence, "[t]he prohibition induces in him [Adam] anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility" (44). Then, "[a]fter the word of prohibition follows the word of judgment: 'You shall certainly die'" (45). Even though Adam cannot comprehend these

words, because finitude still has to enter the world, anxiety reaches its highest point and opens the individual to the consideration of death as punishment.

Moreover, at the end of the *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis ties together anxiety and death using again the metaphor of the dance: "whoever has truly learned how to be anxious will dance when the anxieties of finitude strike up the music and when the apprentices of finitude lose their minds and courage" (161-162). This illustrates once more Kierkegaard's conviction that, as he states in "At a Graveside", death acts as a master who can transform our life, not just through fear but also through joy. He suggests it again in the aforementioned footnote, affirming that

> death remains as that which, itself unexplained, explains that the whole of life was a game that came to an end, and in which everyone, the greatest as well as the least, made their departures like school children, extinguished like sparks of burning paper, and last of all the soul itself as the schoolmaster. And so there is also a muteness of annihilation found in the fact that the whole was merely a children's game, and now the game is over. (CA, 93)

This footnote is especially relevant because it synthesises the basic ideas on death that are a constant in Kierkegaard's corpus: despite being inexplicable itself—or perhaps precisely because it is inexplicable—, death has a retrospective power to change life, because the (joyful) struggle of the soul with the thought of one's own death acts as a master by which the individual can learn to live.

Finally, to end this section, it has to be remarked that *The Concept of Anxiety* questions Plato and Epicurus' ideas on death. Regarding the latter, Haufniensis seems to criticise him when stating that "[b]ecause the pagan view of sensuousness was more naive, its temporality more carefree, so the pagan view of death was milder and more attractive, but it lacked the ultimate" (CA, 92)—that is, the earnestness of death. And regarding Plato, Haufniensis criticises his notion of "dying away" because it depends on a notion of temporality that he does not share. According to Haufniensis, "[t]he moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time" (89).[29] For this, time is divided between present, past and future. After affirming that the future, in a certain sense, signifies more that the present

[29] For the sake of clarity it has to be noted that "moment" is the Hong translation of the Danish word *Øieblikket*, which is derived from *Øiets Blik* ("glance of the eye"), and perhaps it would be better translated as "instant".

and the past because it signifies the whole of which the past is a part, he notes that the Greeks did not have the concepts of the future and the eternal. Temporality, for them, was conceived "as naively as sensuousness, because they lacked the category of spirit" (89). Therefore, the Greeks understood the eternal 'laying-behind' "as the past that can only be entered backwards" (90). Because of this, as Buben observes, the Platonic dying away depends on a notion of temporality "that is wrapped up in recollection of the past and sees little significance in 'the moment' of life" (2011, 101). Christian temporality, in contrast, "sees the moment's significance in binding a guilty past to a forgiven future, understood as eternity, in proper repetition" (101). And this links *The Concept of Anxiety* with *Repetition*, because, in Buben's words, Constantius considers that "such repetition (which, in contrast to recollection, is necessarily forward-looking) is only possible in the case of relating to the eternal; worldly connections or events can never be entirely repeated in every respect" (101)—which does not mean that repetition can be reduced to future and eternity, because it only has meaning insofar as it is connected to time. Not for nothing Haufniensis reminds us in a footnote that, according to Constantius, repetition is the earnestness of existence (CA, 149). Be that as it may, the pertinent issue here is that, while Kierkegaard's earnest thought of death has the power to transform the individual's life, Plato's dying away consists in dying from the body as well as from all sensible things in the interest of an abstract knowledge obtained through recollection. Hence, Plato and Kierkegaard's respective notions of the thought of death are as opposed to each other as their notions of temporality are.

2. Middle writings

We have seen so far that death was an important theme in Søren Kierkegaard's early writings, both in the pseudonymous works and in those signed under his own name. However, between 1845 and 1847 death grows into a major topic. And the most relevant work on death from this period is "At a Graveside", the last of *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* (1845) and the basis of the present investigation. For this reason, in order to have a general perspective of Kierkegaard's reflections on death before approaching the central text of my research, in this section I will create an overview of the middle writings, leaving "At a Graveside" to the end of this chapter.

Already at the introductory "Lectori Benevolo!" in *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Hilarius Bookbinder, the pseudonymous editor, seems to insinuate the importance that death will have in this collection of texts when using a German proverb—"*Heute roth morgen todt* [Today red, tomorrow dead]" (SLW, 3)—to remind that we all must die regardless of status and age (3). And indeed, the importance of the thought of one's own death is highlighted in "In Vino Veritas". When William Afham recounts the banquet, which several of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms attend, Victor Eremita declares that, at the moment of death, "I shall no longer belong to you or to the world, but only to the earnest thought of death!" (SLW, 28). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that "In Vino Veritas" also contains a brief fragment that, as in *Repetition*, makes note of the use of death to metaphorically describe failed erotic love as "certain death" (31). And certainly, it is no coincidence that this comparison is started by Constantius, the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*.

In "Guilty/Not Guilty" the diary's author retells a story of a diligent, shy and to-the-world-unacquainted bookkeeper who suggests the power of the thought of one's own death to transform the individual's life-view. This hard working man, in his strict and decent life, forgot to be young. Yet one day, after a party, heated with wine and some bad company, he became a different person and paid for the company of a prostitute. The following day, he was deeply remorseful and promised himself not to meet those friends again. He became even more diligent than before. Some time later he fell mortally ill. And "[a]t the moment he was closest to death and already prepared to set foot on 'the solemn bridge of eternity,' there suddenly awakened a recollection, a recollection of that event which up until now actually had not existed for him" (283-284). This recollection was the possibility of having a child. He was troubled with this possibility, and "he could never know for sure whether it was a result of the illness, a feverish hallucination, or whether death had actually come to the aid of his memory with a recollection of an actuality" (284). However, although this story reminds us again of the potential of death to change the life of the individual, there is an important difference with what Kierkegaard suggests in *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience*, *He Must Increase; I Must Decrease*, and "At a Graveside", a difference that we have already seen and that helps us understand the inflections of earnestness. Namely, that the challenge of earnestness consists in thinking one's own death without being physically compelled to face it, when our life does not insinuate or demonstrate that it is

coming to an end. This is not, of course, the situation of the bookkeeper, for the thought of his death was forced on by his illness. In any case, despite this difference, in "Guilty/Not Guilty" there are several comments that indicate Kierkegaard's interest in death's life-changing capacity, which can be synthesised with this exclamation, made by the author of the diary after suffering a small wound during a fencing lesson: "O death, I believe we do you an injustice; what meaning you are able to give life when even such a little reminder has such an effect" (300).

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments"* (1846), pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus intends to recover a subjective understanding of ethics in opposition to a modern objective approach. While aiming to the never-ending task of becoming subjective, which is "the highest task assigned to a human being" (CUP, vol. 1, 129), and, more concretely, while offering an account from the point of view of an "outsider" (16) of the process of becoming a Christian, Climacus reflects on what it means to die and what it means to be immortal, as examples of the difficulty for the individual to practice this fundamental task. Climacus believes that in his time there is a tendency to neglect the thought of one's own death, something that might be explained as a Hegelian perspective, under the influence of which "people want to delude themselves world-historically in the totality; no one wants to be an individual existing human being" (355). The danger of this perspective is that, as Paul Muench notes, it "can lead to a condition of absentmindedness in individuals and in their losing track of themselves as ethical agents" (2011, 103). Climacus considers existential problems to be ethical and religious in nature, and hence of such a kind that should concern the individual's life. Thinking about dying is a paradigmatic example of such existential problems. For this reason, he finds that the individual should think it "into every moment" (CUP, vol. 1, 167) of his life. Not as something in general—that is, the way that Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich thought about it, or, in Climacus' example, Soldin the bookseller—but as something decisive for himself, because "*my* dying is by no means something in general; for others, my dying is some such thing" (167). Therefore, like Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside", Climacus insists on the fact that the thought of death requires a subjective approach and the individual's appropriation. This way, he stresses the irreducibly personal aspect of death: to think death in general is not the same as the thought of one's own death, and it does not have the same effect in the process of becoming subjective.

Hence, the task of becoming subjective demands us to think death during our entire life. However, the only detail that Climacus offers about the content of this thinking is something that is also essential in “At a Graveside”: the certainty and the uncertainty of death. Actually, Climacus asks himself if “it is at all possible to have an idea of death” (168). Faithful to his characteristic Socratic style, he admits that he is “very far indeed from having comprehended death” (170). In the end, the vagueness of death, this acknowledgement of our ignorance of it, this comprehension of the fact that death cannot be grasped as an idea or in a representation, stresses its uncertainty and, at the same time, what we do not know about ourselves. Again, this uncertainty of death “cannot possibly be understood in general if I am not also such a human being in general. But this I am not. That is something only absentminded people are” (167). In this sense, Climacus is suggesting that the development of subjectivity can be detected through the individual’s relation to death. There are two different ways of thinking the uncertainty of death: on the one hand, the objective, external, world-historical and general perspective, which “is nonsense, of course, and is not to think it at all” (166), and, on the other hand, the subjective one, which has a decisive influence on the self and the process of becoming subjective.

Therefore, Climacus suggests that facing the thought of one’s own death and its uncertainty transforms the individual’s life. The appropriation of this uncertainty is not just noticeable in the words of the individuals, but also in their actions:

> But if the task is to become subjective, then for the individual subject to think death is not at all some such thing in general but is an act, because the development of subjectivity consists precisely in this, that he, acting, works through himself in his thinking about his own existence, consequently that he actually thinks what is thought by actualizing it. (CUP, vol. 1, 169)

In other words, to think death as one’s own death is not just a conceptual thought about death in general, but an existential thought that implies a personal transformation. As Michaelsen notes, “[b]ecause it is posed ethically and religiously, that is, subjectively and not objectively or metaphysically, the question of death becomes not only a passion but also an act, not only a passive suffering but also an activity of giving oneself over to death” (2014, 273-274).

Before moving on, and although the issue of immortality is not part of the topic of this investigation, it is worth mentioning that Climacus connects it to the issue of death and

to what it means to die from a subjective point of view. In short, for the same reason that the certain uncertainty of death is not something in general but a movement of the subjective that must be repeated constantly, the "indefiniteness" (CUP, vol. 1, 176) of immortality has to be approached subjectively and is related to temporality. The point is not the afterlife but how the self relates itself to immortality in time. Thus the possibility of an afterlife cannot be determined objectively. This is especially relevant for us here because Climacus, as Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside", does not lean on the possibility of the afterlife and also understands it as an indefinable enigma that the individual has to preserve. This way, as in the case of one's own death, the essential issue is to keep this uncertainty in mind during our entire life and to live with it without losing ourselves in abstract speculations.

Finally, this subjective approach to death and immortality is related in the *Postscript* to the issue of being a Christian. In Climacus' opinion, and in contrast to what he considers the usual belief and behaviour of his time, one cannot objectively become a Christian. Being a Christian is not a matter of being born and baptised in Christendom. As the early Christians experienced, the life of a Christian is inseparable from suffering. This suffering translates into "dying to immediacy" (CUP, vol. 1, 460) and into "dying to oneself" (472), which implies several worldly sacrifices and "the martyrdom of faith (to crucify one's understanding)" (559), a topic that Kierkegaard developed in his late writings.

In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), despite the fact that death is not a major topic, there are some interesting comments for my research. Most of what is said about death in this work is found in the first discourse, entitled "On the Occasion of a Confession". In this discourse, also known as "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing", Kierkegaard insists on the power of death, considering it as one of the "changes in life that can allow a person to learn whether he wills one thing" (UDVS, 27). As in "At a Graveside", Kierkegaard uses the constant presence of death to criticise the illusion of postponement, the illusion that we still have some time left, and suggests that death shows the individual what is essential: "for even the old man believes that there is still time left, and the indolent youth fools himself if he thinks that age difference is the main factor with regard to the closeness of the eleventh hour" (15). And again, he relates the thought of death with earnestness: "O eleventh hour, how changed everything is when

you are present; how still everything is, as if it were the midnight hour; how earnest everything is, as if it were the hour of death" (15).

In *Works of Love* (1847), Kierkegaard also addresses some death-related topics. For instance, in "Our Duty to Remain in Love's Debt", he connects the idea of dying to the world—that is, dying to oneself and to worldly understanding—with Christian martyrdom (WL, 196-197). However, the discourse that deals most explicitly with death is "The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who Is Dead", in which Kierkegaard understands that the relationship with the dead is a criterion to test ourselves that can teach us how to love the living[30]: "the work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love" (WL, 358). In this sense, as in "At a Graveside", the thought of death has a decisive influence on the life of the individual—with the difference that in this case it is not the thought of one's own death but the recollection of the dead one that may change our view on life.

Another relevant issue for my investigation is the link that Stokes establishes between the account of loving the dead in *Works of Love* and the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside". For Stokes, this is related with the problem "of how death, conceived as absolute annihilation, can nonetheless be with us" (2011, 257). Indeed, in *Works of Love*, as in "At a Graveside", Kierkegaard understands death as absolute annihilation: "But when a person relates himself to one who is dead, there is only one in this relationship, inasmuch as one who is dead is no actuality; no one, no one can make himself *no one* as well as one who is dead, because he is *no one*" (WL, 347). According to Stokes, however, the ontological status of the dead is more paradoxical than just nonexistence, because, even if the dead are no ones and their un-existence is characterised by the impossibility of responsiveness, we love and mourn specific dead people. Thus, although death is absolute annihilation, it has a particular ontological status and it is still with us. And this can be related with "At a Graveside" in the sense that, in this discourse, Kierkegaard suggests that thanks to the earnest thought of death we become co-present with our own death. In Stokes' understanding of things, even though Kierkegaard does not use the expression "co-presence" in *Works of Love*, there are some parallelisms that indicate a kind of co-presence with the dead, which depend

[30] For some critics, such as Adorno, this implies an antisocial understanding of human relationships, insofar as, according to him, Kierkegaard "demands that love behave towards all men as if they were dead" (1940, 415).

on certain modes of contemplation. Indeed, our duty to the dead in *Works of Love* is explained in contemplative terms: "We ought not to disturb the dead by wailing and crying. We ought to treat one who is dead as we treat one who is sleeping, whom we do not have the heart to awaken because we hope that he will wake up by himself" (WL, 348). According to Stokes, we treat the sleeping "[n]ot through interaction or discourse, but through *watching over* them, lovingly attending to—paying attention to—their presence in the world without disturbing them" (2011, 263). This implies that Kierkegaard changes the way of mourning from external and involuntary emotional expressions to voluntary attention-based duty to the dead, a type of moral recollection that Stokes calls "remembrance". To Stokes, the essential dichotomy between mood and earnestness that Kierkegaard establishes in "At a Graveside" "is reintroduced into the context of our practices of remembering the dead" (264). This remembrance, then, is related to temporality and with the subjective movement of reflection that converts something of the future into something actual—that is, that makes us co-present with our own death.

Finally, to end this recounting of the thought of death in *Works of Love*, it is also worth mentioning that Kierkegaard insists once more on the decisive impact that the anticipation of one's own death has in the life of the individual. Considering death as "the briefest summary of live" (WL, 345) that examines what we "have understood about life" (345), he affirms that "[n]o thinker grasps life as death does, this masterful thinker who is able not only to think through every illusion but is able to think it to pieces, think it to nothing" (345). Hence, as in "At a Graveside", Kierkegaard considers the earnest thought of death as a teacher or a master that puts to the test the individual's life-view, and that annihilates illusions, such as the postponement. It has to be noted, however, that there is also a remarkable difference between the earnestness of death in "At a Graveside" and *Works of Love*, which is evident in the following passage:

> Death is not earnest in the same way as the eternal is. To the earnestness of death belongs that remarkable capacity for awakening, this resonance of a profound mockery that, detached from the thought of the eternal, is an empty, often brazen, jest, but together with the thought of the eternal is just what it should be and is utterly different from the insipid earnestness that least of all captures and holds a thought that has the tension the thought of death has. (WL, 353)

Thus, unlike "At a Graveside", as Buben argues, this passage seems to suggest "that thinking of death must be done for the purpose of grasping one's relationship with God if it is to have any more value than not thinking of death at all" (2011, 83). The key for this interpretation is that Buben assumes that when Kierkegaard refers to the eternal he is actually referring to God. Taking into account the overall Christian character of the book, this is a reasonable assumption. However, the text itself is not referring to God but to the eternal[31]. Certainly, to examine what Kierkegaard means by the eternal is complex and it depends on the context of each case. In this sense, Buben's reading is one possible interpretation. It cannot be denied that there is difference between the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside" and in *Works of Love*, since the former, despite mentioning God, in its consideration of death does not appeal to immortality or any metaphysical ideas. However, I propose that the above passage from *Works of Love* could also be seen as a criticism of Epicurus' advice, which in "At a Graveside" is considered a jest. That is, as thinking about death from an abstract point of view, and being as such something external, which in relation to death is an empty thought. Therefore, the eternal could be read here as an advice to think about death as one's own death, as an encouragement to transform the objective thought of death into a subjective one.

3. Late writings

Kierkegaard's works from 1848 and beyond still contain many of the reflections on death that we have examined so far and that we shall also find in "At a Graveside". In *Christian Discourses* (1848), for instance, Kierkegaard notices again the fundamental issue of the certain uncertainty when affirming that "death is the only certainty, that it, mocking, mocking me and all the uncertainty of earthly life, which at every moment is equally uncertain, is equally certain at every moment" (CD, 257). Moreover, again as in "At a Graveside", Kierkegaard remarks the irreducibly personal aspect of death and the power of individualisation of the thought of one's own death: "Because death knows how to make itself understood on the question, to whom does it apply, knows how to make you understand that it is *you*, that you are the one involved, that it is no one else,

[31] The original Danish words in this fragment are *Evige* (eternal) and *Eviges* (of the eternal ones).

not your next-door neighbor, not the neighbor opposite or anyone else here in the city, but that *you* are the one who is going to die" (164). Finally, he continues to insist on the importance of thinking that death is possible at any moment, writing that the Christian always bears in mind that he "does not know whether he perhaps will die 'this very night'" (27). Thus while the Christian speaks only about today, the pagan, the one without God, the one who pretends not to think about tomorrow, "continually speaks only about tomorrow" (78), and because of this "he is not *living* today" (78). Indeed, when the pagan says "[l]et us eat and drink, because tomorrow we shall die",[32] he manifests his "anxiety about the next day, the day of annihilation" (77). Hence, anxiety is the concern for the next day (78), and caring for the next day is a sentence for life (72). In this sense, the one who really lives is the one who dies to the world: "If there is no next day for you, then either you are dying or you are one who by dying to temporality grasped the eternal, either one who is actually dying or one who is *really* living" (72).

Now let us turn to *The Sickness unto Death* (1849). Although the title might well suggest that this pseudonymous work should play a significant role in my account of death in Kierkegaard's authorship, the truth is that it moves away from my main interest here, which is the thought of one's own death. First, in Anti-Climacus' work, the sickness unto death is despair, which the pseudonymous author identifies with sinfulness, when understood from a Christian point of view. And secondly, *The Sickness unto Death* does not focus so much on the individual, but treats the matter in a rather abstract way; hence, it is not the thought of one's own death that is in question, but the condition of the individuals in despair who, because of that, are "unable to die" (SUD, 18) and are in the need of the previously mentioned dying to the world.

If someone in despair is unable to die, it is because—as seen in *Christian Discourses*—he has never really lived, and at the same time is unable to live because he is already dead. Anti-Climacus describes this condition as a "tormenting contradiction" (18), a sickness of the self that consists in "perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death" (18). In other words, "[w]hen death is the greatest danger, we hope for life; but when we learn to know the even greater danger, we hope for death" (18). And when this happens, despair "is the hopelessness of not even being able to die" (18). Therefore,

[32] 1 Corinthians 15:32.

from Anti-Climacus perspective, “death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world” (6). As we will see, this hope for death is interpreted in “At a Graveside” as the cowardice of those who fear life more than death. In any case, *The Sickness unto Death* is focused mostly on despair, thereby approaching death from a different perspective than the one that constitutes the basis of my investigation. In other words, while *The Sickness unto Death* is focused on the death of the spirit, “At a Graveside” is focused on natural death. A more thorough examination of the links between death and despair, and their relation to sinfulness, could be the topic for another dissertation.

Having said that, in *The Sickness unto Death* there are two further aspects worth mentioning because of their connection with my research. Firstly, the inability to die of the despairing one is deeply rooted in Kierkegaard’s authorship and is strongly related to a certain notion of temporality: the temporality of those dispossessed of temporal presence, which is an important topic in “At a Graveside”. It is likewise a fundamental theme in the figures of the *Symparanekromenoi* and the Wandering Jew in *Either/Or*, an issue that we will approach in the section dedicated to “At a Graveside”. And secondly, when Anti-Climacus states that “to die signifies that it is all over, but to die death means to experience dying” (18), he is blurring the line between life and death. In this sense, as George Connell notes, Anti-Climacus, as Kierkegaard in “At a Graveside”, is criticising Epicurus’ claim that when we are death is not and when death is we are not, because this idea presupposes a sharp demarcation between life and death (2011, 24). Anti-Climacus’ notion of death points towards an essential element that we have constantly found in Kierkegaard’s corpus: the retrospective influence of death in the individual’s life. In Connell’s words, “[d]eath is not just a result that ensues upon the completion of the dying process; it encroaches upon life, making itself manifest in a variety of ways” (26).

This retrospective power of death appears again in “Should One Suffer Death for the Truth?”, one of the *Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays* (1849). While reflecting on the ethics of Jesus’ martyrdom, pseudonymous author H.H. writes that “[h]is death has retroactive power” (WA, 64). However, in this case, the retrospective power does not make reference to the effect of the thought of one’s own death in the life of an individual, but to the fact that Jesus’ death was the atonement for the whole of humanity, since “he was not just some particular individual; he relates himself totally to

the race" (64). In this statement we can observe a nuance that suggests a difference in perspective compared to *The Concept of Anxiety*, because, as we have seen, Haufniensis affirms that every individual is simultaneously himself and the whole race. Indeed, H.H. asks himself if the death of any witness of the truth has the same retroactive power as the death of Jesus. He concludes, however, that "only Christ's death had that, since he was more than human and related himself to the whole human race" (73).

In *Practice in Christianity* (1850) there is a passage that has a couple of echoes from the approach to death that we find in "At a Graveside". Anti-Climacus writes:

> There certainly is rest in the grave, but to sit beside a grave, or to stand beside a grave, or to visit a grave is still not the same as lying in the grave; and to read again and again one's own writing, which one knows by heart, the epitaph that one placed there oneself and oneself best understands who it is who is buried *here*—this is not the same as lying buried there oneself. In the grave there is rest, but *beside* the grave there is no rest; it says: up to here and no further, so you may go home again. (PC, 17-18)

On the one hand, as we see in this last sentence, Anti-Climacus notes the decisive character of death, insofar as it says to the living: "up to here and no further".[33] On the other hand, he insists on the fact that to think about the death of another is not the same as to think of one's own death. Therefore, as Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside", Anti-Climacus distinguishes between the moods that the individual might experience when faced with the death of another and the earnest thought of death, which consists in thinking death as one's own death. Having said that, at large *Practice in Christianity* is an attack on Christendom and a defence of the need to imitate Christ in order to become a true Christian, topics well beyond the reach of my investigation.

In *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!* (1851) we find once more the essential characteristics of death that are a constant in Kierkegaard's corpus—its certain uncertainty—, as well as his interest in pointing out the personal, subjective, and untransferable character of it: "and you know that what is the most certain thing of all but also the most uncertain, death, will some day come to you and be your death" (FSE, 22). And again, Kierkegaard approaches life through the thought of death: "First death—then life" (81). However, as is usually the case in the late writings, the approach

[33] Job 38:11.

is strongly Christian. Indeed, in these couple of works, Kierkegaard continues the task of examining what it means to be a Christian—namely, Christ as a prototype, the imitation of Him and his martyrdom—and points out the difficulty of this task, the task of dying to the world:

> Therefore, death first; you must first die to every merely earthly hope, to every merely human confidence; you must die to your selfishness, or to the world, because it is only through your selfishness that the world has power over you; if you are dead to your selfishness, you are also dead to the world. But naturally there is nothing a human being hangs on to so firmly—indeed, with his whole self!—as to his selfishness! (FSE, 77)

From this perspective, it seems that to die to the world is impossible for the individual by his own means. According to these texts, only God's grace can provide the individual a properly Christian dying to the world: "It is the Spirit who gives life. Yes, the Spirit gives life—through death (FSE, 77). Buben, who understands Kierkegaard's reflections on death, throughout the latter's authorship, as a project onto its own and considers *For Self-Examination* as the culmination of it, affirms that, for Kierkegaard, "[o]nly with God's help can an individual die to the world and avoid making his or her Christianity into what 'At a Graveside' understands as a worldly 'what' concern" (2011, 91). As he explains, this means that the only way to properly die to the world, and to avoid thinking in the new life of Christ as a continuation of this worldly life, is through God's grace. The essential reason for this is that, as we have seen in the *Postscript* and other works, in order to be a true Christian the individual must die to the understanding: "Faith is against understanding; faith is on the other side of death" (FSE, 82). And this can only be achieved with divine assistance. On this basis, Buben claims that what he considers a "death project" in Kierkegaard is inherently Christian and comes up in the context of how one can become Christian (2011, 94). Although he also affirms that he does not want to suggest "that it is impossible for someone with no Christian interests whatsoever to be moved by some of the lessons learned in following this project" (95), he considers that a reader "without Christian interests will find nothing in Kierkegaard's work to compel them to make such a project their own" (95). The reason for this is that, according to Buben, "[i]t seems that Kierkegaard might need Christian theology in order to demonstrate that his approach to life through death is preferable to other possible attitudes towards death" (94-95), especially if we keep in mind the essential role of God's grace in this last works. And what is even more central to my research, he argues

that “[e]ven in the case of ‘At a Graveside,’ which for the most part seems to treat death on its own terms, there is at least an implicit Christian understanding” (94).

In the following section I will try to argue against this last claim, because I am convinced that there is a legitimate non Christian reading of “At a Graveside”. Certainly, I believe that Buben succeeds in pointing out that Kierkegaard represents a third strain in the history of philosophy of death that, placing between brackets the possibility of post-mortem subjectivity, insists on the influence of the thought of one’s own death in our daily life. But I have reasons to argue that there is no need of Christian theology in order to demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s approach to life through the thought of one’s own death in “At a Graveside” is preferable to other possible dispositions to the eleventh hour.

4. “At a Graveside”

4.1. Preamble

Gordon Marino notes that “[w]hile Kierkegaard’s thoughts on death spill across his corpus, I believe that this nonpseudonymous discourse, published in 1845, is his most straightforward and sustained reflection on what might be termed Kierkegaard’s account of ‘Being-towards-death’” (2011, 150). And indeed, as we will see in this section, “At a Graveside” contains and develops almost all the aforementioned ideas on death that Kierkegaard wrote in his corpus. However, more than anything, “At a Graveside” brings attention on an essential issue found throughout in Kierkegaard’s works: how should we relate to death? The issue is not how to explain death objectively or how to determine a particular conception of death, because death is undefinable and its decision suspends any knowledge. Instead, the aim of the discourse is to approach death as a personal and subjective matter—that is, as one’s own death—that has a decisive influence on the individual’s life though its retroactive power. In Llevadot’s words, by virtue of its negativity, the discourse “makes the reader internalize the decision, appropriate ‘death’s decision’ that overthrows assumed knowledge with no pretension to being originary” (2012, 34). Such appropriation, as we will see in this discourse on an imagined occasion, allows the individual to intensify his own life.

4.2. The Epicurean position

Considering that “At a Graveside” can be understood as a response to Epicurus, it is necessary to remind his considerations on death. If they are to be studied properly, Epicurus’ theories, and thus also his thanatology, have to be read in the context of Hellenistic philosophy, which mainly had a therapeutic purpose. As Stokes remarks, “[i]t aims not at uncovering truth for its own sake, but at discerning truth insofar as this serves the end of promoting *eudaimonia*” (2006, 387). In this sense, the Hellenistic project has something in common with some aspects of Kierkegaard’s writings, because despite the fact that his philosophy supposes a constant fissure in our presupposed conceptions of the self and of any unambiguous understanding of existence, it also contains an upbuilding layer.

The main idea in Epicurus’ thoughts on death is that we should not fear it because, since death is the privation of sensation, we cannot experience it. He synthesises this argument stating that when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not. In a manner of speaking, the subject and death cannot coincide. This is his formulation of it:

> [t]his, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are nonexistent. Thus it is of no concern either to the living or those who have completed their lives. For the former it is nonexistent, and the latter are themselves nonexistent. (Epicurus 1963, 180)

Therefore, considering the fear of death as something damaging, Epicurus relies on his atomistic metaphysics—which establish that when we die the atoms that form our body and soul break up and thus we cannot feel anything after death—to affirm that mortality should not trouble us. In the moment of death, human beings do not exist as subjects, and they lack the capacity to experience. Hence, it is irrational to fear death.

However, is this existential issue a matter of rationality? To which extent does this objective and supposedly logical definition of death helps us to deal with the frightening thought of it? In the end, it seems that, despite our rational efforts, and as we have seen at the beginning of this dissertation, we do fear death with varying degrees of intensity. And it is difficult to understand why we should not fear it. Even if we accept Epicurus’ atomistic metaphysics, and even if his sanitised and apparently impeccable logic was correct, the thought of one’s own annihilation is quite disturbing. Hence, one could say

that our reactions when faced with death contradict Epicurus' practical reasoning. Not to mention the fact that his abstract point of view tries to encapsulate something as undefinable as death.

It has to be noted that the essential difference between Epicurus and Kierkegaard is not related to any appeal to immortality, insofar as the latter also understands death in "At a Graveside" as absolute annihilation. Stokes remarks:

> Despite his Christian commitments, Kierkegaard is engaging the question of death on similar ground to the pagan Epicurus, not because he does not accept the reality of life after death, but because he believes that from the vantage point of finite beings such a reality cannot be objectively known (and therefore to seek such objective certainty is to attempt to evade what is centrally at issue). (Stokes 2006, 400)

This issue, and the main difference between Epicurus and Kierkegaard, is that we have to think about death not as something external that does not affect us but as our own death. As stated before, here I do not pretend to ignore the fundamental importance of religion in certain readings of Kierkegaard's authorship. However, "A a Graveside" does not rely on the possibility of an afterlife. In other words, death is not understood as the transition to another life. On the contrary, Kierkegaard points to death as an indefinable enigma. In "At a Graveside", as Stokes clarifies, "Kierkegaard is concerned with understanding death as it appears to us, with faith in an afterlife only taking on true import once death has been understood aright" (2006, 399). And this means to understand that death cannot be understood because it is inexplicable: "death itself explains nothing" (TDIO, 96).

4.3. Memento mori and living as dying

"At a Graveside" starts as reflective speech, after the sermon given by the priest when a family member arrives at the funeral. It points from the beginning to the certainty, the decisiveness, and the silence of death, insinuating at the same time its importance as a retrospective power in the individual's life:

> Then all is over!—And when the person stepped up to the grave first because he was the next of kin, and when after the brief moment of the speech he was the last one at the grave, alas, because he was the next of kin—then all is over. If he remained out there, he still would not learn what the deceased is doing, because

> the deceased is a quiet man (…); and if recollecting he visited the grave every day, the one dead would not recollect him—. In the grave there is no recollection, not even of God. (…) But because he [the deceased] knew this, he acted accordingly, and therefore *he recollected God* while he was living. (TDIO, 71)

According to Theunissen, this discourse—constituted by the initial speech of the pastor and the unofficial or "unauthorized" (TDIO, 73) reflection on it by a young man—is "one of the high points of European thinking about death" (2006, 321). With some essential differences that will be exposed further on, it likewise continues the platonic tradition—but not what Buben calls the Platonic strain—that considers philosophy as a preparation for death. As Derrida explains, "[t]he *Phaedo* explicitly names philosophy: it is the attentive anticipation of death, the care brought to bear upon dying, the meditation on the best way to receive, give, or give oneself death, the experience of a *vigil* over the possibility of death, and over the possibility of death as impossibility" (1995a, 12-13). "At a Graveside" insists on the intensification of life that comes from this *vigil* over the always imminent possibility of death.[34]

This human concert for (one's own) death has historically been represented by the summons of the *memento mori*, which have been omnipresent since the inception of humankind. The reminder that represents the *memento mori* is the certainty of one's own death and the uncertainty of its moment, and it has a fundamental ethical aspect because it compels us to think about our own mortality in a transformative, existential manner. This kind of remembrance has been represented in every conceivable way. However, as Theunissen notes (324), there was one idea about death that in a certain sense captured the call of the *memento mori*. Its origin was the aforementioned Platonic reflection on death—that is, the understanding of the task of the philosopher as a preparation for death. For Theunissen, from the moment that this idea concerning one's own death was introduced in the history of thought, "[t]he philosopher became increasingly obliged to think of himself as *learning* how to die, which could be understood as an admonition to keep death in remembrance" (324). This way, the philosophical approach to death pivoted around two ideas that experienced a process of assimilation: the aim of living as dying and the call of the *memento mori*. According to

[34] As Derrida points out, this idea is also found in the approach to death of Heidegger: "That very idea, namely, this *meletē* or *epimeleia* that one can rightly translate by 'care' or 'solicitude,' opens the vein—and begins the vigil—within which will be inscribed the *Sorge* ('care') in the sense Heidegger confers on it in *Being and Time*" (1995a, 13).

Theunissen, philosophy experienced a shift during the late Enlightenment that provided a decisive push to this assimilation, insofar as "the aim of living as one dying came to fall back into that of *memento mori* due to the fact that the understanding of death on which it was based became increasingly unconvincing in the period following Hegel" (325). This shift was the conception of human being as a unit rather than as a relation between a mortal body and an immortal soul. From this holistic point of view, that has continued to the present day, death affects the whole individual and not just the body. However, for Theunissen, this new anthropological conception could only modify the ideas that came from Plato, "[f]or there is an irresolvable difference between the dying life that Plato had in mind and a mere remembrance of death" (325).

At this point "At a Graveside" enters the picture. Theunissen holds that Kierkegaard shared this new reformulation of the philosophical approach to death, in the sense that, "[h]e deletes the relation of the dying life to philosophy, reduces this life to a process of learning, and gives up the idea of death as the separation of souls and bodies in favor of the totality of the human being" (325). Kierkegaard "saw what had once been aimed at by philosophy, namely, the suffering of death even now in the living body, exclusively in the horizon of this idea" (326). The result is that in "At a Graveside" the Platonic idea becomes a meditation on one's own death, not just a remembrance or a preparation for death in the Platonic sense, but an existential movement of thought characterised by the necessity of thinking death as something that essentially happens and belongs to me. However, as we shall see, although Kierkegaard does not operate in the framework of Plato's anthropological dualism, he also keeps the idea of anticipation. For Theunissen, "[w]hat he does is precisely to rescue the essential difference that prevents the dying life being dissolved into the demand of the *memento mori*" (327). And he does so by transforming Plato's training in dying into a self-reflective thinking on one's own death which, in the end, is an internalisation of the facticity of death.

Therefore, when I have chosen this discourse as the main theoretical basis of my research it is because it represents, in the field of philosophy, what I will try to demonstrate in apocalyptic cinema: a challenge to the individual "to think about and take into account his own death" (TDIO, 73) in a way that has a decisive influence on life. As Michaelsen puts it, death has been related to identity in such a manner in the history of philosophy that "an *ars moriendi* even appears to be a prerequisite for any occidental *ars viviendi*" (2014, 261). In Kierkegaard's case, this relation is particularly

evident, in the sense that "At a Graveside" is an upbuilding discourse that considers death as a master with a retrospective power. As Theunissen explains,

> Kierkegaard did not want to "edify" in the manner of the eighteenth century, but, as the Danish word indicates, to *build up*. The discourse at a graveside effects the building up of an *aedificatio* in the quite specific sense that it places death in the service of life, and it does this by redirecting the person who has looked death in the face to take up again the life that he or she believed had been lost. (Theunissen 2006, 358)

Having said that, however, how can we look death in the face if it is an absolute, inexplicable, and ungraspable nothingness? In other words, although the basic problem in "At a Graveside" is how we think about and relate to death, this implies the fundamental issue of whether it is possible to think death at all. Just like Climacus in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard also addresses this issue in his discourse.

4.4. The problem of representation

As noted, "At a Graveside" focuses on Epicurus' supposedly comforting position in order to criticise the philosophical point of view that tries to nullify the concern for one's own death. At the same time, Kierkegaard's discourse undermines both the sanitizing images of death that compare it to a comfortable sleep or a beautiful youth, and those that, as the harvester of souls, present it like something disturbing, because both representations avoid the confrontation with one's own death. Indeed, being personifications of death, in both cases these images represent it as something external to us, thus neutralising the confrontation and hampering the thought of one's own death. The meaning in "At a Graveside" rests in appropriation: the issue is not to define death, because it is indeed undefinable, but to inquire about our own existential understanding of it. Again, as usual in Kierkegaard's corpus, it is not so much the *what* but before all the *how*.

However, despite Kierkegaard's critique of representations of death, in "At a Graveside" he also represents it to some extent. Indeed, as Theunissen notes, his emphasis on "the facticity of death clearly contradicts the discourse's own readiness in personifying death" (2006, 322) and its attributes, which are represented as teachers

and inspectors. According to Theunissen, if Kierkegaard puts himself in this sort of contradiction, it is because in that way the text is able to show the listener[35] the dramatic relation of human beings with death, since "[o]nly a writer who allows death to make an appearance as *persona dramatis* can hope to draw us into this drama and to make us aware that we are always already acting in it" (324). In some way, this contradiction allows him to insinuate the dialectic nature of death, something that we will examine further on. Or, in other words, it draws attention to a fundamental issue: "At a Graveside" urges the listeners to think death earnestly; and nevertheless, it makes clear that "death's decision" (TDIO, 76) is not just "decisive" (78) but also "indefinable" (85) and "inexplicable" (96). Thus the problem is whether it is possible to think death at all if death itself is indefinable. From this point of view, death constitutes a radical limit for representation, and to think it earnestly means not to constitute it in terms of representation but in a regime that implies subjective appropriation. This is why Mjaaland considers that, in order to approach the content of the discourse, it must also be taken into account how Kierkegaard develops his reflections on death:

> The hermeneutic circle of reflection upon death does not add any facts to the common understanding on death. It rather points at a fundamental ignorance concerning death's reality. Even though we have to rely on concepts and images of death in order to get involved with the thought of death at all, death's decision poses the problem in a radically different way. Thus we might say that the circle of understanding is *broken* by the silence of death. (Mjaaland 2006, 369)

Therefore, considering what we have seen so far, it seems clear that the philosophical problem of death—and specifically of the thought of one's own death—is not just an ontological and psychological problem among others, but also and foremost a language problem related to representation. That is, to repeat, the issue is not just *what* we say or think about death, but *how* we say or think about it. Can we even talk about death? Indeed, when explaining that the discourse insists on the definitive interruption of communication that death imposes between the dead and the living, Mjaaland notes that "at the graveside, the one still living arrives at a limit: the limit of human existence, which is also the limit of language" (2006, 361). However, although I agree with Mjaaland when he affirms that "[d]eath occurs as a rupture of language and of thought, even *in* language and *in* thought" (361), I understand that death cannot even be

[35] When I refer to the receiver as a "listener" and not as a "reader", it is because the discourses were made to be read aloud.

described as the limit of human existence, because a limit implies a definition. Instead, as Michaelsen observes, death "signifies the boundary that eludes all grasp inasmuch as it withdraws itself from the present of presence" (2014, 270).

Thus the basic issue here is that death cannot be defined. Because of this, as Mjaaland points out, Kierkegaard's discourse "is marked by a Socratic irony that breaks up the economy of language to the same extent that death breaks up the economy of conceptual thought" (2006, 373). That is, death breaks the traditional laws upon which rational discourse has been considered to be based: identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle—to which one might also add causation. In other words, although "At a Graveside" is modest in the sense that it does not pretend to have understood death, "this ignorance nevertheless reappears as a Socratic question, whether the reader has understood the full implication of one's own opinion on the thought of death" (384). Similarly, Theunissen states that Kierkegaard's discourse is not just dialectical in relation to the issue at stake—namely, death—but also in relation to its presentation.[36] This way the discourse highlights the paradoxical ambiguity of death and the importance of the attitude of the individual towards death. As Michaelsen puts it, "the decisive difference between the frivolous and earnest understanding of death does not concern the object of understanding but the way of understanding, which also concerns the way in which understanding understands itself and its limits" (2014, 268). That is, the earnest thought of death also uses representations—as the teacher or the inspector—, but unlike the frivolous understanding, thinks about death not as the death of others but as one's own death in a way that, as noted, breaks the traditional laws upon which rational discourse has been considered to be based. The individual's existence is the

[36] For the sake of clarity, the nature of this dialectics has to be explained. In this regard, Theunissen helps us to understand it. After noting that Kierkegaard, together with Hegel and Marx, "is one of the three greatest dialecticians of the nineteenth century" (2006, 347-348), Theunissen affirms that the fact that "the discourse at a graveside develops a specifically upbuilding dialectic should also suggest that it uses the patterns of thinking derived from Hegel more freely than in the pseudonymous works and, at the same time, brings them into closer conformity to its own content" (348), which, as we know, is death. Thus, as notes, "At a Graveside" is not just dialectical in terms of its external presentation but also in relation to its content. According to Theunissen, Kierkegaard held on to Hegel's notion of dialectic, which "exemplify both the laws of thought and the structures of Being" (348), and he organised his thought as a dialectic of existence because he was "convinced that his subject-matter, existence, is itself dialectically articulated" (349). However, as previously stated, the dialectic used in "At a Graveside" has a specificity that distinguishes it. Theunissen explains it as follows: "The discourse frees the aspect of the dialectic that concerns reality from the objectivist illusion that the structure which is to be laid bare discloses itself spontaneously. For the task of understanding that is constitutive of this reality must be disclosed along with it. Concretely, it does indeed describe a real dialectic of death, but one in which the *attitude* towards death is also comprised, and thus, a dialectic that is set in the midst of life itself" (349). In this sense, "At a Graveside" is not dialectical because it uses Hegel's methodology, "but only because of its constant commitment to uncovering the phenomenal structure" (350). I will return to the issue of dialectics in the section focused on the retroactive power of death.

rest, the fragments (*Smuler*), something that cannot be conceptualised, and thus logical discourse encounters a boundary. The earnest thought of death pushes the individual to an existential mode of thinking that breaks this logic.

Through the following exposition we will often see this paradoxical ambiguity of death that the earnest thought brings out. Michaelsen synthesises it "as unavoidable inaccessibility, as certain uncertainty, as equal inequality and unequal equality, as the ownmost possibility of the one and as the impossibility that makes the one into another, as the confrontation that withdraws from all relation, and as the meaninglessness that creates meaning" (270). This paradoxical ambiguity "cannot be overcome in the language of representation by ascribing an unambiguous or definite meaning to it" (270). As Mjaaland explains, regarding one's own death "there is no direct interconnection between the signifier and the signified" (2006, 364). Therefore, as anxiety, the thought of one's own death fractures constantly any unambiguous understanding of existence and being. And that means that thought makes a movement of self-reflection that is permanently sabotaging any possibility of unambiguity and interrupts the logic of conceptual thought.

This is why, as Kierkegaard affirms in the preface of the *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, "[t]he meaning lies in the appropriation. Hence the *book*'s joyous *giving of itself*" (TDIO, 5). The only possibility of meaning is appropriation, not an attempt to define death. And again, this "giving of itself" points towards the form of the text, reflecting death's ambiguity. As already mentioned, the discourses were made to be read aloud, for Kierkegaard, as was the case with Plato, was well aware that written philosophy is dead writing. "At a Graveside" is dead writing meant to reflect on death and its possible impact on the individual's life, through a discourse that was conceived to be read aloud with the vitality of an oral voice. Hence, as Mjaaland observes, "[t]he relationship between speech and writing is reflected into the text and creates an ambiguity inside the thought of death" (2006, 364). That is, ambiguity in the presentation meant to reflect an ambiguous content. For death is so ambiguous that the only statements that can be made about it are such as those we saw at the beginning: decisive, indefinable, and inexplicable. Theunissen holds that the first two statements are negative—yet exposed in the discourse in a positive way, in the sense that they show the positive intention behind the negation—while the third seems to be an empty tautology (2006, 354). In the end, "death itself explains nothing" (TDIO, 96). But this

apparently empty statement is not as empty as the first ones. Although the last thing that can be said about death is that “[i]t is inexplicable” (100) —and for this reason “the discourse will refrain from any explanation” (100) —this inexplicability is the *sine qua non* to think about death. Thus, as Theunissen explains, its inexplicability “becomes the occasion for a countermovement” (2006, 354) in which death’s silence pushes the individual to an existential model of thinking, which is not the model of conceptual thought, but a self-reflection on one’s own death that gives “the thought of death retroactive power” (TDIO, 100). Death is inexplicable and Kierkegaard develops a discourse in which the use of language expresses this inexplicability. In Mjaaland’s words, this is why “[i]nstead of giving a final explanation, he introduces a certain *difference* into any definition of death, that is the difference between death ‘as such,’ entailing that all is over, and death as it is interpreted by the one still living, whose possibility lies in the instant: ‘this very day’” (2006, 373).

In consequence, “At a Graveside” does not address death itself but the earnest thought of death and its importance in the individual’s life. Although it cannot avoid some sort or representation—or, as already mentioned, does not want to, due to methodological reasons, aiming to show the listener our dramatic relation with death— the earnest thought of death cautions us about the dangers of representation and demands us, as Michaelsen puts it, “to think death in its radical singularity” (2014, 271). Noting again its ambiguity, death is something that in an uncertain moment will certainly affect every human being—and for this reason dying is “a very mediocre art” (TDIO, 76)—, but at the same time, death affects every individual in a singular and untransferable way. Indeed, death is both decisive and inexplicable, the most singular and enigmatical condition of existence. Because of this, “to be able to die well is indeed the highest wisdom of life” (TDIO, 76). The difference, as Kierkegaard states, is “that in the one case the earnestness is the earnestness of death, in the other it is the earnestness of the mortal being. And the discourse that makes the distinction cannot, of course, address itself to the dead but to the living” (76). At this point, then, we must enquire about this earnest thought of death that, far from being an abstract thought—and despite the fact that death is neither something to be represented nor grasped—can have a decisive influence on the life of the individual.

4.5. The earnest thought of death

We have seen that "At a Graveside", instead of neutralizing death, alerts the listener of the necessity to think earnestly about it and the benefit to do so, which is to give "the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal toward which he directs his momentum" (TDIO, 83). In synthesis, as Mjaaland affirms, the problem of "At a Graveside" is to think death in a proper way (2006, 359). However, what does this mean? As Stokes stresses, "[t]hroughout his authorship, Kierkegaard insists that ethico-religious questions require of those that engage with them a particular psychological orientation to the subject matter if the actual *content* of these questions is to be understood correctly" (2006, 409). In essence, this is a critique of the pretension of objectivity in relation to ethico-religious topics, and an affirmation of the necessity of approaching those issues with subjective or existential interest. As Haufniensis notes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, to acknowledge the truth, the individual has to "allow it to permeate his whole being" (CA, 138). For example, Haufniensis underlines that

> [s]in has its specific place, or more correctly, it has no place, and this is its specific nature. When sin is treated in a place other than its own, it is altered by being subjected to a nonessential refraction of reflection. The concept is altered, and thereby the mood that properly corresponds to the correct concept is also disturbed, and instead of the endurance of the true mood there is the fleeting phantom of false moods. (CA, 14)

This "true mood" to approach sin is the desire to overcome it. From this point of view, in Stokes' words, "[a]n inquiry into sin is always an inquiry into the sinfulness of the inquirer; it is therefore always an inquiry into actual personal responsibility, a fact which disappears from the discussion if it gets lost in a mood of detached intellectual curiosity" (2006, 409). According to Kierkegaard, the appropriate way to approach death is earnestness—which, in fact, "At a Graveside" opposes to moods understood as the experience of the individual when facing the death of another. This means that the individual has to think death as his own and untransferable death. If Kierkegaard considers that Epicurus' advice is a jest, it is precisely because he, as opposed to Kierkegaard, encourages an impersonal and abstract contemplation of it in which the individual does not think death as his own death.

As we know, Kierkegaard differentiates in his authorship between two types of understanding: one abstract and one subjective. To him, only the latter—according to

which one strives to live—can be considered as true understanding in relation to existence. Therefore, Kierkegaard proposes that an inquiry into death is always an inquiry into the mortality of the inquirer. In fact, Mjaaland explains that when he uses the word “proper” to refer to the appropriate way to contemplate death, he is taking into account “the French use of the word ‘propre’ (*la propre mort*) and the close connection in Danish between *sin egen* (‘one’s own’) and *egentlig* (‘proper’) (*at tænke sin egen Død*)” (2006, 359). This way it is remarked that the thought of death has to point to one’s own death, which is the most essential aim of Kierkegaard’s discourse. In order to grasp death earnestly, instead of thinking about it as “the human condition but not as his own” (TDIO, 73)—that is, as a logical proposition such as “all men are mortal”—, the individual has to recognize its facticity and face death as his own| death. Thinking about death as the destiny of others but not my own destiny is a jest, and this jest “is essential to every contemplation of death in which the contemplator himself is not alone with death and does not think of himself and death at the same time” (73). In essence, as mentioned, the discourse reflects on the issue of appropriation, which is transversal in the three discourses on imagined occasions.

It is for this reason that Kierkegaard rejects the Epicurean dictum. As Stokes notes, “[t]here is something profoundly counterintuitive about the notion that we should be utterly indifferent to our mortality” (2006, 387). Indeed, as I tried to argue in the introduction, as if death were not terrifying enough in itself, recent social changes in Western contemporary societies have created several conditions that enlarge the difficulty of the thought of one’s own death and the confrontation with mortality. Instead of facing the ambiguity of death and acknowledging the irreplaceable character of it, the aforementioned conditions tend to replace this ambiguity with a bureaucratic and technocratic organisation of death, something that, despite efforts to the contrary, does not remove the fear of it. Probably this is one of the reasons that, in Stokes’ opinion, explain that Epicurus’ “confident repudiation of the rationality of fearing death does not find many proponents in modern philosophy” (387). Kierkegaard makes one of the most philosophically interesting and strong claims against this sanitising approach to death when he says that Epicurus’ maxim “is the jest by which the cunning contemplator places himself on the outside” (TDIO, 73), because this is not earnestness, since earnestness is found in inwardness and the appropriation of the thought of one’s own death. Tillich, in affirming that anxiety is the state in which the individual is aware

of his own non-existence, remarks that "[i]t is not the realization of universal transitoriness, not even the experience of the death of others, but the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety" (1980, 35). Again the emphasis is put on the thought of one's own death and anxiety, experienced as one's own finitude.

Yet, if we search in the text a precise definition of the earnest thought of death, we will find none. This is again the issue of death's ambiguity, the problem of both thinking death and of representing it, and the call for appropriation. As Mjaaland notes, the way the text is read "reveals something important about the reader, about how he understands death and how each understand himself or herself" (2006, 365). However, in spite of not offering a positive definition of the earnest thought of death—apart from the general statement that it is the thought of one's own death—Kierkegaard approaches it through a negative definition, writing what it is not. In this regard, he distinguishes the earnest thought of death from the multiple and variable moods (*Stemning*) that affect us. As Pattison puts it, "Kierkegaard sets out the differing ways in which essentially the same thoughts about death may either be adopted as a matter of mere mood (*Stemning*) or as something really serious" (2002, 114).

But what are those moods exactly? According to Carvalhais de Oliveira, "Kierkegaard uses the term *Stemning* specifically for a state or frame of mind that is provisional, but relatively lasting, and characterized by an identifiable predominant feeling, or a propensity in a definite direction" (2014, 197). However, this is a general definition that is intended to apply to Kierkegaard's entire authorship. In the particular case of "At a Graveside", he writes about moods related to the experience we have when we face the death of another, and therefore the use of *Stemning* refers to improper ways of relating oneself to death. As Stokes suggests, "[m]oods such as sorrow, horror, detached objectivity, sentimentality, and a loquacious desire to speak of death at length (to 'eulogize death' as Kierkegaard has it) are all, at base, attempts (conscious or otherwise) to evade the true import of mortality—namely, the responsibility it confers" (2006, 410). This responsibility refers to the aforementioned existential approach: the issue of death "addresses itself directly and *personally* to the contemplator" (410). While affected by moods, then, we might well think about death, but we do not do it properly, we do not think death as our own death. In other words, this is the attitude of those who,

when somebody dies, recall memories but do not confront the idea of their own death. Kierkegaard writes:

> To think of oneself as dead is earnestness: to be a witness to the death of another is mood. There is the light touch of sadness when the passerby is a father who carries his child for the last time, carries it to the grave; or when the indigent hearse drives by and you know nothing about the dead person except that he was a human being (…)—but even if it was your child, even if it was your beloved, and even if it was your one and only guide, this is still a mood; and even if you would willingly die in their place, this is also a mood, and even if you think that this is easier, this also is a mood. (TDIO, 75)

This means that even when we think about the death of our closest ones, we might contemplate it as an external event without grasping what is essential about it. Moods, such as sadness and sorrow for the death of another, may prevent us from achieving earnestness, because this way we see death as something external. Earnestness, on the contrary, consists in inwardness and appropriation, and—as we shall see further on—has a "retroactive power in life" (TDIO, 99). Carvalhais de Oliveira sheds light on this distinction explaining that:

> [m]oods function in a regime of multiplicity and variation of intensity, affecting diverse regions of an individual's life, with multiple domains of life being attacked simultaneously or successively by the same mood or by the same regime of moods—operating like "storms" "in a dreadful witches' dance." This indicates the instability and the scattered character of a possible life founded completely on moods. (Carvalhais de Oliveira 2014, 199)[37]

Although, as Carvalhais de Oliveira notes, there is inwardness in moods, it "is primarily a *first* inwardness—that is, it is in the first place the inwardness (…) of mood inhabiting the natural man" (2014, 202). Hence, moods are fundamentally passive, transitory internal events or fleeting feelings that are experienced or suffered by the individual. For this reason, there is no self-examination and life-development for the individual who passively transits from one mood to another. On the contrary, as Carvalhais de Oliveira explains, the earnest thought of death is active, it gives us continuity and "a kind of comprehension which is motivated by the dispositional perspective of an individual over his life seen as a totality" (199). In other words, Kierkegaard considers

[37] Both quotations in the quote of Carvalhais de Oliveira are from *Either/Or* vol. 1.

death as an event that, earnestly thought by the individual, clarifies the totality of the individual's life through its negation.

At this point, it has to be taken into account that some interpreters have argued against this radical distinction between earnestness and moods regarding death. In noting Levinas' critique of Heidegger for excluding ethics and the issue of the other from ontology and for overlooking the death of the other in his existential analysis of being-towards-death, Mjaaland presumes that this argument could also be used against Kierkegaard for dismissing the death of the other as mood. In a similar vein, Marino states that "there is certainly no accent on my relationship to my fellow human beings in 'At a Graveside,' and on that score, for all its brilliance, the discourse seems inhuman" (2011, 158).[38] Marino holds that moods can also be teachers. For this reason, he criticises Kierkegaard's discourse, since it "offers the frequent admonition that we can't learn anything from observing the death of another, or at least that we can't learn anything about the subject that he is so occupied with—earnestness" (151). If Kierkegaard establishes a distinction between the thought of one's own death and the moods we experience when facing the death of another, Marino's critique points to the fact that the latter is usually a way to the former. And indeed it cannot be denied that the death of a beloved compels us to think of our own death. Thus, from this point of view, it seems that the rejection of moods as a source of self-reflection is not justified.

However, I believe that "At a Graveside" does not deny that the death of another can lead us to earnestness. It only states that thinking about someone else's death as something that just happens to someone else is mood, or, in other words, that we must think death as our own death also. It certainly could be argued that the notions of earnestness and moods are not crystal clear and that they contaminate each other; or maybe that the distinction between moods and earnestness is excessively raw, because the truth is that in "At a Graveside" all moods are fitted into the same box and considered as jest. One possibility of solving this problem would be the existence of some form of "earnestness in mood" (TDIO, 75). Yet Kierkegaard does not write about

[38] A criticism that may be related to the one that Adorno makes to the understanding of the relationship with the dead as a criterion to love the living that Kierkegaard defends in *Works of Love*.

that.[39] Moreover, Derrida's statement that the "death of the other in 'me,' is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm 'my death'" (1993, 76) could be used to question Kierkegaard's division. However, I understand that Kierkegaard's attempt to establish a strict division between earnestness and moods aims at the radical subjectivity of death. Maybe the death of a loved one can lead us to earnestness, and maybe when the thought of the death of another makes us think about our own death, it is not mood but earnestness. The basic point is that earnestness is the thought of my own death, stimulated or not by the death of another. If we approach the death of another without 'thinking in' our own death, we fall into moods and do not think death earnestly, we do not appropriate death as our own death.

One approach to this issue that can help us is Duckles' use of Derrida's *The Gift of Death* to understand Kierkegaard's criticism to the ethical. Although I will not go into details with this article because it does not specifically refer to "At a Graveside", I believe that it illuminates a basic issue, namely, that this discourse does not reveal a lack of ethical concern for others but rather points to the fundamental role of the thought of one's own death in freedom and responsibility. According to Duckles, Derrida suggests that "pursuing ethical considerations is an attempt to avoid confronting one's own mortality and thus avoid the demands of an authentic existence" (2011, 219). In other words, he understands that Derrida claims that the commitment to a universal ethical system implies a loss of personal responsibility and autonomy and an evasion of the implication of one's own death. According to Derrida, we learn from Abraham that "far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for something, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept" (1995a, 61). In this sense, for Duckles, Derrida suggests that universal ethics dissolve the singularity that is essential to assign the individual responsibility for his actions. In contrast, what makes the individual a free and responsible agent is the awareness of his own death. Indeed, when Derrida takes account of Heidegger's understanding of death in *Being and Time*, he affirms that "[e]veryone must assume his own death, that is to say the one thing in the world that no

[39] Except for *The Concept of Anxiety*, where Haufniensis states that "the mood that corresponds to sin is earnestness" (CA, 15). However, I shall not elaborate on it any further, because the earnestness in mood and sin as the mood that corresponds to earnestness are not quite the same thing; in the sense that the latter is a *what* and the former a how, that is, a modulation of the mood. Furthermore, according to Theunissen, this earnestness in mood "is a deficient, reduced form of earnestness" (2006, 333).

one else can *either give or take:* therein resides freedom and responsibility" (61). The central aspect here is to stress the sense of our irreplaceability as individuals that death provides us, an irreplaceability that makes us aware of our responsibility. In Duckles words, "[i]t is because I can die, and furthermore because only I can experience my own death, that I take on the status of a unique individual. In effect, my mortality and the consequent necessity of my death is what defines and distinguishes me from all others" (2011, 224). At this point, however, it has to be noted that Duckles' interpretation of Derrida appears to be problematic, insofar as Derrida states that if death "names the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity (no one can die in my place or in the place of the other), then all the *examples* in the world can precisely illustrate this singularity" (1993, 22). In this regard, the irreplaceability of death is replaceable in the sense that as individuals we all share this irreplaceability. Moreover, when Duckles understands that Derrida maintains that the commitment to a universal ethical system implies an evasion of responsibility as well as the implication of one's own death, he does not take into account that, actually, both subsists and cannot but subsist. Having said that, this criticism of Duckles' article does not invalidate the essential argument that the awareness of one's own death is what makes us responsible agents. In this sense, I understand that the distinction between moods and the earnest thought of death in "At a Graveside" does not imply neither that we cannot learn anything from the death of others nor an ethical exclusion or neglecting of the other. The perspective of Kierkegaard's discourse is different: to indicate the essential role of the earnest thought of death in the commitment to one's own individuality.

Let us ask once more, what is exactly the earnest thought of death and how does the individual learn to exercise it? Indeed, it consists of thinking of oneself as dead. In this sense, as Theunissen expresses it, that "means leading the thought to a certain reality through this 'training exercise'" (2006, 327). In other words, earnestness is an anticipation of death. However, as stated, it is not anticipation in a Platonic sense. To Plato, philosophy was an anticipation of death because he understood it as an exercise of separating the soul from the body already in life in order to allow knowledge. In this way, despite its being incomplete, it was a real experience of death. Furthermore, according to Theunissen, "Plato seems only to have understood death as a separation of the soul from the body because of having before his eyes the analogous movement performed in life by the philosopher" (326). As argued, although Kierkegaard does not

share this spiritualisation of death, he preserves the idea of anticipation—not as separation, but in the act of thinking about one's own death. We can observe it in this reaction against Epicurus: "Earnestness is that you think death, and that you are thinking it as your lot, and that you are then doing what death is indeed unable to do – namely, that you are and death also is" (TDIO, 75). According to Theunissen, "[w]hat it says is that your death can only be your contemporary by virtue of a thought which, as the practice of your own death, really is an act that literally calls it to life" (2006, 327).

Regarding the learning of earnestness, Kierkegaard is quite clear: "Is it by having an earnest person dictate something to him that he can learn it? Not at all. (…) See, the learner concerns himself (without concern there is no learner) about some object with his whole soul, and in this way the certainty of death becomes an object of concern" (TDIO, 94). This concern of the learner is related to the aforementioned critique of the pretension of objectivity in relation to ethico-religious topics. Every individual has to approach such issues with subjective interest. In this regard, to Kierkegaard, there is no master that can teach us the earnestness of death, except death itself:

> Death is the schoolmaster of earnestness, but in turn its earnest instruction is recognized precisely by its leaving to the single individual the task of searching himself so it can then teach him earnestness as it can be learned only by the person himself. Death minds its own business in life; it does not run around, as the timorous think, and sharpen its scythe and scare women and children—as if this were earnestness. No, death says, "I exist; if anyone wants to learn from me, then let him come to me." (TDIO, 75-76)

If we come to meet death by ourselves in the form of earnest reflection, death can have a fundamental influence on our lives. In this respect, it should be useful to take a closer look at the aforementioned characteristics of death as exposed in "At a Graveside".

4.6. The certain uncertainty of death

Kierkegaard affirms that "death is indefinable—the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain" (TDIO, 91). On the one hand, "[d]eath's decision is therefore not definable by equality, because the equality consists in annihilation" (86). Indeed, as we have already seen in *To Preserve One's Soul in Patience*, although some people seek consolation in a certain equality of death—in the sense that, for instance, it makes everyone equally poor—, this equality is not real equality but just annihilation.

In the end, "the multitude of the dead do not form any kind of society" (TDIO, 89), which seems to be a claim against the *Symparanekromenoi*, the Fellowship of the Dead in *Either/Or*. And on the other hand, death cannot be defined by inequality either, because it certainly makes no distinctions, "no age or circumstance or life situation is a safeguard against it" (93). Thus the only certain assertions that can be made about death are the certainty of the "what"—and even the "what" is extremely obscure, insofar as death is indefinable—, and the uncertainty of the "when" and the "how".

Kierkegaard illustrates the attributes of death by comparing it with an axe lying at the root of a tree. The certainty is that every tree will be cut down, both those who bear good fruit and those who do not. The uncertainty is the moment of the blow, which will arrive "even if you do not notice that death is passing over your grave and that the axe is in motion" (93). Ultimately, then, "death certainly is a singular enigma, but only earnestness can define it" (93) and help us to focus on what is really important about its certainty and uncertainty. The individual who does not keep both in mind will be dragged by the storm of moods and runs the risk of being a victim of the false security of postponement, which, as noted, is the mood by which the individual believes that he still has some time to live. Kierkegaard writes:

> That death can make a finish is indeed certain, but the challenge of earnestness to the living is to think it, to think that all is over, that there comes a time when all is over. This is the difficult thing, because even in the moment of death the dying person thinks that he still might have some time to live, and one is even afraid to tell him that all is over. And now the living, as long as he is living perhaps in health, in youth, in happiness, in power—that is, safeguarded, yes, well safeguarded if he is not willing to shut himself in with the thought of death, which explains to him that this security is false. There is a consolation in life, a false flatterer; there is a safeguard in life, a hypocritical deceiver—it is called postponement. (TDIO, 79)

This paragraph also reminds us of an aforementioned essential issue that appears in other works: the challenge of the earnest thought of death is inwardness, to think about our own death while we enjoy good health and do not feel the proximity of the eleventh hour. This is a difficult task, since even the dying tends to think that he still has some time to live. In this respect, the earnest thought makes us aware of the constant menace of death, which can happen at any moment. In Kierkegaard's words, "there is no one who can teach us to loathe the flatterer and to see through the deceiver as the earnest thought of death can. Death and postponement are irreconcilable and they are mortal

enemies, but the earnest person knows that death is the stronger" (TDIO, 80). This is the essential issue: it is not just to be aware of the fact that at some point we will all die, because this easily could be no more than an abstract piece of knowledge, but to remember that we can die at any moment and under any circumstances. In this sense, the experience of time is an essential topic in "At a Graveside".

4.7. The fear of death

The fear of death is in the very root of the issue at hand, because the point of departure was the critique of Epicurus' sanitising claim that human beings should not be troubled by death. On the contrary, Kierkegaard holds that we should be afraid of death. However, he insinuates that there is a proper way to fear it, a way that—although he does not use this expression—could be defined as balanced. What instils in us this equilibrium is the earnest thought of death. As Kierkegaard writes, "earnestness does not scowl but is reconciled with life and knows how to fear death" (TDIO, 88). Therefore, we can only obtain death's retrospective power in life if we fear it in a particular manner. Kierkegaard points out two inappropriate ways of approaching it.

On the one hand, there is the attitude of those who, instead of fearing death, see it as a consolation and compare it to a sleep in which rest can finally be found (80-81). Typically, this is the attitude of the sad, the weary, the sick, the lonely, the humiliated, the excluded, the frustrated, the bitter individual who considers death as the state in which differences are finally levelled, and who awaits the annihilation "consoled by the thought that, in the end, the others must also join him in the dance of death" (Pattison 2002, 114). As we have seen, this is the position of the *Symparanekromenoi*, the mind-set of those individuals who fear life more than death and think of it with hope as the getaway of their problems. Kierkegaard affirms that this is mood, not earnestness:

> To long for death in this way is depression's escape from life, and this way to be unwilling to fear death is rebellion. It is the fraudulence of sadness to be unwilling to understand that there is something else to fear than life, and therefore a consoling wisdom other than the sleep of death must be found. Truly, if it is weak to fear death, then it is a prinked-up courage that fancies itself not afraid of death when the same person fears life; it is an indulgent lethargy that wants to go to bed—that is, indulgently wants to sleep itself into consolation, indulgently wants to sleep itself away from suffering. (TDIO, 81)

There are individuals who console themselves by thinking that death is just a nice sleep, but it is not. Kierkegaard holds that this attitude is cowardice, “a contemptible shortcut to a groundless complaint against life for someone merely to wish and then to complain against life because he did not become what he wished and never becomes proficient in anything but wishing and finally becomes wretched enough to wish everything away” (TDIO, 87). To comfort oneself with the equality of death is absurd, because “the dead does not remember the dissimilarity of life” (88) and the deceased “has no joy in its being over” (82). As mentioned, then, Kierkegaard criticises these positive considerations of death that see it as an equalisation for having a mistaken notion of equality. This attitude “is the lie and the deception in the presumptuous defiance that wants to conspire with dead against life” (88).

On the other hand, there is the attitude of those who consider death as the “greatest misfortune” (98) and fear it in such an excessive way that it incapacitates them to deal with life. Kierkegaard considers again that this attitude reveals cowardice. In this case, however, it is the cowardice of the individual who clings to life, “so that he fears life but fears death even more” (98). There is for example the sensual person, who wants to enjoy the moment in a nihilistic way as if every day was the last one—a topic that, as seen, Kierkegaard also approaches in *Christian Discourses*. But this is “sensuality’s cowardly lust for life, that contemptible order of things where one lives in order to eat and drink instead of eating and drinking in order to live” (83). Thought of in this way, death does not have its retroactive power, which is a force that “accelerate the living” (83) and that can only be obtained from death.

According to Connell, “[t]he common denominator in these diverse evasions, as high as Hegelian speculation and as low as Nietzschean ressentiment, is a fundamental failure (or refusal) to realize that one is, oneself, the one who is to die” (2006, 422). Whether anticipating death with hope or extreme fear, it is not earnest insofar as the individual puts himself outside of time and existence. It does not seem inaccurate, then, to affirm that the earnest thought of death is some kind of equilibrium between these two extremes. However, it has to be noted that, as Buben states, it would not be correct to perceive it as the Aristotelian middle ground as a measure of how much we should fear death, because “Kierkegaard seems to want to maintain death’s full frightening nature while simultaneously pressing forward into life towards death” (2011, 75). Stated simply, death has to be feared and appropriated as a radically personal issue.

Mooney states that “an awareness of death is more than fear, and it should *not* be overcome” (2011, 133). He provides us thereby another clue to link anxiety and the awareness of death, since anxiety is also different from fear. In this respect, I propose that the awareness of one’s own death can be understood as anxiety; as the experience of possibility that places the individual in front of nothingness and shows him that there is one inevitable possibility that escapes his choice. That is to say, the state in which the individual is or becomes aware of his possible and inevitable nonbeing. The aforesaid equilibrium is then not an Aristotelian middle ground of fear but the state of tension between the awareness of death and the will to live. This tension defines the individual’s existential state of continual struggle when thinking earnestly about death, which provides the individual the retroactive power. In what follows, I will endeavour to delve into this power in order to understand it more precisely.

4.8. Death’s retroactive power

Being inexplicable, attempts have been made to explain death or represent it through different euphemisms, such as “a transition, a transformation, a suffering, a struggle, the last struggle, a punishment, the wages of sin” (TDIO, 99), and, as we have seen, as a nice sleep. The problem, according to Kierkegaard, is that death cannot be represented and that these explanations transform it into a mockery. The truth is that “[d]eath has no need of an explanation and certainly has never requested any thinker to be of assistance” (99). It is the human beings that need an explanation “[i]n order to live accordingly” (99). Indeed, each one of these explanations contains a life-view. But the uncertainty of death “walks around like a teacher and watches every moment to see if the pupil is paying attention” (99). Someone who, for example, affirms to believe that death is a transformation but thinks that he still has a long life ahead, will find in the uncertainty of death a teacher that will show him that death is possible at any moment. That is, these life-views based on a certain explanation of death can be just a recited abstract thought with no expression in the life of the individual, or what Kierkegaard calls “the other side of the truth” (99), because it is easy to have an opinion and yet very difficult “to have it in truth” (100). The earnest thought of death is the inspector who digs into these explanations “to see whether the opinion-holder actually does have this opinion—that is, makes an inspection to see whether his life expresses it” (100). In

other words, the individual must have made or must continuously make an existential compromise with his life-view:

> Alas, all empty explaining and all verbiage and all embellishing and all concatenating of earlier explanations in order to find an even more clever one, and all the admiration for this and all the trouble with it—all this is merely diversion and absentmindedness in intellectual abstraction –what does the uncertainty of death think about that? (TDIO, 100)

Death is inexplicable and Kierkegaard's discourse does not aim at offering an explanation but at giving "the thought of death retroactive power and make it impelling in life" (TDIO, 100). The inexplicability of death is not an enigma that awaits us to be solved. And this inexplicability is "death's earnest warning to the living: I need no explanation; but bear in mind, you yourself, that with this decision all is over and that this decision can at any moment be at hand" (100-101). To cling to this thought has an impact on the life of the individual: "let death keep its power, 'that all is over,' but let life also keep the right to work while it is day; and let the earnest person seek the thought of death as an aid in that work" (84). Therefore, the retroactive power of death is connected to its absolute inexplicability. As noted above, "it is not death that is earnest but the thought of death" (75). It is the living that needs an explanation to find some meaning to death, and "[w]hat is decisive about the explanation, what prevents the nothingness of death from annihilating the explanation, is that it acquires retroactive power and actuality in the life of the living person" (97).

Death has a paradoxical nature: on the one hand, it is our annihilation; on the other, it has a life-changing power. In Kierkegaard's words, "the state of powerlessness to which death, taken by itself, reduces us, is already turned into power" (350), a power that intensifies life. As we have seen, in "At a Graveside" we find both a dialectics of presentation and a material dialectics—that is, a dialectics that manifests itself in the way the content is explained, and a dialectics related to the content itself. Regarding the dialectics of presentation, we may get an introductory sense of it through Mjaaland's description of the discourse: "The contrasts between the familiar and the incomprehensible, the speech and the silence, the continuity of life and the rupture of death, and even between one self and the other, occur frequently throughout the discourse and give it an unsettling and discordant nerve" (2006, 363). However, what interests me the most here is the material dialectics disclosed in "At a Graveside",

which, for Theunissen, rests on the retroactive power of death (2006, 350). As he remarks, death's power "can only be retroactive: only death, as the termination of life is able to effect the actual movement retroactively" (350). But this power only gains an actual effect if the individual thinks about death in the proper way—namely not through moods but as one's own death. Thus, although death itself is inexplicable, the retroactive power is only acquired "*through* the explanation" (TDIO, 99)—that is, through the explanation of death as inexplicable that the individual gives to himself when approaching death earnestly. In this sense, Kierkegaard's dialectics in "At a Graveside" depend on the attitude towards death. It is not an objective dialectics but a dialectics situated *in* the life of the individual. As Theunissen observes, although death is an enigma, through the explanation "one can compel the enigma to be integrated into life itself" (2006, 351). It is in this sense that death has a dialectical nature. Therefore, what is really important in Kierkegaard's discourse is that it thematises reflection "in such a way that it transforms this—the theme of death—into reflection, repeating the reflective movement in the movement of its own thought" (351). In this way, the discourse ends up revealing itself as the self-reflection of the young author. This reflection is what enables the retrospective power of the thought of one's own death by which learning to die becomes learning to live.

The retrospective power of the earnest thought of death provides two types of transformation. Firstly, it compels us to make the most of our lives. We learn that there is "no time to waste" (TDIO, 70). Essentially, "earnestness grasps the present this very day, disdains no task as too insignificant, rejects no time as too short" (83). Further, as Theunissen notes, "it teaches us something about the value of existence that is independent of time" (2006, 352). This is why "[w]ith regard to well-spent time in relation to the interruption of death, it is not essential whether the time was long or short" (TDIO, 96). In this sense, for Theunissen, the discourse "shows its uniqueness: it assigns the development of an idea of what leads beyond time its appointed place alongside the proper use of time" (2006, 352). As such we grasp the eternal value of every instant. Kierkegaard illustrates this idea with an economic metaphor that, on the one hand, acknowledges the power of the thought of death to give eternal value to our time, and, on the other, also shows how death, due to its certain uncertainty and its indefinability, goes beyond these economic terms, nullifying calculations and expectations. He starts from the premise that time is a good. For merchants, it would be

beneficial to have the ability to create a scarcity, but that is not possible in the external world. However,

> in the world of spirit everyone is able to do it. Death itself produces a scarcity of time [*Dyrtid paa Tid*] for the dying. Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, was jacked up in price when the dying one bargained with death! Who has not heard how one day, sometimes one hour, gained infinite worth because death made time dear! Death is able to do this, but with the thought of death the earnest person is able to create a scarcity so that the year and the day receive infinite worth—and when it is a time of scarcity the merchant profits by using time. But if public security is unsettled, the merchant does not carelessly pile up his profits but watches over his treasure lest a thief break in and take it away from him; alas, death also is like a thief in the night. (TDIO, 83-84)

The proximity of death—as in the case of a sick person—makes us aware of the value of time because we become conscious of its deprivation. But, as we have seen before, this is not earnestness, since earnestness comes from the thought of one's own death regardless of the circumstances, because this thought makes us realize that death is always a menace, not just when it is announced. The earnest person knows that death is an indefinable certain uncertainty which, as a thief, steals our expectations and, unlike economical exchange, is characterised by the impossibility of calculation. The retroactive power of death stems from the acknowledgement of this enigma. Death acts like an inspector who examines our life to see if we live according to the awareness that each moment may be the last. And "[n]o supervision is so meticulous (…), no surveillance is so ennobling as the uncertainty of death when it examines the use of time and the nature of the work" (TDIO, 95-96). Thus, in this sense, we may be reminded again that the reflection on death is not methodologically dialectic in the sense that it discloses an objective knowledge about it—because death is undefinable—, but in the sense that, through the explanation, the individual can integrate the enigma into his own life with a proper attitude towards it.

According to Stokes, this retroactive power shows the earnest individual that "each moment should be lived as if it were simultaneously the last and a moment in a long life to come, as either, and all possibilities in between, are possible" (2006, 408). Kierkegaard opines that the scarcity of time should compel the individual to avoid "vain pursuits" (TDIO, 75), that is, pursuits that need time to be completed. Of course, in a general sense, every pursuit demands time. For this reason, he points out to the tension between the external and the internal. What really matters is what the individual does

internally while he is doing something or, in other words, how we are doing whatever we are doing:

> With incidental work, which is in the external, it is essential that the work be finished. But the essential work is not defined essentially by time and the external, insofar as death is the interruption. Earnestness, therefore, becomes the living of each day as if it were the last and also the first in a long life, and the choosing of work that does not depend on whether one is granted a lifetime to complete it well or only a brief time to have begun it well. (TDIO, 96)

Hence, the earnest thought of death is connected to action and self-reflection, instilling us with the urgency to think about how we should live our lives and to act accordingly. As Kierkegaard states, "[e]arnestness does not waste time in guessing riddles; it does not sit sunk in contemplation, does not rewrite expressions, does not think about the ingeniousness of imagery, does not discuss, but acts" (TDIO, 82-83). It is in this respect that Llevadot points out that in "At a Graveside" the thought of death takes priority over the thought of life (2012, 21). However, as she also indicates, this priority is not a methodological precaution but an ethical requirement that has an impact in our lives: "One can only learn what is earnest in life by virtue of the earnestness of the thought of death, which must retroactively transform our mode of life" (22). This retroactive power of death, in essence, is a type of temporality that, as we will see in the following section, Connell calls "anticipatory non-recollection" (2006, 434).

4.9. The temporal double-movement of the earnest thought of death

It has already been pointed out that "At a Graveside" begins stating that "Then all is over!" (TDIO, 71). When Kierkegaard criticises the variety of ways in which we try to mitigate death, he distinguishes between two kinds of temporality: the one that comes from earnestness and provides the retroactive power, and the one that comes from moods, which can lead to the illusion of postponement. The earnest thought of death reminds us that we are temporal beings, and has the power to put the individual in a temporality that, as affirmed in *The Sickness unto Death*, contains the synthesis of the infinite and the finite,. In this sense, Kierkegaard denounces the perspective of the individual that puts himself out of time—and therefore also out of thinking:

> Indeed, from what does that confusion of thoughtlessness come but from this, that the individual's thought ventures, observing, out into life, wants to survey the

> whole of existence (…). And when death comes, it still deceives the contemplator, because all his contemplation did not come a single step closer to the explanation but only deceived him out of life. (TDIO, 93)

To think about death earnestly is to think about one's own death—that is, to think of oneself as a self in time, as a finite being. In Connell's words, the earnest thought of death "calls the self back from such speculative absentmindedness and its distorted temporality" (2006, 421).

Connell also compares A's reflections on temporality in "The Unhappiest One" in the first part of *Either/Or* with the notions of temporality in "At a Graveside", which, despite communicating different messages, have much in common—and, I would add, also with the inability to die of the despairing one in *The Sickness unto Death*. In the work of the pseudonymous author A, the identity of the missing owner of the grave with the epitaph "The Unhappiest One" is based on the Wandering Jew, who in the legend is condemned to an endless life. As Connell notes, "A uses this mythic figure to express a complex of temporal dislocations that leave a self profoundly deprived of temporal presence" (426). In A's words, the unhappiest one

> cannot grow old, for he has never been young; he cannot become young, because he has already grown old; in a sense he cannot die, for indeed he has not lived; in a sense he cannot live, for indeed he is already dead. He cannot love, for love is always present tense, and he has no present time, no future, no past (…); he does not have time for anything, not because his time is filled with something else, but because he has no time at all. (EO, vol.1, 226)

A is speaking to his fellows of the *Symparanekromenoi*, those reflective aesthetes who suffer from melancholy and understand that existence is unhappiness because they know that the recollection of happy moments dies with them. According to Connell, the Wandering Jew "symbolizes their reflective loss of presence and their distorted time sense in which" (2006, 426), quoting A, "what he is hoping for lies behind him; what he recollects lies ahead of him" (EO, vol.1, 225)—an apparent contradiction that may remind us of Constantius' statements in *Repetition* about hope and recollection, cowardice and voluptuousness. Connell observes that in A's discourse we can see that

> [t[he simpler forms of loss of temporal presence are unidirectional. Simple nostalgia fixates on a remembered past; simple hope focuses on an anticipated future. As such, recollecting and hoping selves have a presence, just not a presence in the temporal present, but rather a presence in the past or future. Even

> that degree of presence makes them ineligible for the title of the unhappiest one, who must lack presence altogether. A expresses the radical loss of presence by way of temporal paradoxes so as to capture a complex temporal bi-directionality. While he speaks both of hoping for a past and recollecting a future, it is the latter that is of crucial importance. By virtue of its temporal imagination, a self is able to leap ahead of itself to a future moment and then turn about imaginatively to "remember", to view as past, either the self's real present or one of its nearer term futures. Let us label this temporal double-movement anticipatory recollection. (Connell 2006, 427)

Although this anticipatory recollection is the temporality of Kierkegaard's reflective aesthetes, as Johannes the Seducer of *Either/Or* and the young man of *Repetition*, it goes beyond the aesthetic sphere. In the words of Connell, it "is obviously an essential dimension of being-toward-death generally and rave-discourses specifically" (2006, 428). The earnest thought is an anticipation of one's own death that allows the individual to make a leap forward and then jump back into the present—not the present inscribed between the past and the future but a present in which the past and the future are inscribed—"to win everything in life" (TDIO, 76). In other words, it is a temporal double-movement that, contrary to the situation of the unhappiest one, does not lead to a loss of temporal presence. From this perspective, the earnest thought of death follows the model of existential thinking that, as Constantius writes in *Repetition*, encourages the circumnavigation of life, because this leap forward and back compels the individual to think about his life as a whole. However, Connell stresses that "what people see from that perspective differs profoundly according to their life-view" (2006, 428). For the aesthete, for example, this circumnavigation exposes the meaningless of life. In "At a Graveside" we find the same temporality but also a critique "of the way A employs that perspective to drain all significance from life, leaving us with the nihilistic wisdom" (429). Kierkegaard writes:

> And when the thought of death visited you but made you inactive, when it sneaked in and beguiled your life force into romantic dreaming, when death's despondency would make your life a vanity, when that seducer, sadness, prowled around you, when the idea that all was over would anesthetize you into the sleep of depression, when you lost yourself in absentminded preoccupation with the symbols of death—then you did not lay the blame on death, because all this was indeed not death. But you said to yourself, "My soul is in a mood, and if it continues this way, then there is in it a hostility toward me that can gain domination." (TDIO, 84)

As we can see, pointing again to the problem of representation as absentmindedness and, Kierkegaard underlines the importance to realise that this nihilistic view is mood. This way, the individual can switch from a passive condition to an active one that implies a different temporality. The proper way to circumnavigate life or to relate to death is earnestness.

> Then you did not flee death, as if that would be the cure. Far from it. You said, "I will summon the earnest thought of death." And it helped you, because the earnest thought of death has helped to make a final hour infinitely meaningful; the earnest thought of it has helped to make a long life as meaningful as in time of scarcity, as watchful as if sought by thieving hands. (TDIO, 84)

Connell notes that, although it might be that one cannot accuse the *Symparanekromenoi* of avoiding the thought of death—because they refer to themselves as the ones who are already dead—the fact is that, from the perspective of "At a Graveside", "they evade the thought of death as annihilation and substitute for it their own condition of reflective loss of presence" (2006, 430). Their approach to death is external, mitigating and evasive, and therefore it is not earnest. Thought of in this way, death cannot provide its retroactive power and its particular temporality as stated in "At a Graveside". Therefore, the difference between the temporal double-movement of the unhappiest one and the one that comes from the earnest thought of death, is that in the latter this challenging and paradoxical temporality leads the individual to think death in a way that makes one's own lack of presence become present. In opposition to the former, which has been called "anticipatory recollection", Connell calls the temporality of the earnest thought of death "anticipatory non-recollection". In this temporality, Connell writes, "death invades consciousness present rather than consciousness leaping forward to death" (434). The core of the reasoning here is that the self acknowledges its impossibility of anticipating or becoming present to its own death, instead interpreting its present through the always imminent possibility of death—something that, as we have seen, Climacus also affirmed in the *Postscript*, encouraging the individual to think his own death into every moment of his life. This existential model of thinking provides the retroactive power of death that compels the individual to engage with the present instant (*Øieblikket*), which, for Haufniensis, "is not properly an atom of the time but an atom of eternity" (CA, 88) when eternity and time touch each other.

At this point, Connell asks himself why this retrospective power leads us "to regard the present as a precious opportunity rather than a pointless nullity" (2006, 436). His answer is that, ultimately, the retrospective power is connected to Kierkegaard's religious views. He argues that the "existence before God is an essential part of the intensification of the present" (436). Even though Connell acknowledges that the vision of death in "At a Graveside" is depicted in annihilationist terms rather than a transition to another existence, he understands that God is an essential fundament of the retrospective power. My intention here is not to argue against this legitimate interpretation but to offer a different reading, in which the retrospective power can be understood without relying on the figure of God. More concretely, my aim will be to interpret the effect of the earnestness of death on an individual's life referring to one of the possible readings of the concept of repetition exposed by Constantius in *Repetition*.

4.10. The earnest thought of death and repetition

As explained before with Constantius' consideration that, in order to live, life has to be circumnavigated and understood as a whole that includes death, I believe that there is a possible connection between repetition and the earnest thought of death that offers a fruitful path of investigation. I will try to examine it with the intention to broaden the scope beyond a religious interpretation, which is legitimate but, in my opinion, does not exhaust the potentialities of these concepts and their possible relations. Surely one could argue that the earnest thought of death can have a theological background, maybe not as intense as in other works by Kierkegaard, but manifest in any case. Indeed, in "At a Graveside" there are several passages that insinuate the relative importance of God in relation to the consequences for the individual of the earnest thought of death.[40] However, I consider from what we have seen so far that "At a Graveside" proposes a model of existential thinking that can be understood independently of a theological comprehension of existence, because Kierkegaard treats death in the discourse without relying on transcendence. Certainly, it seems that if temporality is understood through the instant (*Øieblikket*), transcendence cannot be set aside, because, as noted, the instant

[40] For instance, Kierkegaard affirms that earnestness encourages us to seek in God the equality that death does not provide: "However oppressive the dissimilarity was, the earnest thought about the equality of death, like the strict upbringing, did help to renounce worldly comparison, to understand annihilation as something even more terrible, and to want to seek the equality before God" (TDIO, 91). Other references to God are found in pages 89-90.

is understood by Haufniensis as that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other. However, the issue that I intend to point to is whether this transcendence has to be necessarily understood from a Christian point of departure. In the end, Kierkegaard not only affirms that seeing death as a transition is mood, he also states that in death each human being "becomes nothing" (TDIO, 91). In Theunissen words, "the discourse recognizes the annihilation of the person in death as complete: not only bodies, but souls too are comprised in this annihilation" (2006, 341). In this sense "[i]t sees death exclusively in terms of termination of life" (344). Thus, in "At a Graveside", death is approached in the life of individuals without relying on transcendence understood as immortality. As Llevadot points out, although the discourse on an imagined occasion "may be considered an edifying discourse (…), [it] does not propose rules for behavior in the face of death and neither does it thematize the 'beyond.' If the edifying is understood to be a normative, prescriptive discourse laden with religious assumptions, then it must be recognized that *At a Graveside* is not of the sort" (2012, 26). From this perspective, taking into account that Kierkegaard did not assimilate the religious and the edifying, "At a Graveside" can have an edifying purpose—in the sense of building up—and at the same time be read outside of a religious scope.

In the *Postscript*, for example, Climacus stresses that "[t]he Christian truth as inwardness is also upbuilding, but this by no means implies that every upbuilding truth is Christian; the upbuilding is a wider category" (CUP, 256). Llevadot notes that the difference between the edifying and the Christian discourses is that the latter deals with Christian categories while the former deals with ethical categories (2012, 26-27). In other words, she explains that "[t]he edifying is ethical because it 'builds up from the foundations', because it appeals to earnestness and appropriation, not because it proposes norms and rules of behavior" (32). Thus, the essential characteristic of edifying discourses is that their ethical vocation is addressed to the individual "interested infinitely in his own actuality" (CUP, 324), whether Christian or not. And a careful reading of "At a Graveside" shows that it presents the necessity of thinking one's own death through ethical categories and from the perspective of here and now. It appeals to the subjectivity of the listener, fleeing from an abstract understanding and symbolic representations, and encourages—in this case, the appropriation of one's own death—which is the basic characteristic of edifying discourses. Thus, from this point of view and also according to Llevadot, "At a Graveside" is edifying but not necessarily

Christian. In the end, to her, "[t]his discourse on death neither talks about the immortality of the soul, nor about the beyond, nor about any other ideas related to death which would immediately be connected with a sermon one might expect from a parish priest on the occasion of a funeral" (2012, 28). In this sense, "At a Graveside" may be understood as an attempt to think death in a non-metaphysical way, and, as Llevadot states, "without assuming any knowledge of death and without admitting any particular belief" (33). In other words, death is considered in Kierkegaard's discourse as a natural fact. A line of interpretation which Theunissen had already underlined, considering that

> the discourse at a graveside might, out of all the upbuilding discourses, be regarded as the most distinct from those that argue in a directly Christian way—thus its thoroughly consistent and sustained refusal of "Christian terminology." To put it positively, it describes a death that can be experienced by all (…). Although its appeal is actually to the Christian, it seeks to be undogmatic and must therefore be kept relatively unprescriptive. (Theunissen 2006, 344-345)

If I am proposing a non Christian reading of the discourse, it is precisely because I also understand that in this way the earnest thought of death has the potentiality to appeal to everyone, Christians and non Christians alike. Although my investigation has no intention to deny the possibly religious background of this discourse, it holds onto the possibility of a legitimate profane understanding of death, which, as Theunissen states, "has an equal claim to be taken into account" (2006, 345). And I consider that this profane understanding of death and its retroactive power demands a non-religious reading of transcendence, faith, and passion, something that I will attempt through the concept of repetition as exposed in Constantius' work.

Much has been written about the ultimate religious meaning of the concept of repetition, and exposing a comprehensive overview on this topic is beyond the scope of my research. It suffices here to mention just one such reading that insists on the irrevocable theological concern of the concept. Summing up the meaning of the concept, Ryan Kemp states that "Repetition (*qua* normative ideal) is ultimately a religious category because it depends on at least three theological concepts: sin, faith, and atonement" (2015, 228-229). Although he also affirms that repetition is understood as the solution of every life-view (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), in the end he concludes that an authentic balance between possibility and necessity can only be found in religious consciousness. This is so because both the aesthete and the ethicist suffer from an

imbalance that forecloses repetition—the former remains in possibility and the latter in necessity (226-227). Hence, Kemp considers that "[o]nly in religious consciousness, represented as a balanced tension of necessity and possibility, can a true repetition occur" (230). In sum, he understands that repetition cannot be comprehended properly without theological concepts.

However, the issue here for me is not whether or not repetition and the earnest thought of death have a decisive religious meaning, but to approach the texts in order to see if there is another possible reading of them, a reading that goes beyond the theological framework and has the potentiality to appeal to every individual regardless of particular religious beliefs. In this respect, there are several arguments—all of them related to temporality—that helped me to extent the scope of application. Firstly, I will begin with a reading of Anti-Climacus' conception of the self related to temporality. Secondly, I will continue with the idea of the eternal present in a combined reading of repetition and Nietzsche's eternal return. And finally, I will rely on Deleuze and Caputo to attempt an understanding of faith that goes beyond the Christian framework.

In a well-known quote of *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus defines the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself" (SUD, 13). To begin with stated simply, the self is a temporal relation that relates to itself. However, as usual, it is not that simple, because this definition states that there is a third element, for it is not a relationship of two but a relation that relates to itself: "The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (13-14). The fundamental issue here is temporality. As Michaelsen explains, "[i]n order for the human being to relate to itself as temporal, it is necessary, in this temporal relationship, also to relate to something non-temporal, trans-temporal, or supra-temporal, that is, in time and as temporal to relate to eternity" (2014, 259-260). The reason for this is that, as Haufniensis affirms in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the distinction between past, present, and future is not implicit in time itself but only appear "through the relation of time to eternity and through the reflection of eternity in time" (CA, 85). And the point is that, as Michaelsen puts it, "[t]his otherness or alterity, which makes the relation of self into 'a positive third,' is an unnameable that may be called by many names: God, the Eternal, the Other, or even Death" (2014, 259). This very idea helps me to support a reading of

"At a Graveside" that does not rely on religious concepts. Indeed, as noted, one fundamental issue is how to interpret transcendence. The problem is that if temporality is thought by means of the instant (*Øieblikket*), transcendence cannot be set aside, because the instant is understood as the ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other. However, in the light of Michaelsen's interpretation of this positive third of the relation, it seems that eternity can be understood as death without relying on theological concepts. Read in this way, the earnest thought of death can shake the self and place it back into its temporal existence without the necessity to refer to God, because the point is the non-temporal character of this unnameable third element in the relation, which may be death itself.

In order to understand this otherness that makes the relation of self into a positive third in a non-Christian manner, Stephen Crites offers a useful interpretation of eternity that help me to put in relation repetition and the retroactive power of the earnest thought of death. He bases his analysis in an understanding of repetition as eternity. In Constantius' words: "eternity (...) is the true repetition" (R, 221). In order to illuminate this assertion, we must examine Constantius' understanding of eternity. Crites argues (1993, 227) that the text contains at least three meanings: eternal past, eternal present, and eternal future. These eternities negate and are correlative with three modes of temporality, which Haufniensis introduces in *The Concept of Anxiety*, distinguishing them from time as irreversible succession: temporality of past, present, and future. In Crites' words, the difference between temporality and eternity is that "[t]he eternal, not subject to the tension of an experience splayed between and across a determinate-past-remembered and an indeterminate-future-projected, is essentially untensed" (227). Of these three meanings of eternity, I will focus on the eternal present, which I will use to enrich the interpretation of the earnest thought of death and its retroactive power.

To introduce the eternal present, Crites hinges on the interpretation that, in the Kierkegaardian corpus, the individual does not become a proper self until he takes "sole responsibility for the self that he has been and will become" (235). And "[o]nly as one reconciled to his past and opened to his future can he exist in the present and avow that existence" (235). This present is the instant, the intersection of the temporal present with eternity that, as noted, Haufniensis understands as an atom of eternity. Crites wonders whether eternity could be interpreted as this eternal present, something that may be quite a polemical claim because it seems that to identify the instant with eternity

implies to deny the former the negativity that characterises it and which determines the individual's existence. However, Crites considers that the text admits this interpretation. He defines the eternal present in the following fragment:

> Unlike the temporal present (…) [it] never becomes past, nor is it threatened with dissipation by the future. It fills the entire horizon, of consciousness and of being alike. For those who celebrate the eternal present it seems that past and future are merely psychological modes of the temporal present, the past-remembered of what has been, the future-anticipated of what shall be. But the eternal present is what-is, concentrating the fullness of being in itself. There is neither truth nor goodness independent of it, for it is what it is, and if we were to use ethical language we should have to say that it is also what it ought to be. Strictly speaking, however, the eternal present renders ethical language meaningless, for there is no ought-to-be in terms of which judgment might be passed on what-is, no fatal attenuation of the present at all, and no object of the will other that things as they are. (Crites 1993, 236-237)

However, Crites supposes that living permanently in this eternal present is impossible—especially if we take into account that, insofar as, for Kierkegaard, the self is a synthesis between the infinite and the finite, it contains a constitutive negativity. With this in mind, what I want to suggest here is that the non-temporal, trans-temporal, or supra-temporal otherness or alterity underlined by Michaelsen that makes the relation of the self into a positive third can be death itself in the form of the earnest thought. From this perspective, the thought of my own death, the appropriation of it, can be the third needed for repetition—substituting God or eternity read in a Christian way—, the cause and the consequence of the passion that pushes the individual to the eternal present, which, despite being impossible to maintain for the constitutive negativity of the individual, offers a real framework or existential action. And this leads us directly to the difference between first and second ethics, something that we will address through the contrast between Constantius' repetition and Nietzsche's eternal return.[41] Crites

[41] Even though it is a well-known theory, it might be of interest reproduce it as exposed in *The Gay Science*: "What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sight and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?" (Nietzsche 2001, 194-195).

proposes that the former can be read in a similar way as the latter. And although there is a significant difference between both, examining the similarities will help us to enlighten the issue.

What Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* regarding the eternal return is not that every moment in the individual's life will be eternally repeated, rather, it is the issue of what would be his attitude if this were the case. Is it possible that the earnest thought of death plays a similar role as that of Nietzsche's demon, reminding us that death is always possible, being likewise the non-temporal third needed for the passion of repetition that pushes us to the eternal present through its retroactive power? Indeed, there seems to be a possible connection. As Michaelsen recalls, the decision of death "depends on how the dying one relates to the moment and to the repetition of the moment, which may explain the last words of A to his fellow deceased of the unhappy Occident" (2014, 277). And these are words that seem to resound in Nietzsche's eternal return: "Arise, dear Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι! The night is over; the day is beginning its unflagging activity again, never, so it seems, tired of repeating itself forever and ever" (EO, vol. 1, 230).[42]

One of the main exponents of a combined reading of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze distinguishes repetition from generality: while in the latter, one term can be substituted by another, the former concerns non-substitutable singularities. In Deleuze's words, "[g]enerality, as generality of the particular, thus stands opposed to repetition as universality of the singular" (1994, 1). According to Deleuze, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—as well as Charles Péguy—"*oppose repetition to all forms of generality*" (5) and make it "not only a power peculiar to language and thought, a superior pathos and pathology, but also the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future" (5). Although Deleuze admits that their thoughts differ in considerable ways, he holds that both coincide in several aspects.

Firstly, they make repetition itself something new, the "supreme object of the will and of freedom" (6)—although, as we shall see, in relation to Kierkegaard this will has to be understood here as a passion. To Deleuze, "Kierkegaard specifies that it is not a matter

[42] Although Nietzsche had not read Kierkegaard (Kaufmann 1974, 125), research has shown that he had a reasonable knowledge of him through the secondary literature (Brobjer 2008, 75).

of drawing something new from repetition, of extracting something new from it. (…) It is rather a matter of acting, of making repetition as such a novelty; that is, a freedom and a task of freedom" (6). In consequence, secondly and thirdly, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche oppose repetition to the laws of nature and to moral law. They don't refer to repetition in nature, which is impossible, but as an act of the individual. This is why "Kierkegaard condemns as aesthetic repetition every attempt to obtain repetition from the laws of nature by identifying with the legislative principle, whether in the Epicurean or the Stoic manner" (6). Indeed, Deleuze explains that, if repetition is possible, even in nature, "it is due to miracle rather than to law" (2). More concretely, is an affirmation against the law. And regarding moral law, repetition constitutes a suspension of ethics, as the *logos* of the singular individual (6-7).[43] In this sense "repetition is a transgression" (3).

And finally, Deleuze states that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also share the consideration of repetition as "the thought of the future" (7), opposed both to the generalities of habit and the particularities of memory. In Kierkegaard, it is the thought of the future in the sense that, contrary to recollection, which is repeated backwards, "genuine repetition is recollected forward" (R, 131). According to Deleuze, "[w]hen Kierkegaard speaks of repetition as the second power of consciousness, 'second' means not a second time but the infinite which belongs to a single time, the eternity which belongs to an instant" (1994, 8). Repetition, then, might well be understood as a test that places us into the instant and, as Constantius writes, "if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy" (R, 131). However, as mentioned before, this test is not a test of will, but a test of passion,[44] repetition being the cause and the effect of this passion. Therefore, to repeat is a passionate act of affirmation. This is why, in Deleuze's words, "the heart is the amorous organ of repetition" (1994, 2). And it is always an act

[43]This is why, as Deleuze explains, "[b]oth Kierkegaard and Nietzsche develop the opposition between the private thinker, the thinker-comet and bearer of repetition, and the public professor and doctor of law, whose second-hand discourse proceeds by mediation and finds its moralising source in the generality of concepts (cf. Kierkegaard against Hegel, Nietzsche against Kant and Hegel; and from this point of view, Péguy against the Sorbonne). Job is infinite contestation and Abraham infinite resignation, but these are one and the same thing. Job challenges the law in an ironic manner, refusing all second-hand explanations and dismissing the general in order to reach the most singular as principle or as universal. Abraham submits humorously to the law, but finds in that submission precisely the singularity of his only son whom the law commanded him to sacrifice. As Kierkegaard understands it, repetition is the transcendent correlate shared by the psychical intentions of contestation and resignation" (1994, 7).

[44] Indeed, Constantius himself discredits repetition understood as a test of will after his second trip to Berlin, when he failed to experience the repetition of a former trip. In this attempt, repetition proved to be only possible from an aesthetic repetition, a "repetition of the wrong kind" (R, 169).

of transgression or exception related to humour and irony that reveals "a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws" (5).

However, as previously mentioned, despite the fact that this parallelism between Kierkegaard's repetition and Nietzsche's eternal return seems to be fruitful, there is a fundamental difference between the two that must be addressed; a difference that, as Llevadot points out (2005, 120), is not so much about the distance between the religious and the aesthetic, but about the opposition between the first and the second ethics. On the one hand, ethics understood in the first sense are abstract ethics based on metaphysical principles. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, such ethics are ideal and therefore unattainable for the individual. On the other hand, second ethics are ethics of the instant, and, in Haufniensis' words, insofar as they presuppose sin and although they set ideality as a task, they do it "not by a movement from above and downward but from below and upward" (CA, 20). Thus only this second ethics, fleeing from an ideal representation of reality and not judging it from an ideal perspective, offer the individual a real framework of existential action—in the sense that, presupposing sin, they accept the impotence of the individual and understand the necessity of a third. Sin and guilt make impossible ethical repetition understood as an act of choice or will, and therefore first ethics are doomed to failure. From this point of view, Nietzsche's attempt to escape from traditional ethics based on metaphysical representations, and instead offering an ethics of the instant through the eternal return, seems to fit in the category of second ethics. However, as Llevadot underlines (2005, 119), although Nietzsche proposes the instant as a criterion of ethics, from a Kierkegaardian perspective it is an abstract conception of the instant that, instead of the entry of the eternal in time, anticipates the eternal in this life. That is, in the eternal return the individual lives as if he were eternal, but he does not become eternal in time. According to Llevadot (119), the Nietzschean instant is a forging ahead that, in contrast to the instant in second ethics, does not live in the present as if the past was redeemed and the future open. For this to happen, the instant must be conceived as the entry of the eternal in time. In other words, the criterion for Kierkegaard's second ethics is the instant understood as the appearance of God in time, which reveals sin and provides a comprehension of the individual as an impotent being with a temporal structure that prevents him from escaping time and taking refuge in an ideal eternity.

It would seem, then, that if we want to understand repetition from a Kierkegaardian perspective, we cannot fail to refer to God. However, I suggest the possibility that the entry of eternity in time, needed to understand the instant in a way that enables the individual to live in the present as if the past were redeemed and the future open, can be interpreted as the consideration of death as one's own death—that is, as the earnest thought of death. In other words, the thought of one's own death, the appropriation of its certain uncertainty, its decisiveness, its inexplicability, and its radical and untransferable personal nature, can be the non-temporal third needed for repetition that, if possible, and acknowledging the constitutive negativity of the individual, offers a real framework or existential action that provides the passion to struggle for the eternal present. As Deleuze points out, "[t]o repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. And perhaps this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal repetition within the singular" (1994, 1). I am claiming that the passion for this repetition can be provided by the retroactive power of death. However, to justify this claim, we must say a few words about faith, which, in Kierkegaard's corpus is a passion. Certainly, as Deleuze reminds us, Kierkegaard entrusted "this supreme repetition, repetition as a category of the future, to faith" (95), which has the strength to undo habit and reminiscence. Hence, from the point of view of an internal reading of Kierkegaard, it would be problematic to detach passion from faith understood from a Christian perspective. However, I will suggest an alternative interpretation, proposing that this faith does not necessarily have to be interpreted as Christian faith.

The aim of the previous exposition, through Crites, Nietzsche, and Deleuze was to suggest the possibility that when Kierkegaard affirms that the earnest thought of death is a force that accelerates the living, it can be read as a self-transformative force that places us in the instant (*Øieblikket*). In Michaelsen's words, the earnest thought of death "throws the self back on itself in its temporal existence and concentrates time in an eternal moment *this day today*" (2014, 283). The thought of death is a—as anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*—that singularises us and shows us the responsibility to exist *in* the instant. Mooney expresses it in a more poetic form, "[d]eath is a teacher and mentor, a disturber of selves and minister to souls, in *this* life" (2011, 133), and the awareness of one's own death "can be a sustaining and continuously transforming spring of life"

(134). Hence, the individual that thinks earnestly about his own death does not have the resentment of those who consider death as the revenge where all differences will be levelled. On the contrary, it is the thankful attitude of the individual who understands that death is always possible and takes advantage of this awareness to get the most out of life. To Michaelsen, "[i]n order to really live, and hence to receive the gift of a proper death, the task of the self is—in every single moment and with infinite passion—to think the certain uncertainty of mortality and the definite indefiniteness of immortality into everything concurrently" (2014, 283).

According to Kierkegaard, however, this passionate task is only possible through what in several works is called the double movement of faith,[45] through which, as Michaelsen explains, "the thought of death repeatedly turns into the thought of the immortality of mortality and *vice vers*a, and through which the moment is repetition—and repetition is what makes everything new" (2014, 279). Thanks to this double movement of faith "the self regains faithfulness towards the radical Otherness of death, while simultaneously and repeatedly overcoming the anxiety and despair that sees nothing other than the withdrawing approach of death" (283). It is quite clear, then, than for Kierkegaard, faith is required. Nonetheless, although one can assume that he is referring to Christian faith, the question about its nature remains open.

Caputo, as Deleuze, understands that the double movement of faith, like repetition, is a movement of transgression, an experience of the impossible (2002, 3). Caputo compares it to Derrida's deconstruction, which he describes as "a transgressor movement, *une passage aux frontières*, taking the step beyond that we cannot take, *le pas au-delà*. Deconstruction tests borders, pushes against the boundaries of thought and desire, goes to the limits of what we dare to think or risk desiring" (2-3). From Caputo's perspective, faith and repetition, as deconstruction, "are privileged instances of *kinesis* that are uniquely keyed to 'impossibility'" (3), in the sense that things get moving by way of the impossible. We observe this in the double movement of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*: first he understands that what he expects is impossible, but then, facing and embracing this impossibility, he believes, by virtue of the absurd, that he can experience repetition, which for Derrida is to go where we cannot go. Just when the individual is paralysed by the impossibility of moving, the movement continues through the paradox.

[45] FT, 36; CUP, vol. 1, 290, 409; WA, 60.

And for this, faith, repetition, and deconstruction are, in Caputo's words, "movements or experiences of freedom just when freedom has been immobilized by an *aporia*" (3). In this sense, they constitute a parallel movement of the one generated by death, which, as we have seen, breaks the traditional laws upon which rational discourse has been considered to be based. In other words, they constitute an absolute interruption in the regime of the possible, an opening to the wholly other. And they require passion; strength of spirit. Thus this passion—that makes a transgressor movement to where we cannot go, that breaks the boundaries of thought, and which I take it can spring thanks to the earnest thought of death—is the passion that allows the individual to struggle with his own constitutive negativity and offers a real framework of action. Let us examine this impossibility.

Repetition begins where *Fear and Trembling* ends: asking whether movement is possible at all. From here, the text presents a sequence of situations that indicate the impossibility of repetition. However, Caputo considers that "Repetition in the eminent sense is set in motion just when we are brought to a standstill, when we are stuck in what Derrida calls an *aporia*, when there is no way to go, no way out" (12). Thus repetition makes the same double movement as faith: "[it] is possible, if it is, only when it is impossible" (12). Asking himself how is such movement possible, Caputo understands repetition in the same line I am proposing here: "Repetition is the courage of everyday life, the stalwart stick-to-it-tiveness that stays the course from day to day, that repeats the little things but with originary freshness each and every time" (12). Repetition concentrates temporality and the instant; it is a passionate and affirmative movement ahead. As seen, Constantius understands that, while recollection is repeated backwards, genuine repetition is recollected forward (R, 131). And when repetition recollects forward, it produces what it repeats. It is a creative force that moves the individual forward.

However, Caputo also underlines that, due to impossibility, repetition does not seem possible without God. As noted, the first part of the book shows the impossibility of aesthetic repetition. The possibility of the impossible is the idea of the religious, and the possibility of religious repetition is put to the test in the second part. The young man loves the girl but knows that marriage is impossible. To make possible the impossible demands a transcendent movement thought the absurd. Abraham and the young poet—as well as Job—lost everything and faced the absolute impossibility. But they trusted

that the impossible was nonetheless possible. This movement is repeated in "At a Graveside" when the pastor's speech states that earnestness is "to think that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order to win everything in life" (TDIO, 76). And this is the retroactive power of death, which can awaken the passion of repetition that pushes the individual to a transgressor movement.

Therefore, in what we have seen so far, the movements of faith and repetition have a religious structure. However, Caputo's interpretation broadens the scope of the meaning of the religious, considering that "*either* what the pseudonyms call the religious has the structure of the passion for the impossible in deconstruction; *or* what Derrida calls the passion for the impossible has the structure of religious passion" (2002, 4). As Caputo himself points out, "[t]his axiom of impossibility goes to the heart of what Derrida calls, not religion *simpliciter* and without further ado, but rather a 'religion without religion'" (5), an understanding of religion without any particular dogma that precedes any particular faith and understands that religion cannot contain what it contains. In the end, "the young man is restored to himself, not to God, and as a poet, not as a knight of faith" (17). In other words, he is a poetic exception to the universal-ethical, not a religious one. To Caputo, "the axiom or dynamic of the impossible, the structure of the movement beyond, goes to the heart of religion with or without religion, or religion 'after religion,' or 'post-religion,' or a 'post-secular' religion" (23). Hence, the passion for the impossible challenges the boundaries that modernity has imposed between the religious and the secular. Understood in this way, religion is a disruptive and transgressive force that cannot be contained within the borders of institutional religion and, certainly for Caputo, "does not remain confined within the confines of apostolic Christianity itself or of any determinate religion, since it is constituted by a passion for the impossible that can always assume other forms" (24). This "other forms" refer to a self-deconstructive conception of religion that collides with itself, blurring the distinction between the religious and the secular. And this does not mean that religion becomes paganism. On the contrary, I would say that it broadens the comprehension of the religious and the secular, opening the door to a more fertile reading of faith and repetition.

Therefore, following Caputo, I suggest the possibility that the faith required for the movement of repetition—if repetition is possible—can be understood as passion in a sense that is not restrained to a Christian framework; a faith or passion that, as the

earnest thought of death, consists in thinking that all is over, in order then to win everything in life; a passion that embraces impossibility and moves us forward to where we cannot go. Michaelsen synthesises this idea defining the earnest thought of death as a "*salto mortale*" (2014, 279).[46] This it is a model of existential thinking that is not necessarily related to a theological understanding of existence.

4.11. Self-examination

Finally, for all we have seen, the struggle with the thought of death in an earnest way is, in essence, a process of self-examination: "the earnest person understands it in another way and understands himself" (TDIO, 93). So is the text itself—that is, an encouragement to self-examination, in the sense that it does not offer a positive definition of death and compels the listener to think about how he understands his own death and himself. Therefore, for both reasons, death's inexplicability becomes the occasion for a countermovement that sets up an existential process of self-reflection. In Mjaaland's words, "[t]he thought of death interrupts and disturbs the reflection on oneself, thus giving an impetus to a more profound understanding of the self" (2006, 362). In this sense it singularises the individual, making him understand the irreducible personal aspect of death. "At a Graveside" does not encourage the listener to solve theoretically the mystery of death, for it is inexplicable. Instead, it pushes him to an existential decision. The concern for death is in the end a concern for oneself. According to Mjaaland, the discourse "situates death *in* life and turns the question of death into a question of understanding oneself" (369). For this, "any explanation of death is necessarily indirect in the sense that it returns to the reader as a question, as a challenge, as a fundamental otherness questioning the being and acting of the explainer" (385). As Kierkegaard himself puts it, "the earnestness lies in just this, that the explanation does not explain death but discloses the state of the explainer's own innermost being" (TDIO, 97).

Hence, as usual in his authorship, Kierkegaard poses a challenge and encourages the listener to follow the advice of the ancient Greek maxim *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* ("know thyself"), which according to Pausanias was inscribed in the pronaos of the temple of

[46] The famous Kierkegaardian leap that we found in *Fear and Trembling* and that Climacus mentions when criticising Jacobi's notion of it (CUP, vol. 1, 100).

Apollo at Delphi. After all, Kierkegaard had during his life an enduring concern with the becoming of the self, as he expressed in the Gilleleje letter of 1835: "One must first learn to know oneself before knowing anything else (γνωθι σεαυτον)" (KJN1, 22). As Anti-Climacus states, "[g]enerally speaking, consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self" (SUD, 29). And, I would add, the more awareness of death, the more self; and the more self, the more anxiety, which can be understood as an opening to our own mortal condition that challenges our explanations and pushes us to self-knowledge. In this sense, the self and the awareness of death constitute a circle of self-examination: the greater the degree of one leads to the increase of the other. The never-ending life-task of becoming subjective that Climacus considers "the highest task assigned to a human being" (CUP, vol. 1, 129) requires the individual to think his own death "into every moment of my life" (167), because "the development of subjectivity consists precisely in this, that he, acting, works through himself in his thinking about his own existence" (169). This implies to think of one's own death in relation to one's whole life. From this point of view, the earnest thought of death is one of the essential characteristics of the ancient subjective ethics that Climacus reclaims and opposes to the modern objective ethics, an understanding of ethics that compels us to look inward. Death itself is unknowable, but the thought of one's own death is an essential task in the process to become a self. In the end, following Socrates' example, the task of becoming subjective entails the constant confrontation with one's own ignorance, and death is the absolute unknown.

However, it would be wrong to understand the ethical challenge of the earnest thought of death as a purely individualistic advice. As seen before, death has no need of explanations, they are but for the ones still living. Death itself remains silent and imposes silence between the dead and the living. In this sense, as Mjaaland notes, the interruption of death does not just disturb the reflection on oneself, but also affects the relationship between human beings (2006, 382). Hence, interruption appears to be an essential concept in order to understand the decisive significance of death in Kierkegaard's discourse, which shows us the importance of the earnest thought of death both in the singularisation of the individual and in his relation to otherness, which are not two separate elements that relate one to the other but merely exist in the relationship. In Mjaaland's words, one's own death is inevitable, "but when it appears

as death's decision, in earnestness, it even becomes decisive for the relationship to the other" (382). After all, being a concern for oneself, the concern for death is also a concern for life, and therefore, potentially, a concern for others.

4.12. Final notes

In conclusion, it seems clear that Kierkegaard's corpus, despite the nuances between particular texts, suggests an approach to death that, unlike the Platonic and the Epicurean strains, does not encourage to overcome the fear of death but to embrace it, an attitude that in its proper way—that is, to think in one's own death—has a decisive impact on the life of individuals, and is neither a simple *carpe diem* nor fatalism. In this sense, Kierkegaard agrees with Spinoza when, in his *Ethics*, he states that "[a] free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death" (1988, 584). As Mooney explains, although Kierkegaard would seem close to Socrates when the latter says in the *Phaedo* that the task of the philosopher is to practice death, while "Socratic meditation on death seems like a *preparation for death*, Kierkegaard's meditations seem like an *intensification* of life. And far from a nightmare of terror, Kierkegaard and Climacus figure death as an amorous partner" (2011, 134). It is in this way that, as argued before, "At a Graveside" belongs to the philosophical tradition that relates the *ars moriendi* with the *ars viviendi*.

Kierkegaard starts the discourse with the pastor's speech that proclaims "[t]hen all is over" (TDIO, 71). However, the further development of "At a Graveside" overcomes this statement. According to Theunissen (2006, 355), this is just the first step of a sequence: the second is the challenge of earnestness to the living "to think that all is over" (TDIO, 79), and the third is when, finally, "the earnest person says 'All is not over'" (85). Here we see again both the dialectics of presentation and a material dialectics in the sense that, as Theunissen states, the discourse displays "the regaining of reality by means of the negation of the negative" (2006, 357). The pastor's speech encourages the individual to win everything in life after everything was lost. In Theunissen's words, "[w]hilst the pastor invites those left behind to look *back* with him on the life of the deceased, the lay speaker warns them to look *forward* to their own lives" (356), in the same way, I suggest, as Constantius affirms that "genuine repetition is recollected forward" (R, 131).

To conclude, as Theunissen maintains, Kierkegaard's discourse "conspires with life against death" (2006, 357). Indeed, the retroactive power of the earnest thought of death allows the living to be where they are in a way that, as I have proposed before, provides the passion for true repetition, a repetition that, despite our constitutive negativity, can allow the individual to live in the present as if the past was redeemed and the future open. Certainly, the aim of the discourse is not to explain death, because it is inexplicable, but to encourage the appropriation of the thought of one's own death so that one may take advantage of this retroactive power. After all, we learn that "knowing a great deal is not an unconditional good" (TDIO, 101). For Llevadot,

> *At a Graveside* deconstructs all *assumed* knowledge piece by piece, every "image of death," leaving the reader alone to face the only question that death poses him while living: whatever your conception of death, whatever the knowledge you believe in, whatever the mood that accompanies this knowledge, death is the "master" that puts your knowledge to the test. (Llevadot 2012, 33)

This test is the claim of death's decision, a claim that we can anticipate and appropriate through the earnest thought, and that whispers to us "[u]p to here, not one step further" (TDIO, 78).

4.13. One step further

And yet, we will go one step further to use Kierkegaard's understanding of death in "At a Graveside" to argue that some apocalyptic movies—and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* in particular—have a philosophical value for the individuals as an occasion to think earnestly about their own death. However, if death is indefinable, inexplicable, and is neither something to be represented nor grasped, we have to ask ourselves if it is possible to develop a theory based on some level on death's representation in cinema—in this case, not just the death of one or several individuals but also massive annihilation. The answer would come from the aforementioned discussions of the issue of death's representation in "At a Graveside". I will defend that there are several parallelisms between Kierkegaard's discourse and some apocalyptic movies, in the sense that both are a challenge to the individual to take into account his own death. Even though Kierkegaard criticizes the representations of death—both sanitising and disturbing ones—because they impede the confrontation with one's own death, he also represents it to some extent with the figures of a teacher and an inspector. As we have

seen, Theunissen explains (2006, 324) this contradiction arguing that in this way "At a Graveside" reveals to the listener the dialectical nature of death and our dramatic relation to it, in the sense that we are always acting in a play that inevitably includes mortality. In other words, this effort to represent something that cannot be represented is an attempt to show the listeners that we are not detached from death, that death is not something external to us. On this basis, I defend the thought that the representation of death in certain apocalyptic movies can have a similar effect on the viewer as Kierkegaard's discourse on the listener. Moreover, although it could be argued that death in apocalyptic movies is always represented by some physical object—for example a planet or a monster—, the fact is that the object is not death but the agent of death. In those movies death is just *there*. It is an atmosphere, an environment, a context. And the earnest thought of death does not consist in representing death but in thinking one's own death in its radical singularity. I will try to argue in the next chapter that a certain kind of apocalyptic movies, as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", can push the individual to do so.

Chapter II: Apocalyptic Cinema

1. Historical approach

1.1. Pervasiveness of apocalypticism

It is imperative to introduce the religious apocalyptic narrative in order to analyse apocalyptic movies through the philosophical framework exposed in the first chapter. This consideration is important because apocalyptic fiction has its narrative roots in such framework. However, apocalyptic fiction also finds nourishment in contemporary apocalypticism, which escalated rapidly in popular culture [47] after World War II. Therefore, considering this, before approaching the apocalyptic narrative we must first approach the pervasiveness of apocalypticism in modern-day Western societies.

With this purpose in mind, Lorenzo DiTomasso helps us to define apocalypticism and to grasp its contemporary importance. According to his definition, apocalypticism is the worldview "of every kind of apocalyptic literature, as well as apocalyptic art, apocalyptic film and anime, and apocalyptic social movements of every size and stripe" (2014b, 1). While the characteristics of the apocalyptic narrative will be elaborated in due course, for now it is sufficient to note that its lowest common denominator is the linear conception of time and the belief that the end of history is near. Additionally, while it perhaps may seem as though philosophical, scientific, technological, and social revolutions of recent centuries may seem to have transitioned apocalypticism into an archaic and outdated worldview, close examination reveals continued influence in ideologies, politics, and social behavior within a global context. As DiTomasso explains,

[47] The definition of popular culture is a problem by itself, and although it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, I want to clarify that here, for the proximity of the subject of study, it will be understood in the same way as DiTomasso defines it in "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture". For him, popular culture "refers to the shared network of meanings, ideas, images, and other phenomena which have characterized mainstream society since 1945, and especially the global form that developed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Popular culture is embedded in the modes of everyday life, and modulated by the impulses of media-driven, consumer society. It is often self-referential, and rarely designed for posterity. Its content/formats range from film, anime, television, and other varieties of cinematic entertainment, to comics, manga, and graphic narratives, as well as art, music, dance, theatre, and video games. Multimedia and hypermedia vectors are common in popular culture, particularly since the emergence of the Internet and new communication technologies in the 1990s. Above all, popular culture is *mass culture*. It occupies the daily interest of much of the world's population. It is manufactured, broadcast, and consumed on an industrial scale. Its attraction is a function of a consensual reality involving a worldwide network of individuals who are at once both the consumers and the producers of content. This reality is generated though untold billions of decisions, which are heavily influenced by mass-market entertainment and commercial advertising. These decisions are made increasingly via the Internet and social media in what is likely the most comprehensive form of mass participation and democratic representation ever known" (2014a, 475). In sum, then, I will understand popular culture not as the traditional culture of a certain cultural group—namely, folklore—, but as the mass culture produced and distributed by the new communication technologies and designed for the industrial consumption of contemporary mass societies.

> [a]pocalypticism is a remarkably persistent and adaptable worldview. Its fertile soil continues to nourish the native beliefs of many Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and has proven equally fecund to new transplants from non-Abrahamic religions. It currently informs foreign and domestic policies of nations across the globe. It is a common feature in nearly every medium of contemporary popular culture, including some of its most *avant garde* forms: anime, graphic novels, and role-playing games. It naturally complements nationalism, enabling it to serve as both the voice of the oppressed and the voice-piece of the oppressors. It freights a teleological orientation which makes it attractive to any group –religious or secular, marginal or mainstream– that considers itself the special object of history. (DiTomasso 2009, 221)

Not to be understated, and relevant to the topic at hand, is contemporary American thought and the essential role of the United States in the development and proliferation of both cinema and popular culture. As Paul Boyer points out, the presence of apocalypticism in contemporary American thought is "obvious in even the most cursory study of public-opinion data and surging to the fore at moments of crisis such as the 1991 Persian Gulf War" (1992, x)[48]—a pervasiveness that he relates with the important presence of Christian evangelical faith.[49] In fact, one of the evidences of the persistence of apocalyptic thought in America that Boyer stresses is, again, the massive penetration of the apocalypse in contemporary popular culture. In the same vein, John W. Nelson affirms that apocalyptic ideas are "as American as the hot dog" (1982, 179), and Berkowitz ends an article on Melville and Edwards stating that waiting for the apocalypse is the great American pastime (1978, 190).

This pervasiveness of the apocalypse was especially evident after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And although we will approach the contemporary nuclear dread in a later section of this chapter, for our purposes here it will be relevant to observe the reaction of humankind to the creation of the atomic bomb. With this focus,

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[48] Boyer provides some data and several cultural references that justify the claim of the important presence of apocalyptic belief in contemporary American thought (1992, 1-18). See also Wojcik's *The End of the World As We Know It. Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (1997).

[49] One of the most powerful apocalyptic beliefs in America is dispensational premillennialism, which, according to Boyer, has had an important influence in shaping public attitudes (ix). However, there are many others. As Wojcik explains, "the expectation of imminent worldly destruction and renewal is an important part of the theology of the Seventh-day Adventists, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses" (1997, 9), not to mention the apocalypticism related to UFO and Marian Apparitions worldwide, the syncretic forms of New Age apocalypticism, the apocalyptic beliefs of survivalists groups and militias, and the apocalyptic pessimism of youth subcultures as the early punk scene and its "no future" motto (9-11). After all, it is probably not a coincidence that this dissertation is the work of a member of the so-called Generation X, which, according to Wojcik, is characterised by apathy and nihilism, and concerned about "nuclear annihilation, impending societal doom, and post-baby boom powerlessness" (11).

it is important to note that this apocalyptic atomic fear was at that time mostly biblical.[50] For his part, Daniel Wojcik affirms that the possibility of nuclear annihilation "has been readily incorporated into some religious apocalyptic belief systems, and thus mythologized as a meaningful event that is the fulfillment of a divinely ordained plan for the redemption of the world" (1997, 4). In this line, Spencer R. Weart points out that some fundamentalist Christians considered that atomic bombs were the true apocalypse and "proved that the day foretold in biblical revelation was at hand" (2012, 57).[51] In fact, Weart reminds us that, back in the 1980s, "an estimated 5 to 10 million Americans, including President Reagan, believed there was a good chance that the Armageddon of the Bible was imminent in nuclear form" (280).

With the passing of the years, this apocalyptic fear has become more diversified, but the biblical backdrop of the apocalyptic imaginary is still very much present. Just to provide some examples, in a *Time* magazine article, Nancy Gibbs referenced (2002, 40) a 2002 poll by *Time* and CNN that shows that more than one-third of Americans affirm to observe how the news may relate to the end of the world, that approximately one-quarter think that the Bible predicted the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, and that a 59% believe that the events in the Book of Revelation will be fulfilled. For his part, Wojcik underlines a 1984 poll which demonstrates that 39% of a sample population agreed with the statement "When the Bible predicts that the earth will be destroyed by fire, it's telling us that a nuclear war is inevitable" (1997, 1). Additionally, Wojcik also references a 1995 poll which showed that 61% of American adults and 71% of teenagers believed that the world will come to an end or be destroyed (2). Hence, in view of the pervasiveness of apocalypticism in our times and—as we shall see—its influence on popular culture, if our intention is to contextualise, understand, and interpret apocalyptic cinema, we must look at its historical sources.

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[50] Boyer underlines some examples to illustrate this assertion (1992, 116): the *Philadelphia Inquirer* headlined "Atomic Energy for War: New Beast of Apocalypse"; the *New York Times* titled the final section of his history of the Manhattan Project "Armageddon"; and a myriad of commentators quoted II Peter 3:10: "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up".

[51] Actually, Weart explains that some people believed that this connection between apocalyptic power and nuclear bombs had a literal Christian meaning, to the point that some preachers "from the 1950s onward prophesied that the Second Coming of Christ would be heralded by nuclear missiles, fulfilling in plain fact the biblical prophecy of falling stars, scorching heat, rivers of blood, and so forth" (Weart 2012, 280).

1.2. Apocalypse as a literary genre

Although the term "apocalypse" has different connotations among academics according to the breadth attributed to its meaning—a social ideology, a literary genre, or simply to designate a sense of an ending—, the etymological definition is the one that generates the highest consensus. "Apocalypse" comes from the ancient Greek *apokalypsis*, which means "uncovering" or "unveiling", and from *apocalyptein*, which means "disclosure", "manifestation" or "revelation", and it is understood as a prophetic revelation that discloses the knowledge of a predetermined end and renewal of the world. Therefore, as Wojcik explains, religious apocalyptic beliefs understand that "the cosmos is ordered, that evil and suffering will be destroyed, that human existence is meaningful, and that a millennial realm of peace and justice ultimately will be created" (1997, 4). DiTomasso synthesises the definition explaining that apocalyptic beliefs reveal the predetermined, imminent, final, and salvific resolution of a conflict between two different realities: a transcendent reality identified with a divine entity; and a mundane reality that is the result of the permanent battle between two antagonistic forces, usually represented by good and evil (2014b, 2). Hence, as Wojcik notes, in the apocalyptic worldview "a profound fatalism for a world believed to be irredeemably evil is entwined with the faith for a predestined, perfect age of harmony and human fulfilment" (1997, 4), and the revelation of this information provides meaning to existence.

According to John J. Collins (2016, 3), the writings that transmit this apocalyptic worldview have been considered as a literary genre since Friedrich Lücke published the first comprehensive study of the subject in 1832, entitled *Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in die Offenbarung Johannis und in die gesamte apokalyptische Literatur*.[52] Literary theory and theology define this genre as "a specific type of literature

[52] It has to be mentioned that the use of the Greek term *apokalypsis* as a genre mark is not documented until Christianity. Indeed, as Collins remarks (2016, 2-4), the first text introduced as an *apokalypsis* is the Book of Revelation, which means that most of the Jewish works considered as members of an apocalyptic literature were not labelled as apocalypses in their time. In order to expand the argumentation, Collins quotes Morton Smith, who stated that "the literary form we call an apocalypse carries that title for the first time in the very late first or early second century A.D. From then on both the title and form were fashionable, at least to the end of the classical period" (1983, 19). This means that the term *apokalypsis* did not represent a literary genre when the Book of Revelation was written. With this in mind, the important issue for us here is that, as Collins affirms, despite the fact that the status of some early works is arguable, "[t]he ancient usage of the title *apokalypsis* shows that the genre apocalypse is not a purely modern construct (…)" (2016, 4). For the sake of rigour, however, it has to be noted that despite the broad consensus among scholars that affirm the existence of an apocalyptic literary genre, there also are some discordant voices. Richard A. Horsley, for example, rejects such genre because he finds "no defined boundaries between texts and other cultural expressions previously categorized as either apocalyptic or sapiential" (2007, 4). And yet, although this is a very respectable idea that has to be considered, we will stand here for the broad consensus that defends the existence of the apocalyptic genre.

characterized by mysterious revelations communicated by a supernatural figure that involve the ultimate defeat of evil, the judgment of the world, and the creation of a new heaven and new earth" (Wojcik 1997, 11). More concretely, contextualised in the Western culture, it can be defined as the Hebrew and Christian writings that, through a certain symbolism, express the suffering of these communities and expect, respectively, the messianic intervention, or the *Parousia*—the second coming of Christ. Hence, the apocalypse is a promise of a revolution—a return to a founding state—that implies spiritual rebirth.

Some scholars have rejected the importance of the eschatological aspect, arguing that the apocalypse should be defined only as revelation[53]. For Collins, however, although it might be true that some academics attached too much importance to eschatology, its role is essential in the definition of the apocalyptic genre (2016, 13). In this regard, Collins' own definition takes into account both revelation and eschatology: "'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (1979, 9).[54]

This definition can be applied to several Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, Persian, and Greco-Roman texts. Indeed, as Boyer remarks, the apocalyptic genre has a variety of complex sources: "Historians of the ancient world find mythic outlines of history, conflict between cosmic forces of good and evil (or order and chaos), and eschatological visions in many ancient literatures, including Ugaritic, Akkadian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Canaanite, Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman" (1992, 21). And with Wojcik we could also add Norse, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Mayan, African, and Native American myths

[53] As for example Christopher Rowland in *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (1982).

[54] Rosen criticises Collin's definition for being too loose and to restrictive at the same time: "it is too restrictive in that it suggests that without the revelatory element a work cannot be considered apocalyptic, and it is too loose because it does not take into account some of the vital components of the traditional story of apocalypse" (2008, xxii), such as the judgement. Although Rosen's critique could help us to expand the definition of the genre to include, for example, apocalyptic cinema, I consider that it is not a fair critique, because it does not seem to consider that Collins definition is about the apocalyptic literary genre, which, as the very name indicates, has to include a sense of revelation. As we will see when explaining the process of secularisation of the apocalypse, it is true that the apocalyptic production has evolved and, certainly, there are lots of examples of narratives without revelation that are considered apocalyptic due to the fact that the criterion has also changed. But, again, Collin's definition is about the traditional literary genre.

that “describe the destruction and transformation of the world, the struggle between the powers of good and evil, and the divinely determined destiny of humanity and the cosmos” (1997, 5). Having said that, and taking into account that, as explained from the beginning, the present dissertation is focused on the thought of one’s own death and its possible taboo in the Western culture, the following overview of the sources of the apocalyptic genre will be limited to ancient Greece, Judaism, and Christianity.

1.3. Sources of the apocalyptic genre

Although a diligent and methodical account of the history of the apocalyptic genre is beyond the scope of this research, I will offer a brief overview of its main sources. However, it is essential to mention that even though the emphasis in the apocalyptic literary genre is placed in general on a transcendent eschatology that implies judgment and retribution after the end of history and not on the end of history itself, I will focus my study in the destructive aspect of the end of history, because this is the element that, rather than the divine revelation itself, has mostly caught the attention of contemporary popular culture in general and cinema in particular. Certainly, contemporary apocalyptic narrative also implies some type of judgment, in the sense that the prospect of the end compels the individuals to review their lives. However, this usually does not imply a transcendent judgment after the end of times. Because of this, as Kylo-Patrick Hart and Annette M. Holba underline, the message that contemporary audiences receive “is one of fear about an ‘end of time’ rather than a message of hope for a new future” (2009, x). Having made this clear, let us visit some essential pillars of the apocalyptic tradition.

In ancient Greece, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* recites the Myth of the Ages. This poem divides human history into five periods: Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, Heroic Age, and finally, the Iron Age, which is the time of Hesiod. The Iron Age is characterised by labour, deprivation, perversion, and all sorts of evil. Thus this scheme depicts a general decline of worsening stages, except for the Heroic Age, when human beings are better than their predecessors. This decline will come to an end when Zeus, after a period of social upheaval and war, will destroy mankind. In order to indicate one of the essential characteristics of the apocalyptic genre, it is worth underlining that Hesiod was complaining about the crisis of his own age. Indeed, as David N. Freedman affirms, apocalyptic narrative is “born of crisis—from the start it was underground

literature, the consolation of the persecuted" (1969, 173). In this line, Jerome Shapiro also notes that, in apocalyptic texts, "mystical knowledge empowers the powerless by teaching how to transcend oppressive conditions and prevail over evil" (1999, 7). Even more, Shapiro considers that the apocalyptic genre is a vehicle for "expressing the struggle to make troubling events meaningful, exhorting the viewer to survive and self-actualize under oppressive conditions, and criticizing contemporary social conditions" (5). Additionally, Wojcik underlines that the "appeal of apocalypticism may also be attributable to the fact that such beliefs enhance the self-esteem of believers" (1997, 143), because they "are assured membership in an elect, righteous group that will be rescued from apocalypse and enjoy eternal life" (144). An additional argument posited by Elisabeth K. Rosen states that apocalyptic literature "has traditionally been written to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption" (2008, xii), underlining as Shapiro that it is also a medium for social criticism. From this perspective, the apocalyptic genre is deeply rooted in its historical context, which determines both its shape and content. As Boyer points out, taking into account that the apocalyptic narrative has always appealed "to those who see their era as a time of crisis, it is not surprising that the apocalypses that made their way into the canon and exerted the greatest continuing influence were those that emerged from periods of upheaval and danger, when the groups to whom they were addressed faced exile, persecution, or death" (1992, 23). Having said that, and as Wojcik notes in relation to America, although the association between the oppressed and the apocalyptic ideas "may have been true in the past, as the third millennium approaches, millions of Americans of all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels currently hold beliefs about apocalyptic prophecies" (1997, 7).

However, now we are examining the apocalyptic historical tradition. And in this regard, one of the most prosecuted groups in the history of human kind is the Jews. Hence, despite the fact that the apocalyptic literature has many sources, it is no coincidence that this genre achieved its peak with the Jewish tradition, which contains at least sixteen apocalyptic works (Boyer 1992, 22)—some of the most relevant being the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Daniel, and the Qumran Scrolls.[55] For Boyer, one basic clue to understand this prolific production might be found in Judaism's linear conception of

[55] Without forgetting that, as explained in a previous footnote, some academics affirm that these works were not labelled as apocalypses in their time.

time, which "encouraged an eschatological vision of history culminating in a series of cosmic end-time events" (22). And although Boyer claims that the Jewish apocalyptic narrative has its origins in the earlier prophetic texts,[56] he also affirms that it has its own distinctive elements—an opinion shared by Collins (2106, 12-13). According to Boyer, the Jewish apocalypticists created a genre that differentiates itself from the prophets insofar as, while the latter "viewed the struggle between good and evil as an individual and corporate matter; the apocalypticists saw it in cosmic terms" (1992, 23). That is, in Boyer's words, the apocalypticists took "entire sweep of history as their subject" (22) and "portrayed in metaphorical language the future of the Jews, the fate of Israel's enemies, and the ultimate destiny of humanity and the universe itself' (22).

Additionally, Collins distinguishes between two types of apocalypses in this tradition: one has "an interest in the development of history, while the other is marked by otherworldly journeys with a stronger interest in cosmological speculation" (2016, 7). The Book of Daniel stands as an example of the former, while the Book of Enoch exemplifies the latter. As we will see further on, this distinction will be especially relevant in the shift to contemporary apocalypticism. However, despite this dual classification, Collins notes that all the apocalypses have a hortatory aspect (2016, 7). This exhorting dimension is important to my research because, even though Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside" is not an apocalyptic text, it encourages the individual to think of death as his own death because, only in this way, death provides its retrospective power. In the end, the ultimate claim is that the perspective of one's own death has the capability to change the life of the individual. And, as it will be argued in the next section—which is focused on apocalyptic cinema—, I consider that the prospect of the absolute annihilation of humanity becomes a special occasion to think earnestly about one's own death.

Turning to the matter at hand, if apocalyptic narratives have an important role in Judaism, they appear to be no less decisive in Christianity. It must be noted, however, that academics debate the degree of such importance. As Collins notes, while some academics consider the apocalyptic narrative as the foundation of all Christian theology, others are reluctant to admit its formative importance in the early stages of Christianity,

[56] A claim denied by John Barton, who affirms that "the 'transition' from prophecy to apocalyptic' is the title of a process that never occurred" (1986, 200).

primarily because the apocalyptic narrative is often associated with fanatical millenarian expectation (2016, 1-2). That said, there is a broad consensus that recognises the important role of the apocalyptic ideas in the formation of Christianity and thus its enormous influence in Western though. In this regard, Boyer provides a brief synthesis of apocalypticism in the texts of Christian tradition (1992, 34), which include some Pauline epistles—I and II Thessalonians and I Corinthians—, the epistle called II Peter—which contains a description of the Earth's destruction by fire that was much used after the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—, the epistles referred as I and II John, and the eschatological discourse of Jesus to his disciples in the Gospels that has been called Little Apocalypse.

However, the most popular and influential Christian apocalypse is the final book of the Bible, the Revelation to John—which, as we have seen, was the first book in Jewish and Christian tradition explicitly introduced as an *apokalypsis* (1:1). Its content is well known—the seven seals, the four horsemen, the seven angels, the Beast, its fight with Christ, the Last Judgement—yet true diligence to its content is beyond the full scope of my research. However, to remark upon its importance, Charles P. Mitchell explains, every "generation of biblical scholars has interpreted and reinterpreted the many abstract and obscure references contained in the vision, usually in terms of their own time" (2001, xii). It must additionally be underlined that this apocalypse was written in an age of crisis, presumably towards the end of the first century AD. This was a difficult period for Christians in Asia Minor because Rome imposed on pain of death the cult of emperor worship in the eastern empire. Hence, this text was addressed to them. In the end, as we have seen, the apocalyptic genre provides meaning and a strong sense of community to the excluded, the persecuted, and the suffering. This is relevant for us because it shows the importance of the context of crisis in the formation—or better said, transformation—of the apocalyptic narrative in contemporary mass culture, and more specifically, in apocalyptic movies.

The production of apocalyptic texts continued during the Medieval Ages, with a special prominence of millenarianism. And although an historical account of this period goes beyond the reach of this dissertation, there is an essential feature of medieval apocalypticism that must be underlined, especially for its essential role in the future development of the genre. In this regard, DiTomasso offers an historical insight that helps us understand contemporary apocalypticism. As we have seen before, the Jewish

tradition had two kinds of apocalypses: historical and otherworldly. What DiTomasso points out is that, after an interruption of nearly 300 years, in the late fourth century the production of otherworldly apocalypses dramatically decreased while that of historical ones increased (2009, 226). Due to this shift,

> apocalypticism became associated exclusively with its temporal dimension, *i.e.*, the expectation for the end of the world and a new creation. This type of apocalypticism remained dominant for the next fifteen hundred years, and is known as *millenarianism* (var. *millennialism*). Central motifs such as the Messiah, the Antichrist, Armageddon, Gog and Magog, and the Last Judgment, although germinating in the biblical era, matured and ripened in the millenarian milieu of medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. (DiTomasso 2009, 226)

As will be explained further on, this historical change of apocalypticism that identifies it with millenarianism—that is, with the temporal dimension and the end of the world—is a moment in a long process that will crystallise in the twentieth century with the secularisation of the apocalypse. Through this process, the apocalyptic narrative tends to lose the moral element. Indeed, as Wojcik notes, the basic difference between religious and secular apocalyptic worldviews is that the latter usually lack the "sense of meaning and moral order" (1997, 4) and "are devoid of the component of worldly redemption and therefore tend to be characterized by a sense of hopelessness and despair" (4). In any case, we shall return to this issue when examining the secularization of the apocalypse and its penetration in popular.

To sum up this brief historical account, then, I want to reiterate once more that the aforementioned apocalyptic texts, among many others that have not been mentioned here, have enormously influenced not only biblical interpreters but also contemporary thought and cultural production in general. As Boyer claims, the "apocalyptic worldview, with its underlying assumption that human experience is moving toward a transcendent goal, profoundly shaped the Western view of history (1992, 45).[57] With this in mind, we will now observe how this apocalyptic imaginary materialised in the twentieth century in one of the most paradigmatic fears that contributed to the production of apocalyptic fiction: the atomic bomb.

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[57] From here, to demonstrate this statement, Boyer offers an historical account that goes beyond the limits of my research. However, the interested reader can consult it in pp. 46-112.

1.4. Contemporary nuclear dread

As we have seen when presenting the pervasiveness of the apocalypse, after World War II and due to the technological advances and the international geopolitical context, the apocalyptic tradition had its most extended expression in the dread of the atomic bomb.[58] In the end, it was the first time in history that mankind had the power to completely destroy the Earth, and the capacity to do so in the blink of an eye.[59] As Wojcik notes, popular conceptions after the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo (New Mexico) on July 16th 1945, "often implied that after the invention of the bomb, humanity could not reverse its inevitable path to destruction, and that scientists had created an uncontrollable weapon that would ultimately destroy the world" (1997, 101). Derrida also underlines this fact when writing that "[u]nlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent" (1984, 23). And in this same line, Boyer states that the nuclear bomb fundamentally altered our lives insofar as, contrary to most historical changes—which occur gradually—it "burst upon the world with terrifying suddenness" (1985, 4).

Indeed, a nuclear war is essentially and qualitatively different from the precedent ones in at least two ways. First, as Derrida stresses, it is a non-event, because it has never occurred (1984, 23); and in this sense "is fabulously textual" (23), insofar as "one can only talk and write about it" (23). And secondly, as mentioned, with nuclear power humankind faces for the first time the possibility to destroy the world in a heartbeat. This potential necessarily changes the way in which we perceive the world. In fact, supporting this thesis, Boyer suggests that "the atomic-bomb announcement was, indeed, a psychic event of almost unprecedented proportions" (1985, 22); and Robert Lifton postulates that the possibility of extinction brought by the nuclear threat has changed the perceptions about the continuity of life after one's own death, radically

[58] It must be noted that, at the same time, there was a strong current of opinion that saw the atomic bomb in positive terms from a military and political point of view. Thus the opinions related to the bomb had a strong charge of ambivalence. Wojcik underlines it stating that "[f]or some Americans, nuclear weaponry represented military superiority or the promise of a techno-utopian future; for others, the bomb evoked feelings of helplessness and fatalism about the future of humanity" (1997, 100).

[59] Henry Wallace, the Vice President of the United States between 1941 and 1945, was one of the voices that called the attention towards this fact. Wallace, who had a negative opinion of the bomb, said on the national radio that U.S. government's course with it might suppose "the extinction of man and of the world" (Alperovitz 1995, 326).

modifying what he calls "symbolic immortality" (1996, 18).[60] Therefore, it does not seem exaggerated to affirm that, as Wojcik writes, the creation of nuclear weapons has "fundamentally altered contemporary apocalyptic thought, fueling fears of global annihilation and evoking widespread fatalism about the future of humanity" (1997, 1). Examples that these fears still persist today in a greater or lesser degree are present with the dread that generates the possibility that some terrorist organisations might possess nuclear devices, the media attention that receives every North Korean nuclear test, and the international control over Iran's nuclear energy. In the end, as Derrida affirms, "no single instant, no atom of our life (of our relation to the world and to being) not marked today, directly or indirectly, by that speed race" (1984, 20)—the nuclear arms race.

Thus, to put it simply, with the creation of the atomic bomb, the continuity of history—which until World War II was taken for granted—was suddenly threatened. The end of the world became an always imminent possibility. And the awareness of this fact, together with the political situation during the Cold War, created a collective mind-state of nuclear fear. As Boyer explains, if until 1945 prophecy interpreters thought that the apocalypse would be caused by natural elements—such as comets or earthquakes—or by an eschatological event beyond our comprehension, after the atomic bomb "a chorus of preachers, Bible scholars, and paperback writers insisted that the Scriptures not only foretold atomic weapons, but also their eventual cataclysmic use" (1992, 115). Indeed, after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a great number of apocalyptic announcements flourished around the globe, especially in the United States. In this regard it has to be taken into account the essential role of the media in the configuration of this nuclear fear, because the news of the complete devastation of these two Japanese cities was rapidly spread worldwide. Because of this, the mushroom cloud became the paradigm of total annihilation and has been present in popular culture ever since. In fact, when we revisit statistics from the previous introduction to the contemporary pervasiveness of apocalypticism—consider here the 1995 American poll showing 61% of adults and 71% of teenagers believing that the world will come to an end—it is not surprising that the fear of the apocalypse penetrated into popular culture, which, at the same time, contributed to its spread. Indeed, as Wojcik explains (1997, 97), despite the fact that apocalyptic narratives have traditionally belonged to religious eschatologies,

[60] I will develop Lifton's theory further on when exposing the reasons for which I consider that apocalyptic movies can be an occasion to think earnestly in one's own death.

American secular culture of the last century has been a vehicle for conveying the apocalyptic imaginary. And it is precisely the atomic bomb that had a central role in this process of secularisation, because, in Wojcik's words, after the first test in Alamogordo and despite the biblical echoes that were generated by it, the apocalypse "was no longer a cosmic event executed by supernatural deities; it was now reduced to a mundane, technological absurdity" (103). Thus, in order to contextualise apocalyptic cinema, we will approach the subject of the secularisation of the apocalypse and its penetration into contemporary popular culture in the next section.

1.5. Secularisation of the apocalypse and penetration in popular culture

The vast production of apocalyptic movies about the atomic bomb during the Cold War is a paradigmatic example of one basic aspect for my research: the mass appeal of apocalyptic fiction. Certainly, apocalyptic narratives have become an essential part of contemporary popular culture across the globe. The cause and also the consequence of this mass appeal seem to be the escalation of apocalypticism in the last century. Indeed, as DiTomasso notes, "[t]oday, arguably more than at any other time in history, people are inclined to understand the world and their place in it through the lens of the apocalyptic worldview" (2014b, 2). If this worldview was a feature of marginalised groups that needed a narrative for consolation and self-affirmation against their oppressors, apocalypticism nowadays is a transversal and widespread phenomenon that reaches all kinds of backgrounds. Indeed, according to DiTomasso,

> apocalypticism can take root in almost any soil, providing that the climate is favorable. It transcends nearly every boundary—religious, cultural linguistic, political, social, or economic. It is neither low culture nor high culture. Apocalypticism can be espoused by the young and the old, by sectarians and centrists, by conservatives and liberals, by communists and capitalists, and by the religious and the irreligious. (DiTomasso 2014a, 475-476)

And in relation to our object of study, it has to be stressed that popular culture—and cinema in particular—has represented the apocalyptic fears in a vast array of formats. Even more, while biblical apocalyptic narratives were not labelled as fiction,

contemporary apocalyptic films are produced and received as fictional.[61] In this regard, Wikipedia's "List of Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic fiction"[62] constitutes an evidence of the growth of apocalypticism and its penetration in popular culture. This list, despite being incomplete, contains nearly one thousand apocalyptic works of different formats, including films, television series, novels, comics, poems, and popular songs among many others. DiTomasso underlines some relevant traits of this list that I will examine at present; the most relevant being the secularisation of the apocalypse as I will explicate further in due course.

The first trait outlined by DiTomasso illustrates that most of the elements of this list were created from the twentieth century onwards, and 80% of them date from after 1970, being English the major language—a fact that confirms the importance of the United States in the production and expansion of mass culture. Certainly, these data suggest a certain bias on the part of the contributors to reference works familiar to them. However, DiTomasso notes (2014a, 476), even acknowledging this possibility, the numbers are still noteworthy.

The next trait is that the items of the list indicate a chronology of apocalyptic fiction divided into three periods: the first includes the years before 1945, when apocalyptic fiction was represented by a relatively few novels and short fiction mostly about the decline of civilisation; the second extends from the end of World War II to the mid-1990s, being the nuclear holocaust the defining topic; and the third runs from the mid-1990s to the present. It is the latter period that is of most interest for my investigation insofar that it is the context of Trier's *Melancholia*, the movie that I will defend as a paradigmatic example of a certain type of apocalyptic cinema that constitutes an occasion for the earnest thought of death. According to DiTomasso's analysis, apocalyptic fiction of modern-day "is marked by the foregrounding of doomsday fears—economic, ecological, pestilential, cosmological—which, while present during the second period, were overshadowed by its atomic dimension" (477). The main events that created the conditions which contributed to this interest in the apocalypse are well-known: the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall,

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[61] DiTomasso underlines some exceptions in the field of contemporary apocalyptic science fiction which are neither fictional nor secular (2009, 231-232): contemporary biblical apocalyptic literature that has reinterpreted the old tradition in terms of pseudo-science; and Philip K. Dick's *VALIS* (2009, 232).

[62] Accessed August 21, 2016.

globalisation and the expansion of capitalism, the financial crisis, the environmental emergency, the conflicts in the Middle East, the rise of terrorism and the so-called War on Terror, the threat of global pandemics, and the emergence of the Internet, which has contributed to shape and spread contemporary apocalyptic speculation. To these should be added more recent events like the Syrian War, the refugee crisis, and the rise of the far-Right populisms in Europe and the United States. Hence, although it has been affirmed that apocalypticism today is a widespread phenomenon that reaches all varieties of backgrounds, it cannot be denied that the self-awareness of living in a time of crisis has an important influence on the apocalyptic worldview and thus in the production of apocalyptic narrative.

Finally, the last trait pointed out by DiTomasso is essential for my research, because it underlines an understanding of the term "apocalyptic" which is the one that will be used in this dissertation. As DiTomasso notes, the majority of the works of Wikipedia's list are not apocalyptic in the traditional sense as it has been defined. That is, they do not depict any type of revelation nor an eschatological salvation. Instead, they simply depict the obliteration of the world or our civilisation. Perhaps as result of a long process that, as explained, started in the late fourth century and exploded after World War II with the creation of the A-bomb, the notion of apocalypse has been recently identified with the end of the world. Indeed, as DiTomasso points out, "[s]ince 1945, 'apocalyptic' has increasingly come to refer to any planetary catastrophe or its anticipated effects, and a code work for any kind of impending disaster or radical change, real or perceived" (478). Therefore, although the traditional apocalyptic genre had an enormous influence in contemporary Western thought, in its transition to popular culture has experienced a process of secularisation. As noted before, the embryonic manifestation of this process can be found in the exclusive association of the apocalypse with its temporal dimension, which leaves aside any otherworldly, theological, or transcendent aspect. In other words, as DiTomasso underlines, secular apocalypticism "equates the transcendent reality with a divinized humanity, superhuman agencies, a force of nature or history, or anything else that does not require a supernatural explanation" (479). Therefore, although the apocalyptic genre still contains some of the elements of its religious tradition, it has experienced a process of secularisation and diversification that has emancipated it from its biblical origin. And despite the fact that apocalyptic cinema will be analysed more concretely further on, it is important to stress that this process of

secularisation it is also seen in the seventh art. According to Conrad Ostwalt, for example, although popular apocalyptic imaginary from modern-day is still influenced by the Jewish and Christian tradition, its contemporary cinematographic appropriation is not apocalyptic in the traditional sense, because, instead of depicting an unveiling or a revelation, it is focused on the eschatological element of the ancient apocalyptic texts (2000, par. 2). Additionally, John Walliss and James Aston also underline that apocalyptic films do not rely on biblical sources and shift "the etiology of the destruction away from supernatural forces—such as, for example, angels pouring the wrath of God upon the earth (Rev. 16)—towards natural phenomena and/or the consequences of human action" (2011, sec. 11).

It therefore appears that contemporary popular culture has eliminated the theological aspect and has put the spotlight into the destruction of civilisation, substituting the traditional transcendent agent for natural forces or a divinised humanity that might itself provoke the end of the world with war, climate change, pandemics, violation of natural laws, etc. Although some secular apocalyptic fiction contains biblical or supernatural elements, this content does not determine the narrative of the work in a theological manner: these elements might be the starting point of the plot—as in *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), a movie based on the so-called "Mayan apocalypse"—or something that adds content and recognises the influence of the apocalyptic tradition—as in *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995)[63], in which the hero, John Connor, has the same initials as Jesus Christ—; but the essence of the work remains secular. Certainly, this reveals that today one can find biblical elements in secular fiction and secular elements in modern biblical apocalypticism; and thus, as DiTomasso states, that contemporary apocalypticism is marked by "a synthetic syncretism" (2014a, 480). Ostwalt, who also notes that contemporary secular versions of the apocalypse often make use of religious language and images (2000, par. 11), considers that this is probably "the most telling comment on our secular society's appropriation of religion—while our culture is substantively secular, we legitimize it with a facade of religion" (par. 11).

Rosen calls this contemporary apocalyptic narrative strictly focused on endings and cataclysm "neo-apocalyptic" (2008, xv) and affirms that it is a pessimistic literature,

[63] A movie inspired in *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), a short film made almost entirely from still photos that depict a time travel experiment after the nuclear destruction of Paris. *12 Monkeys* substitutes the nuclear threat with a more contemporary fear: a terrorist attack with a deadly virus.

insofar as, while the traditional narrative offers an optimistic end that "clearly differentiates between those deserving punishment and those who deserve saving" (xv), contemporary visions assume that "humanity cannot rehabilitate itself" (xv) and that "there is nothing worth saving" (xv)—which is the very same fatalistic tone that we will see in *Melancholia*. However, Rosen suggests at the same time the existence of a certain form of syncretism when stressing that the old apocalyptic schemes still appear in secular literature because some people are "more attracted to the message of hope inherent in the traditional apocalyptic model" (xvi). For his part, Wojcik also underlines contemporary apocalyptic pessimism. According to him, this contemporary notion of a non-supernatural apocalypse—that is, an apocalypse generated by human or natural causes—differs from traditional apocalyptic narratives because, instead of offering faith in a upcoming and redemptive new realm, it usually depicts a meaningless, absurd, and nihilistic destruction (1997, 97). However, although this shift from an optimistic redemption to a pessimistic destruction might be certainly true in relation to apocalyptic beliefs or narratives in general, it is not accurate regarding cinematographic fiction. This is because, as shall be elaborated later on, pessimism seems to be a general tendency only after the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001. In any case, taking into account this process of secularisation, I would like to emphasise again that in the present dissertation, when writing about apocalyptic cinema, I will use the term "apocalyptic" in this desacralised sense characteristic of the period post-1945—namely not as a prophetic revelation in a theological framework, but as any catastrophe that threatens the world or human civilisation as we know it.

Concluding this section, and having clarified the previous point, it is relevant to note that some scholars argue that, in the transition from biblical to secular apocalypse, something has been lost. Amos Wilder, for instance, considers that in at least two senses, modern apocalyptic narrative is shallow in comparison with the ancient. Firstly, while the latter is an existential reaction generated by hierophany, the former is detached from its theological roots and only threatens human civilisation, which is not the same as the fate of all life (1971, 451). Therefore, in his opinion, modern secular apocalypse does not dwell on what he calls "the ultimate crisis" (451)—that is, the deep issues of life, death, and creation. And secondly, as we have just seen, Wilder also points out that secular apocalypse lacks "the phase of miraculous renovation and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation" (451). He

considers that a hierophany implies both an affirmation and a negation. From this perspective, then, the apocalypse that forgets the aspects of judgment and salvation and focuses the narrative only in the catastrophe is not truly apocalyptic.

For his part, DiTomasso argues that the evolution of Internet and the emerging of the new communication technologies have lead to the formation of the distinctive mode of apocalyptic speculation of the twenty-first century that he defines as "superflat" (2014b, 1). Indeed, as DiTomasso writers, if in the past "apocalyptic revelation was transmitted from prophet to prophetic community along restricted channels, it can now be broadcast across the full bandwidth of society" (3). Thanks to this, apocalyptic discussions have broken free from the theological framework and have become public and democratic, without restrictions based on gender, nationality, social status, or religious affiliation. For DiTomasso, the result of this technological revolution is that today's apocalypticism is "compositionally *synthetic*, constitutionally *syncretistic*, and conceptually *shallow*" (3), because it lacks conceptual depth and critical nuance. Although these characteristics were also typical of ancient apocalypses, DiTomasso considers that what makes contemporary apocalypticism "superflat" is the degree that they have achieved in the digital age. Therefore, just as Wilder, DiTomasso stresses that the traditional content of the apocalyptic narrative—its vocabulary and its symbols—have been uprooted from the context that used to provide their meaning.[64]

Although I do not intend to refute both Wilder and DiTomasso's observations—because, at least in a theological sense, contemporary apocalypticism certainly appears to be shallow in comparison with its ancient progenitor—, I would like to make a few comments. Firstly, it has to be underlined that DiTomasso writes about this "superflat" apocalypticism in a paper focused on apocalypticism as a social movement or ideology, not as apocalyptic fiction. Hence, despite the fact that apocalypticism as an ideology might be "superflat" in comparison to the ancient, this does not mean that all contemporary apocalyptic fiction also has to be "superflat". And secondly, regarding Wilder's argument, I do not consider that the shift away of its theological foundations implies necessarily that contemporary apocalypse is shallow. On the one hand, Wilder

[64] As an illustrative example, DiTomasso analyses the aforementioned "Mayan apocalypse" phenomenon, which, thanks to the new communication technologies, became the first global apocalypse. And it is certainly difficult to deny that this worldwide public discussion about the possibility of the apocalypse in 2012—based on an interpretation by doomsday believers of an ancient and obscure Mesoamerican calendar—suggest that contemporary secular apocalyptic imagination is "superflat".

seems to consider that every biblical apocalypse has existential deepness while every secular one is hollow, but for the sake of methodology this statement should be analysed case by case. On the other hand, as DiTomasso argues (2014a, 481), although secular apocalypse is unmoored from its theological roots, it can be moored to something existentially meaningful for contemporary human beings—as we shall see when analysing apocalyptic cinema. In other words, as DiTomasso argues, the contemporary conflation in popular culture of the apocalypse with the end of the world "[i]t has meaning; it is a sign of the times" (479). In this line, Earl Rovit affirms that the apocalyptic metaphor is literally our best model to observe the contemporary human condition, insofar as it expresses "our agonies and aspirations" (1968, 463). Thus although it is true that a narrative which in its origins offered hope for the future in an ordered universe, today has become a crystallisation of our disillusionment and fears in what it tends to be perceived, in Rosen's words, as a "chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe" (2008, xiv), perhaps this shift, expressing "a literally all-consuming, punishing anger" (xiv), reveals something fundamental about our era. And finally, specifically in relation to cinematic representations of the apocalypse, it does not seem accurate to defend that cinema has contributed to vulgarise the apocalyptic tradition, because this tradition was always addressed to common people. Ian Christie, for example, argues that it would be wrong to conclude that cinema "has merely vulgarised what was once scholarly or esoteric, since Apocalypse has been traditionally populist" (1999, 336). Hence, considering this, we must ask ourselves at this point for the reasons that explain the mass appeal of apocalypticism in contemporary popular culture.

1.6. Mass appeal of apocalypticism

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, apocalypticism is a constant throughout human history. Additionally, it is undeniable that contemporary apocalypticism in popular culture is, in DiTomasso's words, "old wine in new skins" (2009, 226), in the sense that Western culture recycles biblical and medieval narratives, so that this traditional content is "continually reified to new circumstances and fresh perspectives" (226). However, as explained before, the last century has seen a notorious escalation of apocalypticism. Hence, in view of this, to enquire about the possible reasons that might explain the mass appeal of apocalypticism will help me to

substantiate the defence of some apocalyptic movies as an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death.

To begin with, we must consider a historical feature of apocalypticism that has been already mentioned: the awareness of living in a time of crisis. And certainly we are living in an era that is perceived by many people as such: wars, terrorism, refugees, nuclear threats, political backdrop, global warming, natural disasters, increase of species loss, melting of the polar ice caps, etc. As Holba and Hart underline, "[a]mid this complex and very disconcerting backdrop, media offerings of all kinds bombard us continually with messages that the end of the world may be near" (2009, vii). Thus the mass appeal of apocalypticism is related to the fact that there is always a context that can be read as an apocalyptic crisis—as for example Donald Trump's victory in the American presidential election of 2016—, not to mention the importance of the new technologies of communication in the transmission of disasters, which contribute significantly to creating the awareness of living in a time of crisis. In this context, as previously mentioned, apocalyptic narratives can provide some type of consolation. Wheeler W. Dixon offers an interesting insight into this topic when affirming that the fascination for the apocalypse in contemporary popular culture comes from the fact that we suspect that, sooner or later, the apocalypse will happen, and thus the vision of the end can provide some sort of comfort. After pointing out several signs that indicate that we are living in a time of crisis, he suggests that the apocalyptic narratives are a sign of our exhaustion:

> We'd like to care, but it's too much effort. Bombarded by a plethora of competing media sources, contemporary humankind seeks some sort of refuge from the incessant images of destruction that flood our telescreens, without success. (...) Indeed, as a culture, we seem tired with life. As we enter the 21st century, there are signs of exhaustion everywhere. (...) Indeed, in all our contemporary cultural manifestations as a worldwide community, we seem "eager for the end" (...). And there is, after all, something comforting in the thought of imminent destruction. All bets are off, all duties executed, all responsibilities abandoned. (...) Equality will at last be achieved in the final seconds before Armageddon, when countries, boundaries, and political systems instantaneously evaporate, making a mockery of all our efforts at self-preservation. (Dixon 2003, 1-2)

In other words, the success of apocalypticism in popular culture might be explained because, as DiTomasso underlines, apocalypticism "offers a comprehensive,

comprehensible, and internally consistent way of understanding time, space, and human destiny" (2014a, 503). This way, it addresses deep emotional needs with simple answers—above all the inclination to organise the Universe with some type of meaning. In this line, Rosen also affirms that the fascination for the apocalyptic narrative can be explained by its capacity to organise "an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe" (2008, xi), serving as a "means by which to understand the world and one's place in it" (xi). Therefore, in a social context perceived as a crisis that dynamites meanings, the apocalyptic vision seems to offer explanation and comfort. In the end, despite the differences between ancient and contemporary apocalypticism, they have similar functions.

However, it does not seem enough to associate the actual success of apocalypticism with the climate of despair caused by the awareness of living in a time of crisis. As DiTomasso notes, although in the first half of the twentieth century mankind also experienced several catastrophic events—the flu pandemic, the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the Great Depression two World Wars, the Holocaust—, "the incidence of doomsday predictions or apocalyptic novels, films or radio show did not rise during these decades of horror and suffering" (2014a, 503). Today, in contrast, apocalyptic production in popular culture is blooming. How can this fact be explained?

On the one hand, I would argue that partitioning the twentieth century into two halves in order to explain the apocalyptic production does not take into account that, precisely, the catastrophes in the first half created the awareness of living in a time of crisis that crystallised in the second half. That is to say that while the twentieth century was not the first with catastrophes, it was the first with to disseminate them worldwide. And the accumulation of disasters and its international broadcast created progressively the conditions for the apocalypticism to flourish and spread. On the other hand, there might be a fundamental difference between the first and the second halves of the twentieth century: the rise of the awareness of our impotence to deal with certain catastrophic events. As DiTomasso puts it, "the social climate of today's world is one where global problems or equal magnitude are also accompanied, so it appears, by a sense that any solutions to them seem to be beyond the compass of human intellection and

imagination" (504). Mervyn F. Bendle[65] explains this pessimistic shift as "a Promethean to an Augustinian view of human nature and history, i.e., from a belief in human self-determination to a conviction of human sinfulness and weakness" (2005, par. 4). This change involves the loss of faith in reason, science, technology, and human progress in general, the conviction that we are living times of crisis, and the suspicion that we are inevitably heading for a catastrophe. Hence, this pessimistic point of view—which we will specifically approach when analysing apocalyptic cinema—could be one reason that explains the pervasiveness of the apocalyptic in contemporary popular culture—a pervasiveness that seems to indeed be a sign of the times.

Another possible cause for the successful proliferation of the apocalyptic narrative in popular culture is more prosaic: the entertainment value of the end of the world. Indeed, apocalyptic fiction—and specifically apocalyptic movies—have the potential to be spectacular in many aspects. In this sense, it is important to note that, for DiTomasso, the interest for spectacle in the form of catastrophes is a sign of the alleged shallowness of the vast majority of contemporary apocalyptic production (2014, 502). According to DiTomasso, this reveals an "adolescent world view" (502), because it "describes the world in uncomplicated terms of good and evil, offers simplistic responses to complex problems, and places responsibility for solving this problems elsewhere: God, an undefined force of nature, a divinized humanity, a super-human messiah-figure, an alien race, or artificial intelligence" (502). In this regard, I would argue that this typical critique to spectacle for being shallow is questionable in at least two senses. Firstly, as we have seen, apocalyptic narratives have been traditionally populist—that is, addressed to the common people and not to a select group of connoisseurs. Secondly, although DiTomasso's argument might perhaps be true in relation to blockbusters as *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), in the end it seems a gross generalisation that lacks a more refined classification of apocalyptic fiction. His statement would require a more detailed exam of each particular case, insofar as there are lots of apocalyptic fictions that face deep existential problems. Thus to approach this issue, I will offer in the next section a more precise definition of apocalyptic movies which will hopefully allow me

[65] Following Albanes' *End-time Visions* (1998), Baumgartner's *Longing for the End* (1999), Katz and Popkins' *Messianic Revolution* (1999) and Weber's *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs Through the Ages* (1999).

to defend that some such movies do not only manifest an adolescent world view, but also constitute an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death.

DiTomasso offers another factor that might explain the proliferation of apocalypticism in contemporary popular culture, which is the growth of science fiction—a genre that, if between the 1930s and the 1960s was limited to fan-oriented pulp magazines, today has a significant presence in every medium (2014, 502). And this growth is important for our argument because science fiction has a predilection for utopias, dystopias, scientific dangers, alien contact, and other non-supernatural stories that have the potential to create the context for human extinction. Science fiction, then, fits well with apocalyptic narrative in its secular version. Even more, for DiTomasso, apocalyptic science fiction is one of the central manifestations of secular apocalypticism, because it preserves "the central axiom of the worldview: the existence of an ulterior yet ultimate reality" (2009, 224). The film *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999) would be a perfect example of this, insofar as it takes place in a world divided between a virtual reality and a true plane of existence. At the same time, being clearly Christological—in the sense that its main character is a messianic figure—, *The Matrix* also shows the influence of apocalyptic tradition in contemporary science fiction. As DiTomasso's notes, due to "its long-standing concern with the approach of the eschaton, Christianity prepared the ground for science fiction" (226).

All this said, apart from the aforementioned arguments—the awareness of living in a time of crisis, the comfort that apocalyptic narratives can provide in this context, the interest that apocalyptic narratives have historically aroused, and its usually spectacular nature—, I will intend to introduce another possible reason that might explain, from a philosophical point of view related to Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety and the earnest thought of death, the contemporary mass appeal of apocalypticism. In this sense, there are two essential elements of my thesis that I will address in the following section: firstly, that, regarding the occasions that can stimulate the thought on one's own death, there is a qualitative difference between those that depict the death of one or many individuals and those that depict the annihilation (or the menace of it) of mankind; and secondly, that apocalyptic movies, just as philosophy itself, seem to have the potential to push us to think the unthinkable. However, prior to elaborating upon these arguments, first we must go deeper into the object of study of this research—namely, apocalyptic cinema.

2. Apocalyptic cinema

2.1. Cinema as an apocalyptic medium

In order to define my object of study, it must be remembered that apocalyptic cinema will be here understood as the cinema that depicts any form of massive destruction of the Earth and/or humanity, or at least the menace of it. It will not be understood as a prophetic revelation connected to a religious eschatology, because, in like manner to the rest of apocalyptic fiction, apocalyptic cinema has been predominantly secularised. In other words, using Mitchell's definition, I will consider apocalyptic films as "a motion picture that depicts a credible threat to the continuing existence of humankind as a species or the existence of Earth as a planet capable of supporting human life" (2001, xi). And just as Mitchell, even though post-apocalyptic movies will be sometimes mentioned here for concrete purposes, I will understand them as a separate genre.[66]

Having defined my object of study, we must go one step further to the aim of this investigation remarking that there seems to be general agreement on the idea that cinema has always been a privileged medium to convey the apocalyptic imaginary. Indeed, from *Verdens undergang* (August Blom, 1916) to the recent *10 Cloverfield Lane* (Dan Trachtenberg, 2016), cinema has historically explored the apocalypse in many variations. Although my dissertation does not offer a systematic catalogue or taxonomy of apocalyptic movies, it is worth noting that Mitchell provides a useful classification. According to him, apocalyptic films can be classified into seven categories: religious or supernatural; celestial collision; solar or orbital disruption; nuclear war and radioactive fallout; germ warfare or pestilence; alien device or invasion; and scientific miscalculation (2001, xii). Moreover, he adds a miscellaneous category that includes some rare films that do not fit into this list. And finally, he affirms that there are some movies—such as *Virus* (1980)—that integrate features from several categories.

Some examples will help us to see the variety of secular forms of contemporary cinematic apocalypse that can be explained through Mitchell's classification—plus

[66] Although the dividing line between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies is not always crystal clear, Mitchell considers that the condition that has to define the former is that the threatening event is presented within the story (2001, xi). In other words, if the event predates the narration, the film is post-apocalyptic.

other categories and subcategories that I have added in order to provide a more nuanced categorisation: meteors and other planets threatening Earth as in *La fin du monde* (Abel Gance, 1931), *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Maté, 1951), *La morte viene dallo spazio*, Paolo Heusch, 1958), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), and *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Lorene Scafaria, 2012); solar hazards as in *Solar Crisis* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1990), *Where Have All The People Gone?* (John Llewellyn Moxey, 1974), *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (Val Guest, 1961), and *Sunshine* (Danny Boyle, 2007); environmental disasters as in *Gli Ultimi giorni di Pompeii* (Mario Caserini and Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1913), *Deluge* (Felix E. Feist, 1933), *The Core* (John Amiel, 2003), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004); extraterrestrial invaders as in *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), *Target Earth* (Sherman A. Rose, 1954), *Kronos* (Kurt Neumann, 1957), *The Day of the Triffids* (Steve Sekely, 1962), *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton, 1996), the remake of *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), the comedy *The World's End* (Edgar Wright, 2013), and *Independence Day: Resurgence* (Roland Emmerich, 2016); monster menaces—sometimes due to science misuse—as in *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), *Goijira* (Ishiro Honda, 1954), *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007), *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), and *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2013); pestilence, germ warfare, and infectious pandemic diseases—which often imply terrorism, human-made threats or science misuse—as in *No Blade of Grass* Cornel Wilde (1970), *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1996), *Carriers* (Àlex and David Pastor, 2009), and *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011); zombie outbreaks—which are often a subgroup of the last category—as in *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) and its remake of the same title (Zack Snyder, 2004), *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985), *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007), *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013); weapons of mass destruction, especially focused on the nuclear bomb, as in *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959), *Fail Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), *The War Game* (Peter Watkins, 1965), *The Day After* (Nicholas Meyer, 1983), *Threads* (Mick Jackson, 1984), *When the Wind Blows* (Jimmy Murakami, 1986), and *Miracle Mile* (Steve De Jarnatt, 1988); and, finally, other variations and combinations of similar themes—Mitchell's miscellaneous category—as in *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), *Week-end* (Jean-

Luc Godard, 1967), *Offret* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986), *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008), *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011), and *Los Últimos Días* (David and Àlex Pastor, 2013). It could also be added the subcategory of post-apocalyptic movies, as *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (Ranald MacDougall, 1959), the *Mad Max* series, *Le Dernier Combat* (Luc Besson, 1983), *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991), *Waterworld* (Kevin Reynolds, 1995), *The Postman* (Kevin Costner, 1997), *Le Temps du Loup* (Michael Haneke, 2003), the cinematic version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), and *The Book of Eli* (The Hughes brothers, 2010). Lastly, it is also worth mentioning *The Last Man on Earth* (Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow, 1964) and *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971), the earlier cinematic versions of Matheson's novel *I Am Legend*, which are more clearly post-apocalyptic than Lawrence's recent adaptation.

Thus we must ask ourselves what is the explanation for this massive and diversified production of apocalyptic films. Certainly, one reason might be the mass appeal of the apocalypticism in general that has been examined before. However, cinema seems to have a special relationship with apocalyptic narratives. Indeed, according to Bendle, "[c]inema, and to a lesser extent television, are uniquely suited as vehicles for this apocalyptic imagination, in both its secular and religious forms, especially in facilitating a clear narrative structure and the range of spectacular imagery and other special effects that are required to represent the end of the world and the events surrounding it" (2005, par. 24). And for Walliss and Aston, simply put, cinema has been the most popular medium for conveying the apocalypse (2011, sec. 6). According to them, apocalyptic cinema is

> a popular and pervasive form of cultural expression, never venturing far from our screens and consciousness (perhaps as Robin Wood suggested of the horror film, because it is part of our "collective nightmare.") If this is indeed the case, then apocalyptic cinema, with its spectacular and pessimistic narratives of modern-day fears and anxieties, is ideally suited to comment on and interpret the "dreams, nightmares, fantasies and hopes" of the present historical period. (Walliss and Aston 2011, sec. 31-32)

One of the reasons that might explain this close relationship between cinema and the apocalyptic imagination—aside from more prosaic ones, as the connection between the economic interest of film majors and the popular attraction for spectacle and special effects—is the fact that the purpose of the apocalyptic genre has always been to provide

some type of meaning to a chaotic, painful, and unfair existence, and perhaps cinema, for its very nature, is a more suited language to transmit this meaning to contemporary public. In the end, as Ostwalt explains, cinema itself as a medium constitutes a way to provide meaning:

> The apocalyptic model allows us to make sense of our lives by providing a means by which to order time. By placing the life drama in relation to a beginning, a middle, and an end, the apocalypse provides coherence and consonance—it makes time trustworthy, especially when plot points toward the future, as it does in the apocalypse. (…) The need to organize time, to make sense of human time, gives rise to the modern apocalypse, and cinematic presentation of this apocalyptic drama is a natural medium for this ordering process, because the motion picture itself is nothing more than a meaningful arrangement of pictures. (Ostwalt 1995, 61-62)

Christie also points out cinema's potentiality to convey the traditional apocalyptic imaginary. When introducing the apocalypse in popular cinema, he asks himself if, despite the frequent use of the word "apocalypse" in popular entertainments, there is a possible relation between them and the tradition of eschatological image-making (1999, 320). And his answer is affirmative, especially when taking into account the beginning of cinema in the 1890s "and the extent to which this in itself reflected a new climate of apocalypticism" (320). In summary, Christie's thesis is that, in the same way that the Book of Revelation was essential for the genre of apocalyptic literature, the birth and development of cinema as a mass medium contributed to create a popular fascination with the apocalypse, offering "more challenging apocalypses" (338). This is explained both because of the content of this cinematic apocalyptic narrative and the shape of the medium itself. Regarding the content, it must be considered that, at the beginning of its development, cinema contributed decisively to depict catastrophic events such as the First and Second World Wars. And this impregnated cinema with an apocalyptic tone. Regarding the shape, cinema itself represents a constant materialisation of the apocalypse. In Christie's words, "every time a screen lights up, a fictive world is born; and when it is extinguished, that world dies, if temporarily" (338). From this perspective, every time a movie ends, a whole world ends. As Peter Szendy puts it, perhaps the only story that cinematic apocalypses portray is the life and death of the filmic image: "They narrate the end of the cineworld" (2015, 48).[67] Because of this, for

[67] Szendy declares that the concept "cineworld" is borrowed from Nancy's "Cinefile et cinemonde," *Trafic*, no. 50.

Szendy, “cinema, *after all*, is perhaps, each time unique, the apocalypse” (55). In his beautiful elegy to Althusser, Derrida writes: “What is coming to an end, what Louis is taking away with him, is not only something or other that we would have shared at some point or another, in one place or another, but the world itself, a certain origin of the world—his origin, no doubt, but also that of the world in which I lived, in which we lived a unique story” (2011, 115). This story, he continues, is irreplaceable, and even if its meaning could not have been the same for the two friends, it is the *only* world for them; and with Althusser’s death, “it sinks into an abyss from which no memory—even if we keep the memory, and we will keep it—can save it (115). Thus in a similar way that the death of every living thing is every time an end of the world, every movie is also a certain origin of the world in which we live for a while, a unique story that, when it ends, puts an end to that world. Because of this, as Szendy affirms it, every film is a “stream of testamentary images” (2015, 60). It is said that when an individual dies, his life passes before his eyes as a procession of images. Therefore, it seems quite clear that cinema as a medium embodies an eschatological message. In this regard, it is worth remembering that, when this new technique was presented, the moving images were sometimes frightening for the audiences and placed on the table metaphysical questions, such as the possibility to see on the screen people who have been dead for a long time. And although this potentiality was sometimes interpreted as the realisation of the old Frankensteinian ideal of dominating nature and triumphing over death,[68] the truth is that, on the contrary, it was clear from the beginning that cinema faces us to the inexplicability of death.

Hence, both content and shape helped to create the impression that film was essentially an apocalyptic medium and a well suited art to communicate the apocalyptic imaginary. As Christie explains, “[i]n an era of pervasive Symbolism, the filmic image readily evoked a limbo world and cinema itself had an apocalyptic aura, heralding both the end of art as it had been known, and a strange new form of mechanized afterlife” (1999, 321). Thanks to this, film has contributed to actualise the traditional apocalyptic

[68] As Noël Burch notes, even though Louis Lumière “never fell victim to the lyrical dream of analogical representation, the mythology of victory over death” (1990, 20), his cinematograph was “recruited at the outset and in the footsteps of the Diorama and the Stereoscope in the service of the Frankensteinian ideology” (20) which has always been pursuing “the supreme fantasy: the suppression of death” (21). It must not be forgotten that cinema was often seen as a technical answer to the scientific necessity of describing reality analytically. In fact, one of its main appeals was its capacity to describe motion.

imaginary for contemporary audiences, and therefore, as suggested, has played an important role in secularising and actualising it. As Christie argues,

> [t[he feelings of crisis, decadence and transition characteristic of modernism have been powerfully relayed by cinema (…). In an increasingly secular and globalized society, it could be argued that any shared sense of eschatology now results from the broad following for such cycles of popular fantasy cinema as *Planet of the Apes*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Mad Max*, and Romero's *Dead* trilogy. These have become the syncretic mythology of our time. (Christie 1999, 338)

In a similar line, Ostwalt notes the fundamental role of cinema during the last decades in experimenting with new causes of the end after the rejection of supernatural forces (2000, par. 12). In other words, as Christie, Ostwalt considers that "popular film apocalypses reinterpret the cataclysmic threat in terms of contemporary fears and projections" (1998, par. 4). That is, instead of the classic battle between good and evil, contemporary celluloid apocalypses are often focused on desacralised agencies such as environmental catastrophes and alien invasions (par. 4). And this feature is essential insofar as it leads to a vision of an avoidable apocalypse, either thanks to a human messiah or through a collective human effort. Walliss, who also explores this idea, states that, in contrast to ancient apocalyptic texts, contemporary films reject the inevitability of the apocalypse "and posit an end that is both natural and, crucially, *avoidable* through human agency" (2014, 75). In contrast to supernatural forces, nuclear threats and asteroids can be somehow avoided. However, as it shall be argued in the following section, although this optimism might be certainly present in apocalyptic movies shot before 9/11, the general tendency post-9/11 is a growing pessimism.

Finally, for the sake of completeness, it must be underlined that this process of secularisation or desacralisation does not imply that religion is completely absent from contemporary apocalyptic movies, nor that biblical apocalyptic films are inexistent—as Mitchell's category of religious or supernatural films indicates. For Walliss, some apocalyptic films, despite removing the divine presence, "do not shy away from drawing, both overtly and covertly, on the language, symbolism or ideas found within apocalyptic texts" (76). In the end, according to him, there are arguments to defend that "within a culture steeped in Christianity, it is impossible to talk about the destruction of the planet and/or mass destruction of humanity and *not* invoke on one level or another the spectre (and it is often only a spectre) of Christian apocalypticism" (77). In this

regard, I have already noted the messianic role of Neo, the main character in *The Matrix*, not to mention some of the other religious references that can be found in the movie[69]. Furthermore, just to put another example, in both *Deep Impact* and *2012*, the project to save humanity refers to Noah's Ark, and in the former the mission to destroy the asteroid is names "the Messiah Mission". Indeed, there are a lot of examples of religious symbolism in apocalyptic movies. However, as Walliss and Aston observe, in these films religion is either sentimentalised as "a form of 'social crutch' or civil religion typically invoked at a moment of grave crisis and then at a point where disaster is averted" (2011, sec. 16) or its language is used to describe secular elements (sec. 16). And despite the existence of some films inspired in a biblical apocalypse,[70] the tendency of apocalyptic films—as the tendency of contemporary apocalyptic fiction in general—seems to be secularisation.

2.2. Post-9/11 pessimistic turn

We have seen that the apocalypse has always been a major topic for the film industry. However, as Walliss documents, in the last decade of the twentieth century there was "an outpouring of millennial fears and expectations quite unprecedented in the modern world" (2014, 71) that had an important influence in film production. As noted, there are several events that contributed to create this apocalyptic fear, such as the awareness of the climate change, the AIDS epidemic, the threat of global pandemic, the computer Millennium Bug, and the violent actions of some apocalyptic cults. For Rosen, all these crises "contribute to a growing sense of uncertainty about the survival of our planet and the viability of our future on it" (2008, xix). Perhaps one of the most decisive events was the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 in the U.S., which had a deep and decisive impact not only on international geopolitics but also on mass culture. According to Walliss and Aston, "the connection of 9/11 to apocalyptic imagery was exacerbated by both premillennium interest in apocalyptic ideas and religious speculation about the resonance 9/11 had on various apocalyptic prophecies, ranging

[69] The nickname of Neo's closest friend and future lover is "Trinity", and the hovercraft of his mentor is called "Nebuchadnezzar", as the Chaldean king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, who appear in the Book of Daniel and who was responsible for the destruction of the city and the Temple of Jerusalem, together with the deportation of much the Jewish population of Judea to Babylon.

[70] As *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) and its sequels—*Damien: Omen II* (Don Taylor, 1978) and *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (Graham Baker, 1981)—, *The Seventh Sign* (Carl Schultz, 1988), *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999), *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999), *Left Behind* (Vic Sarin, 2000), and *The Omega Code* (Rob Marcarelli, 1999).

from the Book of Revelation to the quatrains of Nostradamus" (2011, sec. 5). That is to say, 9/11 contributed to amplifying an apocalyptic imaginary that has always been present in our culture and which stems from the apocalyptic literary tradition. And although this imaginary crystallised in a multiplicity of different areas and formats, cinema has always been a preferential medium for conveying it. According to Walliss and Aston,

> [t]his is especially pertinent post-9/11 where eyewitness accounts on the day directly connected the events to cinematic referents by saying that the destruction of the Twin Towers seemed "just like a movie." In drawing upon cinema as a means of interpreting the attacks, public testimony situated Hollywood representations of the apocalypse as a primary and accessible site with regards to how people made sense of and responded to the events of 9/11. (Walliss and Aston 2011, sec. 6-7)

This does not mean that apocalyptic movies after 9/11 frequently had terrorism as their main theme, but rather that Hollywood apocalyptic movies have represented a vast array of fears and social transformations created by 9/11. This also speaks to film's capacity through media representations to make us re-experience some traumatic events, something that can be explained through Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan's concept of "transcoding". For them,

> [f]ilms transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. That construction occurs in part through the internalization of representations. (Kellner and Ryan 1988, 12-13)

In this sense, it can be stated that apocalyptic movies transcode post-9/11 socio-political situation and social imaginary into narratives of catastrophes of all types, from environmental disasters to alien attacks. In other words, apocalyptic movies reinterpret the apocalypse in terms of contemporary fears. Therefore, the events of 9/11 modified the modes of representation of the apocalyptic imaginary. Certainly, there has been some movies that depict the attacks and thus that deal directly with 9/11, the most significant being *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006). But at the same time, as Walliss and Aston point out, through the process of transcoding "apocalyptic Hollywood narratives have projected fears and anxieties circulating around 9/11 more successfully in that they were able to avoid the traumatic

nature of direct representation" (2011, sec. 12). This way, apocalyptic movies become an occasion for the public to deal with the panic that apocalyptic threats generate. Indeed, Hollywood science fiction movies have historically cultivated allegories as a means of coming to terms with traumatic events.[71] This could seem a similar process to that of sanitation of death through representation criticised by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". However, I consider that, in fact, some apocalyptic movies might function as Kierkegaard's discourse, becoming an occasion to think earnestly on death, showing to the spectator his personal dramatic relation with it. I will return to this issue further on when offering the central arguments of this investigation.

Turning to the matter in hand, one of the key characteristics of post-9/11 apocalyptic cinema is its pessimism. The fears engendered by 9/11 were projected into popular culture, especially into apocalyptic cinema, and the general tendency was to crystallise them into pessimistic narratives. This feature contrasts with apocalyptic movies shot during the 1990s, in which, as Ostwalt notes, the traditional fatalism of western apocalypticism was toned down (2000, par. 3). Indeed, as noted, the cinematic representation of millennial doom in pre-9/11 transmits the idea that the apocalypse can be avoided through a combination of science, technology, and human effort. As it has been already pointed out, this effort often takes the form of individual heroism—as for example in *Armageddon*, in which Bruce Willis saves humanity bombing a meteor that was heading towards the Earth[72]. In Ostwalt's words, the cinematic apocalypse of the 1990s depends frequently "on a human messiah who battles nature, aliens, the 'other' in a variety of forms" (par. 3). And as Walliss explains (2014, 79-80), even if sometimes the apocalyptic menace comes from the misuse of science and technology, the solution is frequently found in an alleged good use of them—as in *12 Monkeys*, in which scientists from the future send a convict back in time in order to stop a scientist that tries to release a lethal virus. Thus, in contrast to Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*—a film in which, as we shall see, science and human knowledge appear to be useless—, in pre-

[71] *Cloverfield* might be a paradigmatic example of this, insofar as it substitutes the terrorist attacks for a huge monster that devastates Manhattan. As Walliss and Aston explain, this film contains "numerous shots of falling skyscrapers, clouds of ash, dust and general debris billowing down lower Manhattan streets and avenues and several characters asking 'is it a terrorist attack?' as the first signs of the monster's destruction become known" (2011, sec. 13). This way, *Cloverfield* constitutes and archetypical post-9/11 movie that provides "both a mechanism to comment on post-9/11 fears and a way of crudely appropriating 9/11 imagery" (sec. 13).

[72] Besides *Armageddon*, it could also be mentioned films as *Independence Day* and *The Matrix*, which present a macho messiah (Will Smith and Keanu Reeves, respectively) who saves humanity using a combination of science, technology, and muscle.

9/11 films the tendency is to overcome the fatalism of religious apocalypticism and to trust in the ability of mankind to avoid its own extinction.

This pre-9/11 optimism is therefore related to the process of secularisation, which contributed to creating a new apocalyptic narrative that substituted an omnipotent God for a quasi-omnipotent humanity that can assure its own survival. According to Ostwalt,

> [w]ith a sacred worldview, one that dichotomizes the transcendent realm and the world, cosmic cataclysm initiated from another realm to destroy the world makes sense—it is almost inevitable. However, in a secular, contemporary world, we have difficulty conceptualizing world destruction from the hands of a sovereign God. Part of the process of secularization involves raising humanity to the sovereign level—we are in charge of our own destiny—and this has even spilled over into our ideas of the apocalypse. (Ostwalt 1998, par. 19)

As noted in relation to the nuclear bomb, in the twentieth century we realised for the first time that we have the power to provoke the end of the world. Because of this, as Ostwalt points out, "is only natural that human beings also believe they can stop the end" (1995, 62). Perhaps this might explain that "modern apocalypse has replaced a sovereign God with a sovereign humanity, and instead of providing hope for an eschatological kingdom, the cinematic apocalypse attempts to provide hope for this world" (62). For Ostwalt, this is one of the most characteristic differences between ancient apocalyptic literature and contemporary apocalyptic imaginary: "the modern apocalyptic imagination removes the end of time from the sacred realm of the gods and places the apocalypse firmly in the grasp and control of humanity" (1995, 63). From this perspective, as Ostwalt explains, the apocalyptic message is revised in a way that remains meaningful for contemporary secular societies (63).

However, as mentioned previously, this optimism in apocalyptic movies vanished with the change of millennium, especially after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Indeed, in a large part of post-9/11 movies, destruction is neither prevented nor avoided. In fact, in some of them, the plot insinuates that events might even get worse, as we can see in the hopeless post-apocalyptic scenario depicted in *The Road*. I shall present in the following several manifestations of this pessimism.

One of the most important characteristics of post-9/11 apocalyptic movies is the loss of faith in science, technology, public authorities, and human abilities in general. As Walliss and Aston stress, "post-9/11 movies posit scenarios where science, technology

and the government are, at best, powerless against the apocalyptic forces, and at worse willingly complicit with them" (2011, sec. 15). Bendle also notes that contemporary apocalyptic films emphasise "the impotence, ignorance and incompetence of the police and other institutions, none of whom are capable of comprehending the danger or responding constructively to it; they are simply swept aside and usually massacred" (2005, par. 31). In *The Day After Tomorrow*, for instance, scientific predictions regarding a climate change in the form of a sudden global freeze are inexistent or incorrect; and when it comes to salvation, in contrast to *Armageddon*, there is neither any public authority intervention nor any messiah that could solve the apocalyptic threat. Another such example is the ending of *The Happening*, which announces the imminence of humanity's annihilation. After a massive wave of suicides located in a part of the U.S. that suddenly stops without any apparent reason, the final sequence of the movie suggests that this very same phenomenon is about to happen worldwide in a definitive form that will exterminate humanity. Additionally, this film also expresses the mistrust against science and a sense of deserved punishment for our application of it, because the wave of suicides is provoked by nature itself as a defence mechanism against human beings and their negative impact on Earth.

This loss of faith in humanity leads to a sense of helplessness, as it can be seen in *I Am Legend* and *Cloverfield*. In the former, although the ending offers some hope[73], the government and the military show themselves impotent to control a pandemic crisis that wipes out almost the entire humanity—something that we also find in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. Furthermore, as Walliss and Aston underline, the relationship between the infected and the non-infected in *I am Legend* is ambiguous and "complicates the strict binary constructs of the Self and the Other, good and evil, and normal and abnormal that have come under threat post-9/11" (2011, sec. 29). And regarding *Cloverfield*, when the military force finally stops the monster that attacks New York, Manhattan is already devastated. In fact, to see the difference between pre-9/11 optimism and post-9/11 pessimism it is useful to compare *Cloverfield* with *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998). In both movies, the end suggests the possibility that the event could be repeated. However, the atmosphere is quite different. While *Godzilla*

[73] Although there is an alternative ending, this one also offers a prospect of survival. For both the original and alternative versions see, *I Am Legend*: Special Edition DVD, directed by Francis Lawrence (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007).

suggests that the military has the power to destroy any further monster, *Cloverfield* transmits the idea that the military is powerless again such threats. In other words, while the plot of the former is a confirmation of human power, the second is a desperate struggle of a helpless humanity against an inevitable defeat.

Another characteristic of this post-9/11 apocalyptic pessimism is both a critique of our everyday life and contemporary socio-political situation, two aspects that here I will consider as two sides of the same coin—and which derive directly from the apocalyptic literature. In contrast, as Bendle notes, the tendency in Cold War apocalyptic films was to represent everyday life "as invaluable in its innocence and simplicity" (2005, par. 30), something whose loss would be tragic. But this valorisation of the social order changed after 9/11, when, as Walliss and Aston stress, apocalyptic movies started to criticise systematically the status quo and the socio-political order (2011, sec. 23).

As an example of this shift, Bendle mentions *On the Beach*, a film that follows the last and fatal footsteps of the few remaining survivors of a nuclear war that will soon extinguish life on Earth. The representation of the everyday life of those human beings that are about to face an inevitable death values the importance of family and friendship, showing them playing, fishing, singing, and eating together just before they commit suicide with pills or injections that the government has prepared for them. Also paradigmatic is the ending of *Fail Safe*, in which a series of still shots with a fast zoom-in show a variety of citizens in their ordinary activities just before a nuclear attack, insinuating the good things that are about to be lost.

Additionally, the beginning of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956)—the original film adaptation of Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers*—portrays a small and unified American community in times of the post-war prosperity that will be put on the verge of collapse by an alien invasion of emotionless plant spores that supersede human beings. Shot during the Cold War and interpreted as a metaphor of the dangers of a communist society, this movie presents the American way of life as the one that deserves to be preserved. And finally, another example could be *Panic in Year Zero!* (Ray Milland, 1962), which depicts the collapse of society due to a nuclear war and starts with the portrait of a prototypical suburban, innocent, and happy family that ignores the upcoming catastrophe. At the end of the film, the encounter of the survivors with a military patrol, together with the closing title "There must be no end—only a

new beginning", offers to the spectator the promise of the restoration of the missed social order.

In contrast, post-9/11 apocalyptic films criticise, scorn, and despise everyday life. As Bendle notes, "[t]he prevailing system of values has shifted radically: families, suburbs, public and private institutions are devalorized, criticized, even ridiculed" (2005, par. 31). Moreover, Bendle also remarks that in post-9/11 apocalyptic films everydayness "is also frequently represented as the deadening realm of unfreedom, conformity, alienation, tedium, repression and exploitation, based on superficial relationships, facile ideas and transient commitments" (par. 35). *The Matrix* is again a good example of this, in the sense that its critique of the virtual reality that the enslaved human beings perceive as their everyday life is, after all, a critique of contemporary Western life—to the extreme that some liberated humans, incapable of confronting the real world, prefer to remain as a slaves in order to continue living in a pleasant but fictional reality. In this regard, Bendle underlines that in contemporary cinema "masses are depicted as mindless, barely functional vermin, ready to tear each other apart in a desperate rage for survival" (par. 41).[74] Hence, the representation of everyday life is a key element to observe the pessimism in post-9/11 films.

As noted, this pessimism is also materialized in a more or less intense socio-political critique. In contrast, pre-9/11 films tend to valorise the status quo and are usually replete with values such as heroism, patriotism, responsibility, respect, honesty, courage, and integrity—something that, as explained, tends to crystallise in the figure of a messianic saviour or a group of them. In this sense, the presidential discourse before the final attack against the alien invaders in *Independence Day* is especially paradigmatic, insofar as it heightens the unity of mankind.[75] And just to put another example, in the case of *Deep Impact*, it is not just that bypasses any critique to the socio-political situation, but that its narrative also affirms that Western—and primarily American—way of life is worth saving. This can be seen when the government uses underground caves to protect qualified professionals in order to preserve the status quo

[74] I would put contemporary zombie films such as *28 Days Later* and *World War Z* as an example of this, but the fact is that this feature is a constant in all zombie films, not just exclusive of post-9/11 ones.

[75] Scene no. 7: "Independence Day," *Independence Day*, 1996, DVD, directed by Roland Emmerich (Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2000).

in a post-apocalyptic scenario that appears to be imminent.[76] But after the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, international geopolitics changed in a decisive way—the so-called War on Terror, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the obsession with security, the return of the ghost of the Cold War, the consequences of the Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic state, the Syrian War, the migration crisis, etc.—and apocalyptic movies became a medium to criticise the international socio-political scenario. And even more, some of these movies also questioned the value of human existence itself suggesting that we deserve the apocalypse. As Walliss and Aston point out,

> a recurring theme found in the post-9/11 cycle is that, like some form of Old Testament punishment, the apocalyptic scenario that humanity faces is both deserved and, indeed, something that we would be better off not surviving. As the final voice-over on *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007) asks; "are we worth saving?" This theme of humanity receiving its "just deserts" is found in *The Day After Tomorrow*, where the northern hemisphere (chiefly North America) is shown facing the brunt of the destruction and, in a reversal of current geopolitical realities, consequently having to go "cap in hand" to the southern hemisphere for food and shelter. (Walliss and Aston 2011, sec. 15)[77]

One perfect example of this critique of both everyday life and contemporary socio-political situation in post-9/11 apocalyptic films is found in *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009), the cinematic adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's comic series of the same name,[78] which is not just a critique of modern-day Western unequal and alienated everyday life, but also and foremost a pessimistic questioning of the socio-political situation and even of human nature itself, insofar as it suggests that this unfair society can only be changed through an apocalypse that leads to a new beginning. In this neo-noir superhero and apocalyptic film contextualised in an alternative 1985, Nixon is still president, and the U.S. has won the Vietnam War. Additionally, although the Americans control the international geopolitical situation at the expense of the Soviet Union and thanks to Dr. Manhattan—a quantum superhero capable of modifying matter at his

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[76] As Walliss and Aston point out, this characteristic is also found in futuristic post-apocalyptic films such as *Waterworld* and *The Postman*, which present the past—our present—with nostalgia, "especially with regards to law and order, civic responsibility and social and political leadership" (2011, sec. 22). In doing so, these movies reaffirm and valorise pre-9/11 status quo.

[77] Walliss and Aston also make reference to Boyle's *Sunshine*, which, instead of assuming—as pre-9/11 movies—that humanity should impede any apocalyptic danger, raises the question as to whether the mission to reignite the Sun in order to save humanity should succeed (2011, sec. 15).

[78] It has to be noted that, although *Watchmen* was released after 9/11, the original DC Comics series were published between 1986 and 1987.

will—, the world lives under the constant menace of a nuclear apocalypse[79]. The rest of the (anti)heroes of the film—some of them with powers and others just ordinary people with suits—are struggling to cope with a depressing and pointless life—and in this sense, *Watchmen* is also a destruction of the type of macho-messianic heroism of pre-9/11 films. The only one who still acts as a masked vigilante is Rorschach, a psychologically troubled antihero with a manacheistic view of morality that fights crime compulsively. As the narrator of the story, Rorschach describes a hopeless society rotten by corruption and evil with a tone that evokes the voice of Travis Bickle, the schizotypal main character in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). His monologue at the beginning of the film is a good example of the contraposition between the general optimism of pre-9/11 movies and the pessimism and socio-political critique that can be found in those shot after the terrorist attacks. In this speech—which has the opposite tone of that of *Independence Day* and contains almost all the pessimistic aspects that can be found in *Watchmen*—Rorschach makes clear that not everyone deserves to be saved. [80] This questionable moral standpoint seems to find his antagonist in Ozymandias, a former hero regarded as the smartest man in the world who revealed his secret identity to the public and has become an apparently exemplary citizen. He appears to be the only ex-vigilante that has not lost hope. But in the end, he turns out to be to be a megalomaniac with a superiority complex that has led him to design a plan to destroy the world's main cities with the objective to unify humanity, because, according to him, human beings will only open their eyes if they suffer a catastrophic event. After all, Ozymandias plan directs us to another main theme in *Watchmen* which is a central issue in post-9/11 films: the incapability of politicians and public institutions to create a prosperous community and protect their citizens, and, ultimately, the necessity of a catastrophe or the use of violence to start over and achieve a more desirable and peaceful social order. For all this, *Watchmen* constitutes a paradigmatic case of post-

[79] Actually, one of the main themes of the movie and a fundamental basis of its socio-political critique is the issue of delivering the power in the hands of an unwatched or unsupervised few. In this regard, it is worth underlining that its title stem from the question "Who watches the watchmen?"—from the Latin *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* attributed to the Roman author Juvenal—, which is an invitation to reflect on the problem of controlling those who hold the power, a classical issue famously discussed by Plato in the *Republic*. In the film this is especially observed in the case of Dr. Manhattan, whose power makes him the world's biggest nuclear weapon. In fact, one of the many faces of pessimism in *Watchmen* can be observed when Dr. Manhattan, increasingly and inevitably detached from humanity due to his quasi-omnipotence, undergoes an existential crisis.

[80] Scene no. 3: "Somebody Knows Why," *Watchmen*, 2009, DVD, directed by Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009).

9/11 pessimism that criticises Western contemporary life-style and socio-political order as well as human nature itself.

Another example of this contemporary critique to the status quo could be *The Invasion* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2007), the third remake of the aforementioned Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—being the first *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman, 1978), and the second *Body Snatchers* (Abel Ferrara, 1993). *The Invasion*, in contrast to its predecessors, and certainly not with some ambiguity, insinuates that the substitution of human beings by emotionless and eusocial alien spores would be an improvement because it would imply a world without suffering, poverty, and conflicts. Ferrara's version, on the contrary, ends with a military assault and victory against the aliens that reaffirms the heroic survival of the actual status quo. Therefore, it seems that one common feature of post-9/11 films that emerges from the social-political critique in one form or another is the idea of destroying a hopeless society in order to start again under a different social organisation. *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) is another example of this feature. Cuarón's film depicts a near dystopian future in which human beings are infertile and live on the verge of collapse. As an accurate allegory of a central element of our times, the U.K. government uses military force against its own citizens and implements repressive policies on refugees that attempt to enter the country. In this critical situation, a young woman falls pregnant and becomes a symbol of a possible future that calls for the rupture with a rotten past. This idea is also found in the latest version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in which the alien's decision to eliminate humanity is modified thanks to his relations with an innocent child, who shows him that, despite our behaviour, we deserve to be saved. Certainly, this seems to suggest that contrary to what has been affirmed, these two films offer some hope. However, this hope actually contains a severe and pessimistic critique of present times which implies that the only possible solution is an apocalypse that would allow us to start over. In the end, as Walliss and Aston observe, although some post-9/11 movies have presented some optimistic perspectives, its "narrative equilibrium is never completely reinstated, and often there is oscillation between positive and negative leading to an ambiguous conclusion" (2011, sec. 25).

If I consider Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* as a paradigm of a type of apocalyptic cinema that can be an occasion to think earnestly about death in the Kierkegaardian sense, it is partly due to the fact that it contains all these forms of pessimism that have

been underlined: firstly, it transmits a mistrust in science and what is perceived as its inherent arrogance; secondly, the apocalypse is not averted; thirdly, the movie contains a satiric and aggressive social critique to the bourgeois life-style; and fourthly, answering the final voice-over on *Diary of the Dead*, Justine, the main character, affirms that life deserves to be extinguished, something that implies the absolute absence of any hope. At the same time, the apocalypse in *Melancholia* is also secularised, and, as we will see, if religion has any kind of role, it is just as a social crutch. For all this, I believe that Trier's film is a perfect representation of the pessimistic shift of post-9/11 apocalyptic cinema. In any case, all of this will be argued further on in the chapter dedicated to *Melancholia*. At this point, after explaining some of the basic features of contemporary apocalyptic films and after arguing why cinema is a uniquely suited medium for the apocalyptic imagination, it is time to approach the main thesis of this dissertation.

Thus in the following I will offer several arguments to affirm apocalyptic cinema as an occasion to think earnestly about death. In order to do this, first I will propose another clue that might explain the contemporary mass appeal of apocalypticism which is related to the Kierkegaardian philosophical background exposed in the first chapter—a clue that, at the same time, defends apocalyptic cinema as a means to think the unthinkable; secondly, I will divide apocalyptic cinema in two categories, being one of them those type of apocalyptic movies that push us to think the unthinkable; and finally, I will provide some reasons to defend the thesis that this type of apocalyptic movies can be an especial occasion to think in one's own death in a similar terms as those exposed by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside".

2.3. Apocalyptic movies and the thought of one's own death

2.3.1. The unthinkable and anxiety

So far we have seen some arguments that might explain the contemporary mass appeal of apocalypticism: the influence of the ancient apocalyptic imaginary; the awareness of living in a time of crisis; the entertainment value of the end of the world; the growth of science fiction; the transcodification of social traumas into disaster narratives in order to deal with them; and the critique of science, public authorities, everyday life, and the status quo. However, here I intend to introduce another reason that finally leads us to

one of the main theses of my research: the connection of some apocalyptic cinematic narratives with anxiety understood from a Kierkegaardian perspective.

In this regard, Susan Sontag offers a reason to explain the fascination for disaster movies which supports my research. For Sontag, one of the strengths of science fiction films—which according to her are not about science but disaster (1967, 213)—is the "immediate representation of the extraordinary" (212). She affirms that disaster movies supply something beyond the reach of novels, which she articulates as "sensuous elaboration" (212). That is, due to its specific resources and language, apocalyptic films aestheticise destruction in a way that other mediums cannot provide. In the end, she argues, these films are "concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess" (213).[81]

However, what interests me most with regards to Sontag's analysis is the fact that, when she underlines the potentiality of cinema for representing the extraordinary by means of sensuous elaboration, she points out that disaster films deal with "things which are (quite literally) unthinkable" (225). In this line, Dixon argues that contemplating the mortality of an entire civilization makes the unthinkable "palatable" (2003, 2). Additionally, Wilder also points out that in the apocalyptic narrative "we sense the enigma of the unthought and the unthinkable" (1971, 441). As Deleuze articulates regarding science fiction, "[w]e write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other" (1994, xxi). Certainly, as we have seen in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", death cannot be represented. However, it seems that apocalyptic movies can become an occasion to put us in this frontier and force us to reflect on what cannot be explained. And this is important for my research, because, as Richard Klein states when writing

[81] It has to be mentioned that Sontag also argues that apocalyptic films are characterised by an extreme moral simplification and they present "a morally acceptable fantasy where one can give outlet to cruel or at least amoral feelings" (1967, 215), a similar argument to those that Wilder and DiTomasso's expose to describe the alleged shallowness of contemporary apocalypticism. Although I would reply once again that this simplicity is not applicable to all apocalyptic films, it is true that, as Aston remarks, some films serve "to allay anxieties and fears circulating in society by providing a morally simplified and visually entertaining diversion" (2012, 2). In this line, Sontag also affirms that science fiction movies "invite a dispassionate, aesthetic view of destruction and violence—a technological view" (1967, 216). And in this case I openly disagree, because this affirmation is a gross generalisation. Indeed, some apocalyptic films are made for spectacle, but there is a significant amount of them that also invite to a reflection about the meaning of existence in general and of one's own life in particular. Having said that, it must be remembered that Sontag's essay was written in the 60s, and much water has flowed under the bridge since then in relation to apocalyptic films. Just to put an example, she claims that "[t]here is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films" (223), something that, as exposed, might be true of some apocalyptic films of the 60s, but it is certainly not true after 9/11.

about nuclear criticism, thinking the unthinkable is an essential and unavoidable philosophical task (2000, 79).

In a similar vein, I defend that apocalyptic cinema is a suited medium for pushing us to think the unthinkable, which in my object of study is, expressly stated, death and its inexplicability. Indeed, the apocalypse represents the absolute end of existence itself, and, as Kierkegaard reminds us, death cannot be thought and thus cannot be represented. Therefore, faced with the apocalypse, language loses meaning. As Rovit affirms, "[i]n this situation of disorientation, vertigo, and weightlessness there are not only no answers; there are no categories, no questions" (1968, 444). This is why we speak about "nameless horrors". In the apocalypse, for Rovit, "meaning speaks out of meaninglessness" (446) and all categories are put into question: space, time, and causation (448). According to Wilder, "[c]ommon to all true apocalyptic is a situation characterized by anomie, a loss of 'world,' or erosion of structures, psychic and cultural, with the consequent nakedness to Being or immediacy to the dynamics of existence" (1971, 440). For him, the antinomies that are at stake in the apocalyptic narrative—such as life and death—are not only an issue of the individual but "a juncture which renews the archaic crisis of all existence: that of survival, the viability of life" (441). From this perspective, when putting the spectator in a position in which he anticipatorily contemplates the end of existence, apocalyptic cinema has the potentiality to communicate this absolute interruption that breaks all continuities and the laws of thought. As we have seen in "At a Graveside", death constitutes an absolute limit for the usual language of philosophy because it is completely inexplicable. This is what Eugene Thacker calls the "horror of philosophy" (2011, 2), which is "the isolation of those moments in which philosophy reveals its own limitations and constraints; moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility—the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language" (2). While Thacker considers that the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable takes place in the genre of supernatural horror (2), I defend that apocalyptic movies also have the potentiality to become this non-philosophical language through which the viewer can approach the inexplicable thought of one's own death. Therefore, insofar as they deal with the unthinkable, those apocalyptic movies that can become an occasion for the earnest thought of death—and that I will define more precisely in the following

section—are essentially philosophical, but through a different language than that of the philosophical tradition.

In the end, this potentiality of apocalyptic cinema to put the viewer on the limit of the unthinkable and to convey the interruption that breaks the laws of thought can be interpreted as the experience of anxiety in a Kierkegaardian sense. As we have seen in the first chapter, anxiety, the fundamental experience of human being's existence that determines us as human beings, arises when the individual is faced with the nothingness of possibility and constitutes an experience that challenges our explanations, showing us that there are not solid answers. Sontag seems to point in that direction when she argues that "science fiction films reflect powerful anxieties about the condition of the individual psyche" (1967, 200) and have the capacity to "lurk the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence" (200). As explained before, Haufniensis defines anxiety as the dizziness of freedom, which generates in us a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy. Thus anxiety is an ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion that the individual experiences when faced with the abyss of possibility. On this basis, I propose that the cinematic end of the world might become an occasion to situate us in front of this abyss and awake in us this ambiguous experience; or, to put it another way, that apocalyptic narratives have the potential not just to make us reject the end of the world but also the desire to experience it, operating as anxiety, fracturing all meanings and categories, and interrupting the laws the thought. At the same time, anxiety is always anxiety about the future, which is always death. And apocalyptic fiction confronts us with the complete annihilation of human existence. Therefore, the experience of the encounter with death—and in this case with extinction—is the experience of anxiety. This way, death becomes the object of anxiety—a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—, because being "indefinable" (TDIO, 85) and "inexplicable" (96), death is indeterminate, and this is what characterises the object of anxiety. Fear, by contrast, is awakened by a concrete and defined threat. To be sure, apocalyptic narrative usually presents a specific menace, such as a meteorite or a zombie plague. However, as it shall be argued further on in relation to *Melancholia*, the focus is not put on the concrete danger, but on the annihilation of existence, which is exposed to nothingness. Thus the frame of apocalyptic narrative is not simply fear but anxiety, the cipher of existence. As anxiety, apocalyptic narrative constitutes a challenge to our explanations, ideas and presuppositions, and to what we take for granted, instilling us a constitutional

sense of fragility, opening us to our necessary mortal condition and inciting us to self-knowledge and to what it means to be a human being. As seen before with Podmore, death is the unknown that "simultaneously holds the key to self-knowledge, and also the self's own destruction" (2011, 45).

2.3.2. A *montrage* apocalyptic cinema

At this point it must be underlined that I do not suggest that every apocalyptic movie has the capacity to push us to think the unthinkable, and therefore to become and occasion to think in one's own death in the terms exposed in "At a Graveside". As any other genre, the apocalyptic one encompasses an enormous variety of movies, some of them with similarities and shared conventions but, at the same time, with very different characteristics regarding both the shape and the content. To put a significant contrast for this research, *Armageddon* and *Melancholia*, despite having in common a cosmic menace, are as different as two movies of different genres can be. Hence, in order to set precise limits to my object of study and acknowledging the impossibility to apply my thesis to every apocalyptic movie, I shall now proceed to define and examine a subcategory of apocalyptic films that, for their characteristics, can become an occasion to think earnestly about death.

First of all, in order to determine more precisely my object of study, the definition of apocalyptic films has to be reduced. At the beginning of this section I have stated that I would consider as apocalyptic any film that depicts a credible threat to the existence of humankind or even the very existence of Earth. This definition might be useful to define apocalyptic films in general, from *Armageddon* to *Melancholia*. However, in order to become an occasion to approach the thought of death in an earnest way, two differential characteristics are required. Firstly, the credible apocalyptic threat has to be essential for the plot and not just an excuse or a gimmick to develop a movie that could be classified as a member of another genre—in other words, the emphasis has to be put on the possibility of the end itself. And secondly, the movie has to focus on the anxiety experienced by the individuals when faced with the imminent possibility of the end of the world—that is, the external apocalypse has to materialise on the screen the internal apocalypse experienced by the characters in the movie.

According to this definition, an apocalyptic movie has to be articulated in reference to the emotions, thoughts and attitudes of those who are about to experience the apocalypse. We have seen that, for Kierkegaard, ethico-religious questions demand to those that approach them a particular psychological orientation related to subjective or existential interest. From here, I suggest that, in order to be an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death, apocalyptic movies have to create a *Stemming*[82] related to existential or subjective issues. In other words, in a manner similar to Kierkegaard, who, instead of understanding truth and its communication from an objective point of view, created a multitude of characters that subjectively embodied different existential positions in order to approach ethico-religious questions, I propose that the apocalyptic movies that can become an occasion to think on death earnestly are those that, instead of focusing on the external or objective aspect of the apocalypse, try to embody the reactions of the individuals when facing the prospect of the end of existence. From this standpoint, the end of the world has to be essential in the plot of apocalyptic movies, not as a scenario that serves to create an external or objective discourse that usually becomes an action film, but as the medium in which subjective reflections on the end of existence come to light. With this I am not defending that apocalyptic movies which can be an occasion to approach death earnestly cannot have action or spectacle. Rather, that these cannot be their distinctive or fundamental characteristics. For example, *2012* uses the prophecy about the end of the world as a pretext to develop a storyline of love, action, and survival, putting the emphasis on the measures that should be taken to prevent our extinction. In this film, however interesting, the apocalypse is just a set, in the sense that the storyline would follow the same schema if the movie was located in a burning building. The essence of the story is the adventures of a family to escape a danger. Indeed, this danger is the apocalypse. However, no matter how big this danger is, it still appears as a danger that can be avoided through several spectacular actions. And the same applies to films like *Armageddon*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Independence Day*, *Cloverfield*, and *World War Z*, among many others.

On the contrary, *4:44: Last Day on Earth* (Abel Ferrara, 2011) is not interested in the external mechanics of the apocalypse and, instead, it focus the narration on the

[82] Not in the sense of mood opposed to earnestness, but as an atmosphere or a disposition.

relationship of a couple as they await for the announced and inevitable end of the world by a cosmic radiation that will erase the ozone layer. In this sense, Ferrara's movie tries to create an atmosphere that captures the desperation of human beings when faced to annihilation. Another example would be *Perfect Sense* (David Mackenzie, 2011), a movie that relates an uncommon apocalypse in which the menace of the end is provoked by an unexplained epidemic that affects progressively every physiological sense. Depicting the relationship between an epidemiologist and a chef who get to know each other while human beings begin to lose their sensory perceptions, the film relates the struggle of individuals to adapt to each loss, creating a heavy atmosphere of growing hopelessness in front of what seems to be inevitable: the loss of every sense and thus the end of humankind. Although there is an external description of the social consequences of the pandemic, the film focuses on the personal experience of those who increasingly realise that the end will not be avoided.[83]

Thus what is at stake here is the potentiality of some apocalyptic movies to bring into light not so much the external representation of the apocalypse, but the truth of the single individual understood in a Kierkegaardian sense—that is, when anxiety creates a rift in all meanings, interrupts the laws of thought, and opens the individual to the loss of the world. In this regard, Llevadot points us to the right direction when analysing the cinema of Lars von Trier in the light of Kierkegaard using at the same time Robert Lapoujade's concepts of "montage" and "montrage" cinema. Indeed, as Llevadot notes paraphrasing Climacus, when the individual becomes heterogeneous with the ethical, cinema must be heterogeneous with traditional film aesthetics (2007, 436). According to her, both Kierkegaard and Trier reflect on this single individual that puts the general in crisis, and because of this, both of them had to renew the stylistic precepts of their respective mediums of expression (2007, 436). Although I will further develop this statement when writing specifically about *Melancholia*, for the moment it helps us to advance into the stricter definition of those apocalyptic movies than can become an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death. So far, I have proposed that those films have to put the emphasis on the imminent possibility of the apocalypse and on its subjective effect on the individuals that face it. And this means to put the emphasis on

[83] Beyond these two examples, as mentioned, I consider that the paradigm of this type of apocalyptic movies that focus the narrative on the existential struggle—becoming this way an occasion to think earnestly in one's own death—is Trier's *Melancholia*, which will be analysed in the following chapter.

the subjective truth that the certainty of the end arises on the individuals. Let us now consider how Lapoujade's concepts of montage and *montrage* cinema can help us in this regard.

In the first part of the dissertation we have already approached through Llevadot the difference between objective and subjective truths and its form of communication in Kierkegaard's authorship. While objective truth is understood as the adequacy between thought and being, and is usually transmitted by means of direct communication, subjective truth is understood as the subject's appropriation and it can only be communicated indirectly. That is, while an objective truth is a recreation of reality through representation and is focused on the *what*, a subjective truth is a subjective experience of the truth and is focused on the *how*. According to Llevadot (436), this distinction might be helpful to locate Trier's use of cinematographic language. In the end, both Kierkegaard and Trier had the same problem: how to speak about what cannot be spoken, how to think the unthinkable, how to approach what cannot be represented. To attempt such defiance, the usual forms of direct communication and representation—both in philosophy and cinema—had to be forced.

The core issue to contextualise this discussion is the criticism to cinema understood as the craft of editing for being a non-art that offers a fixed meaning and generates passive spectators. This criticism led Lars von Trier and his partner Thomas Vinterberg to create the Dogme 95 manifesto.[84] Indeed, when explaining in an interview that, for him, this manifest was "a challenge to the conformity of filmmaking" (Kelly 2000, 122), Vinterberg made clear that cinema is "the most conservative art-form so far" (122). And this conservatism refers primarily to editing or montage. As Llevadot notes (2007, 437), from the dawn of cinema, it was understood that its essence was editing. This way, cinema was defined as the art of composing fragments of reality in order to create the illusion of continuity. However, for the sake of accuracy, it must be pointed out that it was not exactly from the beginning of the medium. Contemporary spectators are accustomed to cinematographic syntax and take the continuity of time in film for

[84] This manifesto was announced on March 13th 1995 in Paris, at *Le cinéma vers son deuxième siècle* conference. Although it was initially wrote by Trier and Vinterberg, shortly thereafter they recruited new members such as Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, Kristian Levring and Anne Wivel. The first Dogme films were Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998) and Trier's *Idioterne* (1998), both presented at the Cannes film festival in 1998. After this, the movement expanded internationally and other Dogme films were made by non-Danish directors, as *Lovers* (Jean-Marc Barr, 1999) and *Julien Donkey-Boy* (Harmony Korine, 1999).

granted, but, as Tom Gunning notes, "continuity was not the natural order of things (or shots) in early cinema" (1991, 97). Indeed, however innovative pioneers like the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès, or Alice Guy-Blaché may have been, their use of an emerging cinematographic language was still theatrical, insofar as it was as if their aim was to search for the point of view of a theatre-goer with the perfect seat. Cinema did not find its own language until some filmmakers started to experiment with editing.

One crucial moment in this process was *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903), in which Edwin Porter combined archive images of the Edison collection with scenes that he shot himself in order to create a fiction story. For some historians and critics, the sequence in which the firemen rescue a mother and her son from a burning house is the first example of continuity editing or cross-cutting; namely, the cut from one shot to another in order to maintain the continuity of the action in space and time. The editing of this sequence in particular is constituted by several cuts that change the perspective alternatively from the inside of the house to the exterior.[85] In *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) Porter is even more determined with the use of editing, cutting each scene just before it arrives to its ending with the purpose to prevent undesirable delays—as often happened in *The Life of an American Fireman*, in which the editing was more hesitant. In addition to advancing into the use of parallel editing with jump-cuts and cross-cuts in order to present two different lines of action, this film also introduced other innovative techniques such as filming in the actual setting rather than in a sound stage and using minor camera movements. Thanks to these advances, filmmakers realised the potential of editing to compress time and narrate more complex stories in fragmented spaces and, at the same time, started to put more emphasis on the movement—as is evidenced by the fact that chase scenes would become one of the most employed resources in film.

Thus it was taking shape a new cinematographic language in which the basic unit was the shot understood as a measure of time instead of the theatrical scene. And another key figure of this process was David W. Griffith, who, according to Lewis Jacobs "repudiated theatrical conventions and evolved a method of expression peculiar to the

[85] However, further research suggested that the original version of the film was constituted by two different sequences of the interior and the exterior of the house that, instead of being cross-cut in order to follow the action, were edited separately until each one was complete—that is, the scene in the interior of the burning house is shown first and then the same action is shown again from the outside. Thus it seems, as Gunning notes, that the original version was modified some time after the film's release in 1903 in order to "accord with later ideas of continuity, intercutting exterior and interior views of the rescue into nine shots" (1991, 96).

screen" (1959, 289). Certainly, Griffith developed a series of new elements that contributed to shape cinematographic language as we know it—as for instance different camera angles such as close-ups and narrative transitions such as fades—, being editing the most decisive for its "awareness of the tempo and the device of parallel and intercutting, which greatly expanded and enriched the internal structure of movie art" (291). However, the truth is that some of these elements were already used by other filmmakers—Méliès, for instance, used editing and close-ups. Griffith's innovation was to use them not as theatrical effects but as the syntax of a new language. For Deleuze, although Griffith did not invent editing, he raised this technique "to the level of a specific dimension" (1986, 30). In *The Lonely Villa* (1909), for example, he took a step forward in development of continuity, editing three parallel actions and raising the tempo with increasingly rapid cuts to reach the climax. This way, varying the spatial distance and the temporary duration of the shots, he put the basis of classic Hollywood continuity editing, which he perfected in his influential masterpiece *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that, as Jacobs explains, proved that "not only the basis of film expression is editing but that the unit of editing is the shot, not the scene" (1959, 296). Finally, Griffith took another step forward in the use of parallel editing in *Intolerance* (1916), intercutting four different historical storylines. This way, the cuts no longer represent scenes that happen simultaneously, but depict sequences that belong to different eras in order to show the spectators several historical examples of intolerance. Hence, the editing in *Intolerance* is not just related to action or time, but also with the subject. Using thematic cuts, Griffith forces the viewer to think, not just on the progress of the action, but also on the intellectual meaning of the sequence.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that, mainly thanks to editing, cinema ceased to be a simple spectacle to progressively become an immersive psychological experience. Indeed, as Lev Kuleshov proved, the process of editing has an enormous influence on the semantic understanding of cinema. At the beginning of his career, this Soviet filmmaker thought that the appeal of American cinema could be explained through the use of editing, which was more dynamic than in European and Russian films because of the use of fast cutting, the alternation of spatial distance, and the combination of parallel

lines of action—as the work of Griffith exemplifies.[86] Considering this, Kuleshov performed an experiment that demonstrated that the interaction of two sequential shots modifies the meaning of each isolated shot. In other words, he proved that cinema conjures emotions above all through editing rather than with the specific content of each shot. He edited a short film in which a shot of the expressionless face of the actor was alternated with three different shots: a plate of soup, a girl in a coffin, and a woman on a divan. This created the illusion of continuity in the sense that the spectators understood in each sequence that the actor was looking at the plate, the girl, and the woman. After viewing the sequence, although the face of the actor was always the same, the spectators believed that it had a different meaning depending on what he was looking at. The plate of soup made the spectators believe that the actor was hungry, the girl in a coffin that he was grieving, and the woman on the divan that he was experiencing desire. Kuleshov admitted that this discovery stunned him (1974, 200) to the point that he thought that the essence of cinema was montage and that everything else was secondary (183).[87] Vsevolod Pudovkin—who claimed to be the co-creator of the experiment—also concluded that the director's art was "*montage*—or constructive editing" (1960, 169).

The Kuleshov effect is one of the main reasons why film understood as the art of editing was labeled by some critics as a conservative art that doesn't encourage creative thinking, because apparently, due to the closed concatenation of images, the viewer does not have enough time to associate ideas freely. In other words, this use of editing determines the meaning of the film and does not leave space to open interpretations—it is certainly no coincidence that cinema has always been a privileged medium for political propaganda. Using Llevadot's words, it can be said that, by cause of the classical use of editing, cinema thinks for or in the place of the spectator, who remains

[86] Strongly influenced Griffith, Russian filmmakers were the first to make an attempt to systematically investigate and define the principles of editing, to the point that, according to Rudolf Arnheim, they tended to see editing as the only important artistic film feature (1957, 87). Eisenstein, for instance, was one of them. However, as Deleuze stresses, although Eisenstein shares with Griffith the idea of the film as an organic composition of images, he criticises him for considering that a movie is a juxtaposition of extrinsic parts instead of a unity of production, and not seeing "the dialectical nature of the organism and its composition" (1986, 33).

[87] Later on he changed his point of view and affirmed that "film material (the selection of which is determined by the ideological tendency of the artist) is the live person working on the screen, real life filmed on the screen" (1974, 183). Therefore, although he still considered montage as an important element of film, he understood that to reduce the complexity of cinema to the mechanical juxtaposition of images was a mistake (183). If we take into account his reflections, it appears that this change of opinion was mostly due to ideological reasons, because he came to the conclusion that the "flowering of American cinema was the result of the development of American capitalism" (189), in the sense that, on the one hand, cinema was had the aim to educate individuals to fit in with capitalism instilling in them a bourgeois mentality, and on the other, was also a "'consoling art', an art that lacquered reality, an art that diverted the masses from the class struggle, from an awareness of their own class interests" (190).

passive before the concatenation that is offered to him (2007, 437). This experience was defined by Benjamin as the shock effect of film:

> Let us compare the screen [*Leinwand*] on which a film unfolds with the canvas [*Leinwand*] of a painting. The image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on. The train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention. (Benjamin 2006, 132)

Furthermore, as Llevadot notes, there at least two more reasons that contributed to see cinema as a conservative art (2007, 427). First, due to the fact that, for its high production costs, films can only be amortised if they are massively distributed, the editing technique is used to determine the meaning and homogenise the experience of worldwide viewers. And second, the constant repetition and abuse of some editing techniques have led to a certain audiovisual conventions—as for instance shot-reverse shots and eyeline matches—that may turn the spectator into a passive subject that has assumed them to such an extent that refuses any movie that flees from the usual logic of sense. As Llevadot reminds us, this conventions are what Deleuze—using Bergson's philosophy—calls structures of sensory-motor recognition (1989, 44) and opposes to the attentive recognition (44). In the former, "we pass from one object to *another one*, according to a movement that is horizontal or of associations of images, but remaining on *one and the same plane*" (44). In the latter, on the contrary, we return to the object over and over again identifying different features of it, and "instead of an addition of distinct objects on the same plane, we see the object remaining *the same*, but passing through *different planes*" (44), creating a description that is a "pure optical (and sound) image of the thing" (44). In the following fragment we can see the main differences between the structures of these two modes of recognition:

> The sensory-motor image effectively retains from the thing only what interests us, or what extends into the reaction of a character. Its richness is thus superficial and comes from the fact that it associates with the thing many different things that resemble it on the same plane, in so far as they provoke all the same movements (...). Conversely, the pure optical image may be only a description, and concern a character who no longer knows how or is no longer able to react to the situation; the restraint of this image, the thinness of what it retains, line or

> simple point, 'slight fragment without importance', bring the thing each time to an essential singularity, and describe the inexhaustible, endlessly referring to other descriptions. It is, then, the optical image which is really rich, or 'typical'. (Deleuze 1989, 45)

In the end, this is the difference between what Deleuze calls movement-image and time-image. According to him, cinema is not a representation of the movement of reality: it reproduces it. And it does so at two levels: movement and time. With this conceptual framework, Deleuze divides cinema into classic and modern, or pre-World War II and post-World War II, and understands that in each period prevails one particular way of reproducing reality: movement-image and time-image. The former depicts the world of sensory-motor connections, is focused on the movement between two actions, and is usually found in action movies and classic westerns. The latter deals with the reproduction of reality as a development of the constant stream in which it consists, as duration. This is the case of French New Wave and Italian neorealism—which, for Deleuze, is made of pure optical and sound situations (1989, 2). Time-images do not only show actions and reactions, but also different layers of time that converge with the present, and they can express a present that constantly seeks ties with the past and the future. That is, time-images are not actions but descriptions.

Specifically in relation to editing, Deleuze considers that, while movement-image cinema puts the emphasis on the smooth and commensurable linkage between images and subordinates cuts to this connection—which he calls rational cut (213)—, time-image cinema focuses on the cut itself. In his own words, "[t]he cut, or interstice, between two series of images no longer forms part of either of the two series: it is the equivalent of an irrational cut, which determines the non-commensurable relations between images" (213). Thus in time-image cinema there is no association of two linked images through metaphors or metonymies, "but only relinkages of independent images" (214). In relation to time, while movement-images are indirect images of time, time-images are direct images of it that are liberated from action. As Deleuze explains, "[t]he relation, *sensory-motor situations → indirect image of time* is replaced by a non-localizable relation, *pure optical and sound situation → direct time-image*" (41). In this regard, Deleuze distinguishes four different styles of editing or montage in movement-images cinema: "the organic trend of the American school; the dialectic trend of the Soviet school; the quantitative trend of the pre-war French school; and the intensive

trend of the German Expressionist school" (1986, 30). Although these trends have different specificities, they share the use of editing through rational cuts. According to Deleuze, although there were few examples of time-images before WWII, the dominant paradigm was that of movement-images.

Therefore, if at some point it was understood that film did not find its own language until filmmakers as Porter and Griffith started to experiment with editing, over the years some critics and artists considered that it go trapped in the conventions of this classical style. Thus, using Deleuze concepts it can be said that, after WWII, some filmmakers started to experiment with time-images more often. This way, in confrontation with the so-called conservatism of classical editing, a new cinematic language was gradually taking shape. To define it, Deleuze uses Lapoujade's concepts and calls it "montrage" cinema (1989, 41). Apart from the commitment with time-images, in this new approach to cinema, as Llevadot notes, the use of editing is reduced, and shot is understood in a pictorial way in order to release the spectator from the passivity that results from the homogenisation or vericalisation of meaning (2007, 437). The examples of this style of cinema that Llevadot offers are the sequence shots of Dreyer, the use of depth focus by Welles, Godard's jump cuts, and Rossellini's pure optical-sound situations (437).

Bazin was one of the theorists that pioneered this new language. As Deleuze notes, instead of defining Italian neorealism by its social content, he defined it through formal aesthetic criteria (1989, 1). Bazin displaced the debate from the dichotomy between silent and sound films [88] to "the long-standing opposition between realism and aestheticism on the screen" (2005b, 16). Indeed, he considered that, mainly due to its relationship with photography, film had an essential realist aspect. However, we must be careful when approaching this opposition between realism and aestheticism, because it can lead us to a false dichotomy. For Bazin, aesthetic refinement must not be contrasted with "a certain crudeness, a certain instant effectiveness of a realism which is satisfied just to present reality" (25), because in the end realism in art is can be only achieved through artifice (26). And cinema is by definition an artifice. Hence, Bazin understands that the merit of Italian neorealism is that it has demonstrated the paradox

[88] A debate that involved theorists as Arnheim, who in works such as *Film as Art* (1932) stated that silent movies are artistically superior to talkies because, with the addition of sound, cinema lost its differential characteristic: the possibility to present moving bodies. Because of this, he concludes that cinema had become a combination of other art forms. And with this mixture, both images and sounds are weakened.

of realism, which is the fact that it is deeply aesthetic (25). As Jan Distelmeyer underlines, the issue here is not a "cinema of 'transparency' devoted to an innocent capture of reality" (2012, 147), because, as Bazin's affirms, cinema consists in lying (2005b, 27). Thus film is not a capture of reality, but a conquest of it through its specific way of lying—which is what interests Bazin. Therefore, he does not think of realist cinema as an allegedly objective film document that records reality—whatever "reality" might be. Instead, Bazin reminds us that it is essential for film to choose what it shows. This selection is indeed important for every art form, but regarding that cinema attempts to create the illusion of reality, "this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when such a choice is made" 26); and unacceptable "because it would be done definitely at the expense of that reality which the cinema proposes to restore integrally" (26).

Taking this into account, Bazin is critical to "classical editing" (2005a, 39), which is continuity editing, the one established by Porter and Griffith and developed mainly by Hollywood cinematography. It has also been referred to as invisible editing, because its aim is to create the illusion of continuity while ensuring that viewers pay attention to the story without realising that it has been edited. As we can see in the following, Bazin considers that this sort of editing lacks realism and imposes the interpretation of the filmmaker to the spectator, insofar as the scenes are "broken down just for one purpose, namely, to analyze an episode according to the material or dramatic logic of the scene" (2005a, 24). To this editing that offers a fixed meaning and transmits to the viewer a constructed mental time, Bazin opposes the editing of Italian neorealism, which tries to reduce it to the minimum in order "to transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality" (2005a, 37). According to Deleuze, Bazin considered that neorealism, instead of representing a real that was already deciphered, "aimed at an always ambiguous, to be deciphered real" (1989, 1). If classical editing breaks space and time continuity to recreate the world with symbolic forms, dictating this way a univocal meaning to the spectator, Bazin understands that Italian neorealism, with the absence of effects of montage, "tends to give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality" (2005a, 37). Thus in other words, and as he points out, the goal of neorealism is the opposite of Kuleshov in his experiment: preserving the mystery of reality (37).

With this kind of cinema, then, we are facing some Kierkegaardian echoes: the art of moving the spectators without putting oneself as a director in a position of authority that

imposes a meaning, and the introduction of ambiguity—the ambiguity that we have seen in Haufniensis notion of anxiety—in the cinematographic narrative. According to Bazin, the use of sequence shots, depth of focus, and the unity of space and time continuum[89] in Italian neorealism introduces ambiguity into the story and gives freedom to the viewers to interpret the narrative by their own means. As he affirms, in analyzing reality, classical editing presupposes the unity of meaning of the dramatic event and rules out ambiguity (2005a, 36). On the contrary, the use of sequence shots allow the viewers to choose by themselves the importance of the several data presented on the screen. In its turn, the depth of focus gives the film a more realistic structure because it "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality" (35). Hence, the depth of focus contributes to fracture any fixed meaning, as far as reintroduces the inherent ambiguity of reality "into the structure of the image" (36).

This is also introduced by the style of editing of Italian neorealism, in which the viewer has again a more active mental disposition and contribution, because, as Bazin affirms, "while analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice" (36). For Bazin, the difference between two styles of editing is that, while in classical editing, events "mesh like a chain with the sprockets of a wheel" (2005b, 35), in Italian neorealism, "[t]he mind has to leap from one event to the other as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river" (35). Thus in opposition to classical editing, neorealist filmmakers use editing with an elliptical architecture without predetermining the shape of the events. In Distelmeyer's words, "while classical Hollywood cinema famously tends to avoid open questions about story causality and motivation" (2012, 150), films in which editing is reduced and used elliptically are filled with ambiguity and leave space to uncertainty. And this points to an essential characteristic of the Kierkegaardian corpus: the constitutive ambiguity of existence. Thus, just as Kierkegaard's philosophy, Bazin's theory on cinema—which was influenced by Sartrean principles—revolves around freedom and ambiguity.

Bazin co-founded the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which was very influential among its readers, including Truffaut, Godard and Varda, who later on would found the French

[89] That is, without constantly fragmenting it through editing.

New Wave, a non-formally organised movement that attempted to break with the so-called conservative film paradigm. With this aim and following Bazin's ideas, these filmmakers developed a politically committed style of cinema close to documentary that forced the usual film shape through experimentation with the aforementioned techniques: sequence shots, discontinuous editing, non-causal plots, and non-closed endings. This understanding of film set cinematography close—both in shape and content—to Kierkegaard's existentialist approach, and had a strong influence on the Dogme 95 movement. Indeed, the topics addressed by this manifesto are similar to the French New wave, which are at the same time characteristics of the Kierkegaardian corpus: the singularity of human existence: freedom, anxiety, despair, communication, and death, among others. In the following, given that I defend that the paradigmatic example of apocalyptic cinema that becomes an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death—namely *Melancholia*—was directed by Lars von Trier and, although is not part of Dogme 95, it is certainly influenced by it, I will address the basic features of this manifesto. Additionally, I will put its features in relation with the critique of classical editing as well as the traditional conventions of cinema that we have seen in the last pages.

Indeed, although Trier and Vinterberg's manifesto starts criticising French New Wave considering that with it the "anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art"[90]—specially regarding the concept of "auteur"—, the truth is that the rules of Dogme 95 stem from the stylistic values of this movement[91] and constitute another attempt to break classical film conventions. These rules were the following:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

[90] Dogme95.dk—A tribute to the official Dogme95, "The Manifest," accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.dogme95.dk/dogma-95/

[91] For Simons, the opening sentence of the Dogme 95 manifesto "is an explicit reference to François Truffaut's article 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français' published in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* of January 1954, which came to be considered the 'manifesto' of the Nouvelle Vague" (2005, 182).

3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited.[92]

As Jan Simons explains, "[t]hose who endorsed the Dogme 95 program welcomed it as a call to arms for a new realism in cinema" (2005, 182)—perhaps because it was known that, in a certain sense, the Dogme 95 manifesto was influenced by Italian neorealism and French New Wave. However, neither the word "realism" appears in the manifesto nor it does refer to realism. Instead, these rules are conceived as a subversion of the conventions of classic cinema that attempt to avoid overproduction, manipulation or "trickery".[93] According to Simons, "[t]he rules are not concerned with the film as it will appear on the screen, but the manner in which the film will be produced" (2005, 184). In other words, these rules—also known as the vow of chastity—are directed to filmmakers and conceived as a constriction game that aims at stimulating their creativity. From this perspective, realism in Dogme 95 appears to be a collateral consequence of the rules rather than the concrete purpose of the manifesto. In this sense, if in Bazin's theory the specifics of film creation are a means to an end—namely, realism—, for Trier and Vinterberg they are the core of their proposal.

However, it seems that, even if realism is not its main purpose, theses rules certainly contribute to create a realistic effect. Indeed, in opposition to the trickery of special effects, added music, sets, artificial illumination, and an endless list of post-production

[92] Dogme95.dk—A tribute to the official Dogme95, "The Vow of Chastity," accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/

[93] Dogme95.dk—A tribute to the official Dogme95, "The Manifest," accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.dogme95.dk/dogma-95/

effects, Dogme's use of natural illumination and sound, the practice of shooting on location with a hand-held camera, and the obligation to situate the film in the here and now, lend the film an amateurish style that increments realism. According to Simons, the realism of Dogme 95 films is a virtual realism closer to Deleuze than to Bazin (193). And it is virtual in the sense that a Dogme's filmmaker does not create "a *representation* of an event, but a *simulation*" (189). He does not have a strict script that has to be followed, but rather he distributes the elements according to the rules, leaves space to the actors, registers their actions and "waits and sees into what 'state' the model formed by his settings and actors will settle into" (191). These simulations "do not retrospectively reconstruct past states, but generate prospectively and hypothetically virtual states" (190). Using this technique, the "'visualization' of the model is, like in modern theatre, left to the imagination of the spectator" (191).

In this sense, then, we encounter here at least two closely connected Kierkegaardian echoes that I have approached in the first part of this dissertation: subjective appropriation and the impossibility of representation. Indeed, in Dogme's manifesto we face the same impossibility of representation that we have seen regarding death in "At a Graveside", in which Kierkegaard stresses the uncertainty of death uncertainty and states that it can be neither grasped nor represented. However, despite underlining this impossibility, he represents it to some extent—as a teacher or as an inspector. According to Theunissen, if Kierkegaard puts himself in this conflict, it is because, in this way, the discourse can show the listener the dramatic relation that we have with our own death. From this perspective, taking into account that death entails a radical limit for representation, in order to talk about it Kierkegaard needs to move to another regime—a regime that implies subjective appropriation and which forces him and us to question not just *what* do we say or think about death, but *how* do we say or think about it.

The Dogme manifesto seems to be aware of this same problem, not just regarding death but in relation to cinema itself. In fact, Trier affirmed in an interview that he does not believe in any truthful representation but in authenticity.[94] Thus in a similar manner to Kierkegaard, who had to force philosophical language to write about death and the

[94] Anthony Kaufman, "Lars von Trier Comes Out of the Dark," *Indiewire*, September 22, 2000, accessed November 27, 2016, http://www.indiewire.com/2000/09/interview-lars-von-trier-comes-out-of-the-dark-81384/

single individual, Dogme 95 subverted the procedures of traditional cinematographic language in order to create, not a representation, but a more authentic truth—the truth that arises when approaching the singularity of human existence. With their vow of chastity, Trier and Vinterberg highlighted the fact that, when dealing with human existence, we must question not just *what* do we film, but *how* do we film it. Therefore, to force the pretension of representation and achieve a change in cinematic language, the Dogme manifesto rethought not just its content but also its shape. As Llevadot notes, Trier's cinema, just like Kierkegaard's philosophy, does not pretend to offer a representation or an objective truth, but to talk with us about the single individual opposed to the general and to question our life-style. And to do that, the Dogme manifesto had to subvert classic cinematographic language with the vow of chastity and use another regime that impedes any generalisation (2007, 441).

Regarding subjective appropriation in Dogme's films, it is related to the shift from the product to the process that its rules encourage. As Walter underlines regarding *Idioterne*, Trier "made a film that is wholeheartedly about the redemptive value of giving up control, of daring to fail and looking foolish when doing so" (2004, 42). Such movement—a movement that emphasises the *how* and accepts the impossibility of controlling the narrative—appears similar to Kierkegaard's strategy of communication. Convinced that ethico-religious truths cannot be communicated through an objective discourse, Kierkegaard also gave up control, refusing with a Socratic attitude to be any kind of authority, creating a multitude of characters that embodied different existential positions, and thus making himself invisible as an author. For him, what really matters is the dialectical tension of ideal possibilities that the poetic ideality of the author offers to the reader. This way, the meaning of the narrative is left to the reader, who has the task of making a leap and actualise them into existence. In other words, the texts might become an occasion that pushes us to make decisions by ourselves.[95] This strategy, then, appears to be similar to Dogme's manifesto, which, by putting the emphasis on the process of making a film, giving up control, and creating a virtual reality understood not as a representation but as a simulation, pushes the filmmaker to abandon the pretension to be an authority that imposes a meaning or an objective truth.

[95] This constitutes the already commented paradox of the author, because, as Climacus notes, the author always runs the risk of interfering in his reader's personal freedom (CUP, vol. 1, 620).

In this sense, editing has a central role in determining whether the narrative is objectively presented of left to subjective appropriation. Although Dogme's manifesto does not mention it, editing is a central issue for Trier and Vinterberg. Indeed, the third rule of the vow of chastity, the one that obliges the filmmaker to hand-held the camera, allows a more flexible and reduced use of editing, replacing it with long sequences. Furthermore, as Simons points out, this rule "requires the camera to *follow* the action instead of the action being staged *for* the camera" (2005, 188), which affects to editing in the sense that, again, implies a reduced use of it that brings fluidity, avoiding the strict causal continuity of fragmented shots found in classical paradigm. According to Simons, Trier's use of it is "radically innovative" (191), insofar as all his films—both Dogme and post-Dogme—move away from the classic style of continuity editing, using jump cuts and mismatched shots, and sampling scenes by putting together different executions of the same scene (191). From this perspective, even if, in contrast to Italian neorealism and French New Wave, the primary concern of Dogme 95 is not realism, this manifesto continues their subversion of classical editing and its predetermined interpretation. And this is a Kierkegaardian shift in the sense that, as seen when explaining Dogme's virtual realism and according to Simons, every execution of a scene in a Dogme film "is just one state out of a vast state space of possible versions of the events specified by the script and modalized by the parameters defined by the director" (192). Thus in the same way as Kierkegaard's corpus embodied different existential positions instead of building up for objective communication, Dogme films offer an open and ambiguous narrative that admits different versions, becoming an occasion for the imagination of the spectator, allowing them to construct their own meaning and subjectively appropriate what emerges from it. In other words, there is no objective representation, but an occasion for the viewer to find a truth that—as Kierkegaard wrote in his journals—is truth for *me* (KJN1, 19). Thus while editing-based films try to avoid ambiguity and leave no place for open interpretations, *montrage* film pursues subjective truth, the one that exposes us to an ambiguity that collapses any predetermined meaning. In this sense, this kind of cinema acknowledges the essential ambiguity of our existence which characterises anxiety, the original condition of the experience of freedom. As seen with Tsakiri, anxiety cannot be conceptually defined because it has abysmal qualities (2016, 19). Taking this into consideration, and finally returning to Deleuze concepts, it can be affirmed that *montrage* cinema also acknowledges the abysmal constitution of existence, insofar as it is focused on non-

commensurable relations between images and with the cut itself, which, as anxiety, becomes "the pivot upon which everything turns" (CA, 43).

I started this section arguing that not all apocalyptic movies have the potentiality to become a special occasion to think earnestly about death in Kierkegaardian terms. According to the criteria set forth before, a hypothetical earnest apocalyptic movie has to focus the emphasis on the end itself—that is, the apocalypse cannot be just an gimmick to develop a movie of another genre, as in Roland Emmerich's *2012*—and on the anxiety experienced by the individuals when faced with the imminent possibility of the end of the world. Now, after elaborating on the use of editing and explaining the difference between montage and *montrage* cinema, I will add a third feature that I consider necessary for apocalyptic cinema in order to become an occasion to think earnestly about death. That is, I claim that the distinction between montage and *montrage* cinema can also be applied to two different types of apocalyptic movies: those focused on representation and an objective communication of a fixed meaning, and those that systematically subvert genre conventions, embody the essential ambiguity of human existence, and try to recreate the subjective experiences of anxiety and the confrontation with one's own death. Generally speaking, it would be difficult to deny that apocalyptic movies have the potential to show the fragility and finitude of our existence and the constant menace of death, which, as the blow of the axe in "At a Graveside", is a certain uncertainty. But I affirm that there are a type of apocalyptic movies that go one step further: those in which the apocalyptic context is essential for the plot, in which the narration stems from the reactions of individuals when facing the end of life, and in which the use of the cinematographic language opens the viewer to ambiguity and does not impose a fixed meaning. Unlike movies focused on action and spectacle, these films approach the experiences of anxiety and the imminent confrontation with one's own death, using the global or objective apocalypse to focus on the internal or subjective one. Thus, as Kierkegaard's philosophy, these movies constitute a constant fissure in any unambiguous understanding of our existence.

However, regarding specific examples of this type of apocalyptic cinema, the truth is that it is not easy to find films that meet the three conditions aforementioned. There are many examples that fulfil the first two conditions. For instance, on the one hand, Mackenzie's *Perfect Sense* and Murakami's *When the Wind Blows* focus the narration on the apocalypse and on the effect that the imminence of it and of one's own death has

on the individuals. With these films, the end of the world is not just a gimmick employed as an excuse to create an action movie. Instead, it is a substantial and essential core feature. Nevertheless, these movies employ editing in a conventional way that neither introduces ambiguity nor an open meaning. On the other hand, it could be argued that Tarkovsky's *Offret* meets all the conditions. Indeed, in this film Tarkovsky uses long sequences and a reduced editing that, to some extent, can be related to *montrage* editing. However, although *Offret* certainly revolves around the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, the fact is that the focus of its narration is rather a reflection on sacrifice and the consequences of making a promise, for the tragedy that develops the plot is the commitment of its main character with God, whom he promised to sacrifice all he held most dear if the apocalypse was averted.[96]

One of the movies that could meet the three conditions is Ferrara's *4:44: Last Day on Earth*. Its plot is indeed apocalyptic in the sense that the apocalypse is not a pretext to develop a movie of another genre but the centre of the narration, focused on the actions, emotions, and reflections of the main characters when facing the end of the world. Hence, the very essence of the movie is the internal apocalypse caused by the imminence of the external one. And regarding the shape, although it is not realistic in the sense of Bazin's theory and that it would be extremely daring to affirm that it is a time-cinema movie in Deleuze's terms, the truth is that its style of editing is rather different from the classical one. Indeed, *4:44: Last Day on Earth* puts on the screen several oniric, ambiguous, and enigmatic images—from minutes 20 to 21[97] and from 72 until the end[98]—while also using long sequences and a reduced editing that does not determine the narrative, leaving space to the viewer to approach the experience of the main characters. For instance, from minute 40 to 43, there is a long sequence with a moving camera that shows us a dramatic Skype call between one of the characters, his daughter, and his ex-wife.[99] Without cutting the scene, Ferrara allows the spectator to observe the scene and the actors' performance without guiding him to a predetermined

[96] Haneke's *Le Temps du Loup* could be a good example, insofar as it is focused on the subjective apocalypse and, at the same time, uses a style of camera and editing that does not determine the meaning. However, it is a post-apocalyptic film, and, as stated, this genre goes beyond the scope of my research.

[97] Scene no. 3: "Shoot Yourself," *4:44: Last Day on Earth*, 2011, DVD, directed by Abel Ferrara (New York, NY: IFC Films, 2012. DVD).

[98] Ibid., scene no. 11: "Stay With Me."

[99] Ibid., scene no. 7: "I Miss You."

meaning or a concrete moral judgement. Indeed, as explained, long sequences provide freedom to the viewer to interpret the narrative and choose by himself the relative importance of what appears on the screen. In this regard, it must be underlined that although the movie contains some songs, it does not use the classic resource of adding dramatic music in order to evoke certain emotions in the viewers. Furthermore, Ferrara's intimate approach to the apocalypse does not develop a causal plot. In a manner of speaking, nothing happens. The film just presents us the last hours of the main characters while they are waiting for the end, doing everyday tasks that, in the apocalyptic context, seem to become meaningless. This way, *4:44: Last Day on Earth* creates an atmosphere that captures the suffering of some individuals when the illusion of postponement that Kierkegaard mentions in "At a Graveside" is vanished and they face the inevitable and imminent annihilation. Using Dogme's language, it can be said that the film does not contain superficial action. In fact, for all we have seen, although *4:44: Last Day on Earth* is not a Dogme 95 film, it complies with some of its rules.

For all this, it can be affirmed that Ferrara's movie introduces in its narrative a sense of the essential ambiguity of human existence, leaves space to uncertainty, and pursues subjective truth, the one that depends on the viewer's appropriation. With this, *4:44: Last Day on Earth* approaches the experience of anxiety and the confrontation with one's own death. Instead of focusing on the depiction of the commensurable and objective apocalypse—as films like *Deep Impact* and *2012* do—, Ferrara's film approaches the subjective and ambiguous truth of the apocalypse focusing the narrative on the incommensurable reality of the single individual. From this perspective, it can constitute an occasion to think earnestly about death from a Kierkegaardian perspective.

With consideration of the aforementioned, I defend that the most paradigmatic example of this apocalyptic cinema—the cinema than can become an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death—is Trier's *Melancholia*. However, before offering exhaustive reasons for this statement, there is one essential question that remains unexplained: why exactly this type of apocalyptic cinema that I have defined with the aforementioned conditions constitutes a special occasion to reflect earnestly on death? This question needs to be answered before approaching the analysis of *Melancholia*. Thus let us now consider with more detail the supporting claims relevant to my thesis.

2.3.3. *Montrage* apocalyptic cinema and one's own death

As it has been argued previously, cinema seems to have a privileged relation with apocalyptic narratives and constitutes a unique suitable medium for conveying them. This can be explained both by the content and by the shape. Regarding the content, cinema contributed from its very beginning to document and communicate decisive catastrophic events of our history, something that linked the apocalyptic imaginary and the moving images—as the paradigmatic case of the broadcasting of Hiroshima's mushroom cloud exemplifies. And in relation to the shape, cinema is itself a permanent reproduction of the apocalypse, because every film, from its beginning to its end, creates and destroys a world in which we live while it lasts, and which has a different meaning for every spectator. Furthermore, as noted, the traditional purpose of the apocalyptic genre is to provide meaning to the chaos of existence, and cinema, being an art that consists in a certain arrangement of images—whether for creating an ordered reality or for showing its essential ambiguity—, appears to be a well-suited medium to convey the apocalyptic imaginary to contemporary audiences.

Thus cinema as a medium is essentially eschatological, and, at the same time, in Szendy's words, a "stream of testamentary images" (2015, 60). This is especially relevant because, for the aim of my investigation, it is essential to prove that cinema is not just a well-suited medium for the apocalypse but also that apocalyptic cinema is a privileged occasion to think earnestly about death. And indeed, as Derrida points out, cinema has a close relationship with death. According to him, photography combines death and the referent in the same system (2001, 53). That is,

> in the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the reference to this referent, call it the intentional movement of reference (…), implies just as irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent. It implies the "return of the dead" in the very structure of both its image and the phenomenon of its image. This does not happen in other types of images or discourses, or indeed of marks in general, at least not in the same way, the implication and form of the reference taking very different paths. (Derrida 2001, 53-54)

For Derrida, film is a 'phantomachia' (2002, 115), in the sense that in the photographic experience "something becomes almost visible which is visible only insofar as it is not visible in flesh and blood" (115), which is exactly what happens with spectrality or

phantomality. When we are the object of a picture—which will be reproducible in our absence—we become specters. And because of this, "we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death" (117). In other words, in the photographic image "[o]ur disappearance is already here" (117). At the same time, as Derrida notes, "[t]he specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed (...) without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity" (120), because the other watches us but we are not able "to meet its gaze" (120).

We can expand this idea to film in general. From this perspective, film puts us in front of us the specter of life itself; and this specter brings with its own death, which cannot be represented but presented as a phantomachia, a present absence, a specter that is "both visible and invisible" (117); and most specially, a specter of death that exceeds us and observes us without being possible to return its gaze. As in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", the inexplicability of death and the impossibility to represent it become the point of departure for the self-reflection of one's own death. Again, film appears to be a special occasion to put the individuals in front of their own death. In relation to this, it is important to note that Derrida made these reflections in reference to Barthes' thoughts on photography, according to which, when posing for a portrait,

> I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. (...) Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the "intention" according to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the *eidos* of that Photograph. (Barthes 1981, 14-15)

For this reason, Barthes understands that photographers—and I would add filmmakers as well—"who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death" (1981, 92). Hence, we are not just facing the problem of the representation of death, but also a fundamental paradox: when trying to capture reality and thus preserve life, cinema becomes an agent of death itself. Again, cinematography appears to be essentially an apocalyptic medium that faces us with the inevitability of death. In the same manner that, for Barthes, "each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (97), cinema contains the sign of the future death of humankind itself, challenging "each of us, one by one, outside of any generality" (97). For Barthes, then, the horror of death is that the "only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two,

nothing more than waiting; I have no other resource than this *irony:* to speak of the 'nothing to say'" (93). And this transports us again to the Kierkegaardian approach to death in "At a Graveside", to the fact that, although the only thing that can be said about death is that it is inexplicable—and for his reason Kierkegaard's discourse "will refrain from any explanation" (TDIO, 100)—, this inexplicability of death is the *sine qua non* to think about it, becoming the occasion for a countermovement that pushes the individual to an existential model of thinking, which is a subjective reflection on one's own death that provides the retroactive power of it. Hence, through Barthes perspective, it seems that cinema constitutes a suited medium to push the spectator to the frontiers of knowledge and put us in front of the paradox to think the unthinkable, to reflect on what cannot be explained.

So far I have argued two essential issues for the aim of this research: on the one hand, that cinema has a close relationship with death, in the sense that it can be interpreted as a phantomachia, as a collection of testamentary images, or even as an agent of death; and on the other, that, at the same time, cinema appears to be essentially eschatological and thus a well-suited medium to convey apocalyptic narratives. However, in order to defend that apocalyptic cinema is a special occasion to think earnestly about death in a Kierkegaardian sense, it still remains for us a fundamental step: why apocalyptic movies are a more privileged occasion to think earnestly on death than non-apocalyptic movies that in one way or another focus their narrative on the death of one or some human beings? Take as an example *Mi vida sin mí* (Isabel Coixet, 2003), a film that depicts the drama of a young mother who is diagnosed with metastatic ovarian cancer and has only two months left to live. Following her pursuit for new experiences, this film clearly becomes a reflection of one's own death, as the title—*My Life Without Me*—suggests. On the other side, instead of focusing the narrative on the death of the main character, Trier's *Melancholia* reflects through several characters about the annihilation of life on Earth. Thus, taking this into account, is there any reason to affirm that *Melancholia* is a more suited occasion to reflect about death as one's own death than *Mi vida sin mí*? It must be clarified that I am not claiming that apocalyptic movies are the only ones that constitute an occasion to think earnestly about death. That would be not just problematic but also absurd. What I am trying to defend is that, for their characteristics,

those *montrage* apocalyptic movies which fulfil the aforementioned conditions[100] constitute a privileged occasion to think earnestly about death. In the following I will offer some reasons that support this thesis.

The narrative structure of *montrage* apocalyptic movies, in which the apocalypse is not a pretext but an imminent threat that constitutes the very essence of the film, undermines what Kierkegaard calls the deception of the postponement, the hypocritical deceiver, which, as noted, is the mood by which the individual believes without justification that he still has some time to live and that death is something that will occur in a distant point in the future. In this regard, Szendy explains that the narrative formula of disaster movies[101] can be summarised in the fact that, within the narrative, the disaster or apocalypse becomes a real threat faster than it was predicted (2015, 41).[102] As we have seen, "At a Graveside" makes clear that death is a certain uncertainty, which means that it is inevitable and possible at any moment. Kierkegaard uses this constant presence of death to criticise the consolation and illusion of the postponement. This way, the earnest thought of death teaches the individual what is essential in life. Similarly, putting us in front of the inevitable extinction and telling us that it can happen sooner than it was expected, apocalyptic movies show us the certain inevitability of death and its constant presence, which puts us in the position to question the illusion of the postponement. In other words, apocalyptic narratives have the potentiality to remove individuals from the abstract and distant knowledge of mortality—which tends to be detached from their particular existence— and to remind them their constitutive and always imminent finitude.[103]

That said, it could be argued that this feature—the confrontation with the illusion of the postponement—might be also shared by movies that depict the death of one or some

[100] Namely, those in which the apocalyptic atmosphere is essential for the plot, in which the narration is focused on the reactions of individuals that face the imminence of extinction, and which use the cinematographic language in a way that opens the viewer to the ambiguity of existence.

[101] Apocalyptic movies can be considered a globalised and sometimes definitive form of disaster movies. In other words, although a disaster movie might not be apocalyptic, an apocalyptic movie is always a disaster movie, but quantitatively and qualitatively greater. In his essay on apocalyptic films, Szendy uses sometimes "disaster movies" to refer to apocalyptic ones.

[102] Szendy uses the eight episode of the ninth season of *South Park* to explain this feature. But it is also found in almost every apocalyptic movie, as for instance in *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*.

[103] As we will see in the next chapter, the constant presence of planet Melancholia throughout Trier's movie can be considered as well as a reminder of the constant menace of death and its inevitability.

individuals. In opposition to this possible objection, I defend using "At a Graveside" that the fundamental difference between these movies and apocalyptic ones is that the former are the cinematographic equivalent of the experience of what Kierkegaard calls moods. As seen, while moods are passive and temporary feelings that the individual might experience when faced with the death of another—such as sadness or sorrow—, earnestness comes from the thought of one's own death and the subjective appropriation of it. That is, although while exposed to the death of another and affected by moods we might well think about death, we do not do it properly, in the sense that we do not think it as our own, inevitable, and untransferable death. From this perspective, despite the fact that the individual might certainly be extremely affected by the death of another human being and perhaps also think about death itself, "even if it was your child, even if it was your beloved, and even if it was your one and only guide, this is still a mood; and even if you would willingly die in their place, this is also a mood, and even if you think that this is easier, this also is a mood" (TDIO, 75). In other words, that individual still observes death as something external that affects others and does not appropriate subjectively the thought of it—as Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich before realising that death was his inevitable and untransferable fate. Thus according to "At a Graveside", moods prevent us from thinking death earnestly—namely, as our own condition. In this sense, I consider that the experience when watching a non-apocalyptic movie that depict the death of one or some individuals—as the aforementioned *Mi vida sin mí*—is parallel to the experience of moods as defined in "At a Graveside". Although the viewers might be affected by the death of the characters in the movie, it is still mood, and therefore, that experience might prevent them to think death as their own condition. In other words, that who has died—even if it is fiction—is another human being, but not me. And thus I can still get on with my life through the illusion of postponement.

In contrast, I am defending that, for anyone that thinks about death as an external phenomenon that only affects others, *montrage* apocalyptic films may help him to understand that, at some point, everything ends. In the apocalypse there is no escape, no shelter, and no illusion of postponement. It is not just the other who dies, but all of humanity. This is the fundamental difference between *montrage* apocalyptic films and non-apocalyptical films that depict the death of one or several individuals: in the apocalyptic ones what is threatened is the entire humanity. And showing that there is no possible escape for anyone makes absolutely clear the inevitability of the end. It has to

be noted that the important difference is not merely quantitative, but above all qualitative. In this regard, one might approach such films comparatively as quantitative, whereby the comparison occurs in the form of one individual death vs. the deaths of all of human individuals. However, I argue that there is also a qualitative difference insofar as in apocalyptic movies in which the world ends, what actually disappears is human life as such, and this makes clear the inevitability and certain uncertainty of death. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis affirms that human beings differ from animals because "man is *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race" (CA, 28). From this perspective, I believe that the confrontation with the annihilation of the entire mankind may have an effect on the spectator that is qualitatively different from the experience that offer those movies that depict the death of one or some characters.

Thacker, when describing what he calls "*the horror of philosophy*" (2011, 2), distinguishes three dimensions of the world: the *world-for-us*, that is, the world that human beings interpret and give meaning to; the *world-in-itself*, which exists apart from us and it is paradoxical insofar as, when we think about it, it immediately becomes the world-for-us; and the *world-without-us*, which is a specter and only exists at the boundaries of what can be thought (4-5). Although our activities aim to transform the world-in-itself, it is never absorbed and remains independent from us. However, Thacker suggests that natural disasters—which in a certain and narrow sense are a type of apocalypse—and climate change constitute an occasion to deal with the aforesaid paradox thanks to the fact that, when evoking the specter of our extinction, they also evoke the world-without-us (4). In the end, as the very name indicates, the world-without-us pushes us to think a reality without human beings. That is, while "[t]he world-in-itself may co-exist with the world-for-us (…), the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us; the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world" (2011, 4). In this sense, it is the limit of what we can experience. Hence, I propose that the difference between apocalyptic movies and non-apocalyptic movies that depict the death of some character is qualitative and not quantitative insofar as it opens the possibility of a qualitatively different reflection that implies the thought of the unthinkable and the absolute unknown. Thacker notes this qualitative difference noting that it is ontological, in the sense that extinction "simultaneously denotes the

negation of particular lives, as well as the negation of an entire category of living beings (the species)" (122). From this point of view, there is an essential ontological difference between apocalyptic movies and non-apocalyptic movies that depict the death of one or several human beings. While the latter depict the biological death of an organism, the former, confronting us with extinction—with the world-without-us—constitute an occasion to think about death itself, something that can lead us to think the inevitability of one's own death. Indeed, then, as Dixon underlines, apocalyptic films have the potentiality to push us to think the unthinkable: "[c]ontemplating not just one's own mortality, but that of an entire civilization, somehow makes the unthinkable not only palatable, but also vaguely reassuring" (2003, 2).

What interests me the most from Dixon's quote is the first part of it, that is, the statement that contemplating the apocalypse makes the unthinkable palatable. The second part, on the other hand, seems to underline a relation with death that Kierkegaard disapproves in "At a Graveside". Indeed, the fact that, in Dixon's opinion, the vision of the cinematic apocalypse could be reassuring seems the hope in the equality brought by death that Kierkegaard criticises as cowardice. As we have seen, death is not definable by equality, because the dead do not form any kind of society, do not remember the dissimilarity of life, and do not feel any joy for being dead. It has been pointed out before that this is the attitude of the *Symparanekromenoi*, the Fellowship of the Dead, those who are constantly dying and conspire with dead against life because they believe that the worst tragedy is to live. In this sense, the *Symparanekromenoi*, whose writings are always posthumous, constitute an apocalyptic society. As we will see, this is also the attitude of Justine, one of the main characters in *Melancholia*, who sees the apocalypse as a blessing. And in Kierkegaard's opinion, as explained, this is not earnestness but mood.

At the same time, this alleged reassuring feature of apocalyptic movies leads us to another important issue that has been pointed out before. As noted, science fiction movies—which in a certain sense can include the apocalyptic ones—have always used allegoric narratives as a means of coming into terms with traumatic events. I have already mentioned that, although this might seem a similar process to that of sanitation of death through representation criticised by Kierkegaard, the fact is that *montrage* apocalyptic movies might function as Kierkegaard's discourse itself, which also represents death in order to show to the listener his personal and dramatic relation with

it. The issue for us now is the affirmation that apocalyptic movies might function as a way to come to terms with traumatic events, something that Aston also suggests when affirming that apocalyptic films have the capacity to stimulate the imagination of disaster in a way that constitutes an occasion for the audience to "cope with fear brought on by apocalyptic threats by neutralising it through sci-fi's use of fantastical narratives" (2010, 2). I would not deny that apocalyptic movies might have the potentiality to neutralise the fear brought about by traumatic events, because that would imply a psychological research that goes beyond the limits of this dissertation. That said, I want to underline that, from this perspective, apocalyptic movies would certainly be a neutralisation though representation. And again, although this can be a possible interpretation, I consider it a simplistic one, in the sense that it neglects the paradox of representation. I understand that, as Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside", *montrage* apocalyptic movies such as *Melancholia* play with the attempt to represent something that cannot be represented as a way of showing the viewers that we are not detached from death, that death is not something external to us. From this perspective, instead of a way of coming to terms with the fear of death, *montrage* apocalyptic movies can function as an occasion to think earnestly about death. Furthermore, as seen, Kierkegaard believes that we should be afraid of death—that is, that the fear of death must not be overcome. However, we must fear it in a proper way—a way that, instead of incapacitating us for life, presses us forward into it. There is no coming to terms with death, just the subjective appropriation of one's own death that provides the retroactive power. And apocalyptic movies, because of the medium itself, have the potential to communicate the confrontation with one's own death through imagination—that is, through subjective appropriation—rather than intellectually. As Sontag points out in relation to disaster movies,

> in place of an intellectual workout, they can supply something the novels can never provide—sensuous elaboration. In the films it is by means of images and sounds, not words that have to be translated by the imagination, that one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself. (Sontag 1967, 212)

In this regard, Sontag points in the same direction of my thesis: *montrage* apocalyptic movies can be an occasion to think earnestly about death in a Kierkegaardian sense. And I defend that this feature derives from the fact that, unlike non-apocalyptic movies, *montrage* apocalyptic movies do not present death as the death of others. Instead, while

confronting the paradox of thinking what cannot be thought by representing what cannot be represented, *montrage* apocalyptic movies make clear to the viewers the certain uncertainty of death that Kierkegaard approaches in “At a Graveside”, and thus become an occasion to think earnestly on death.

Another feature of *montrage* apocalyptic movies in which the world is actually annihilated—like *4:44 Last Day on Earth* and *Melancholia*—that helps me to defend them as on occasion to think earnestly about death is the absence of testimonies, which makes clear that “death itself explains nothing” (TDIO, 96). Indeed, for there to be death there must be testimonies, something that Kierkegaard’s discourse underlines from its very title: for there to be death, there must be the one next to the grave. This is a central difference between *montrage* apocalyptic movies and non-apocalyptic movies that also depict death in some sense: in those apocalyptic movies in which the world ends, the viewers testify the absolute absence of testimonies. As Dixon writes, “No one will know that we have ever existed. No one will bear witness to our demise” (2003, 3). At the end, the universe remains silent, and death shows its inexplicability. As Thacker underlines, insofar as there are no testimonies, “extinction can never be adequately thought, since its very possibility presupposes the absolute negation of all thought” (2011, 123). Thus, as noted, extinction faces us to the paradox of thinking the unthinkable and shows us that death is an unsolvable enigma. And as Kierkegaard states in “At a Graveside”, only earnestness can define it. That is, the annihilation of every human being puts on the screen death’s inexplicability, which is the necessary condition to think about death. And in this regard, again, *montrage* apocalyptic movies deal with the paradox of representing and thinking what cannot be represented nor thought. In this sense, instead of offering a fixed meaning—the type of predetermined narrative that we have seen in classical editing movies that do not leave space to free association of ideas—, *montrage* apocalyptic movies push the viewer to the responsibility to deal by himself with the enigma of death, and, thus, to confront the fact that death is his own necessary and untransferable condition. And this is earnestness, which Kierkegaard considers the proper way to think about death. As we have seen, the problem of the representation of death is that it transforms death into a mockery. As stated in “At a Graveside”, death does not need explanations. It is the living that need an explanation “[i]n order to live accordingly” (99). And in *montrage* apocalyptic movies in which the world ends, death is not represented: what remains is the absolute absence without

testimonies. Thus, these movies are an occasion for the viewers to confront the thought of one's own death in order to find an explanation by themselves.

Indeed, as stated, it can be said that every time a movie ends, a whole world ends. And apocalyptic movies in which the world actually ends are a paradigmatic example of this fundamental feature of cinematography. Szendy explains it through the ending of Trier's *Melancholia*: "Nothing else remains. It is not only our planet that has just in effect exploded, it is not only life on Earth that was just annihilated (…) What there isn't anymore is the world. Not the mineral cosmos, but the world *as* world, the one that opens, as Schopenhauer said, with the 'first eye,' with the first opened eyes" (2015, 3). Szendy is making reference to a passage from *The World as Will and Representation* in which Schopenhauer affirms that "the existence of the whole world still remains dependent on the opening of that first eye, even if it only belonged to an insect, since the eye is a necessary intermediary for cognition and the world only exists for and in cognition" (2010, 52). In other words, there is no object without subject. From this perspective, in non-apocalyptic movies which depict the death of one or several human beings, these deaths have internal testimonies in the sense that they exist within the film narrative. The explanation of death that these internal testimonies give to themselves is additionally offered to the spectator. On the contrary, in those *montrage* apocalyptic movies in which the world ends, the only eye that remains open is that of the spectator, who witnesses the absence of internal testimonies and thus faces the inexplicability of death through its immutable silence.

This is related to the aforesaid testamentary structure of cinema itself. However, in the case of apocalyptic movies, it is a testamentary structure that does not offer any explanation and leaves no testimonies and no trace—or, better said, that the only trace that leaves is death's inexplicability and the responsibility for the viewer to reflect on it by himself. As Derrida explains, cinema "is therefore a trace twice over: a trace of the testimony itself, a trace of oblivion, a trace of absolute death, a trace of what is without trace."[104] In this sense, cinema has a paradoxical nature, because, as Szendy puts it, cinema leaves no trace and, at the same time, it is "the trace par excellence, the trace of the absence of trace" (2015, 126). And those apocalyptical movies in which at the end

[104] "Le cinéma et ses fantômes," interview published by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 556 (April 2001). Translated by Peter Szendy in *Apocalypse-Cinema. 2012 and Other Ends of the World* (2015, 125).

the world actually ends constitute the paradigmatic example of this trace of the absence of trace, the trace of the absolute death that shows its absolute inexplicability. Szendy uses a passage of Derrida on the effect of cinder to explain the nature of cinema in general and apocalyptic cinema in particular. For Derrida, cinder is "something that remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent, which destroys itself, which is totally consumed, which is a remainder without remainder" (1995b, 208). That is, being something that is not, cinder is a testimony that testifies without testifying, that testifies the disappearance of witnessing and of memory (208). Taking this into account, Szendy underlines the etymological roots of "cinema" and relates it to the nature of cinders, underlining the close connection between cinema and apocalyptic narratives:

> "Made ashes," become cinders, or reduced to ashes: In Lucretius's Latin, this is stated as *cinefactus*. "Cinefied," as we might also translate it, a translation that would open a space for a secret and anachronistic resonance between the two possible meanings of the root *cine-* that would thus oscillate between cinder and movement, from the Latin *cinis* to the Greek *kinēma*, from cineration to cinema. This is much more than a matter of simple homonymy that blithely spans the abyss of centuries or millennia in an off-hand way, from Lucretius to the Lumière brothers. For cinder belongs to cinema, *kinēma* and *cinis* belong to one another, so true is it that cinder is the name or the figure for what cinema shelters within itself structurally: the apocalyptic possibility I was able to describe as *ultratestimonial*: The camera is always already carried to the limit of all possible testimony or testament (…). (Szendy 2015, 127)

Thus turning again to Derrida, cinema functions as cinders, testifying without testifying, testifying the disappearance of the witness. For Szendy, in those apocalyptic movies that end with the end of the world, the camera "is structurally carried right up to the last border of testimoniality itself, since it includes in advance within itself the point of view of the after-all, the point of view from after the end of the world, in other words the point of view of no one" (2015, 127-128). In this sense, from the perspective of my dissertation, *montrage* apocalyptic cinema leaves the viewer alone without any other explanation other than one's own (lack of) explanation. And thus it can become an occasion to face the inexplicability of death and to think about it "as your lot" (TDIO, 75).

According to Szendy, this feature of apocalyptic cinema—namely, the fact of being "ultratestimonial"—supports an idea that I have defended before: apocalyptic cinema, for its very structure, pushes to think the unthinkable—which, in this case, is death and

its inexplicability. Szendy's summarises this idea in this question: "Does this mean that cinema is dedicated, structurally dedicated to archiving the unarchivable, to being transported in advance toward this place of the 'outside-the-archive' that Derrida described as 'impossible,' immediately adding that 'the impossible is the affair of deconstruction'?" (2015, 128). Indeed, as it has been explained in the first chapter, Derrida's deconstruction is a transgressor movement that pushes us to the borders of what cannot be thought, just as faith and repetition in Kierkegaard's corpus. And in relation to my thesis, this transgressor movement is the same that the one generated by the inexplicability of death, which breaks the classic laws of rational discourse and can lead to the earnest thought of death. This way, pushing us to think the unthinkable and facing us to the inexplicability of death, *montrage* apocalyptic movies, as death in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", can constitute an absolute interruption of the regime of the possible, which makes them an occasion to think earnestly about death. In Szendy's words, apocalyptic cinema is "filmic arch-interruption" (66). From this perspective, then, it might be suggested that apocalyptic cinema, just as death and anxiety, constitutes an absolute interruption, transmitting the definitive interruption of communication that death imposes between the dead and the living. As we have seen with Mjaaland, "[t]he decisive significance of death in 'At a Graveside' lies in the *interruption*" (2006, 381), which is decisive not just for the individual but also "for the relationship to the other" (382). Putting the viewer in the position to witness the absence of testimonies, *montrage* apocalyptic movies approach the absolute interruption of this relationship. This way, as Kierkegaard's discourse, they remind us that death is a "singular enigma, but only earnestness can define it" (TDIO, 93) through one's own explanation. And this task is up to each spectator, who does not receive a closed explanation but an occasion to reflect earnestly on death by himself. This is the same dynamic that we find in Kierkegaard's authorship and that Saez calls "ethical seduction" (2000, 86), a movement by which the text "seduces the reader in that it deceives him/her into what it creates, namely a new reality (fiction), in that it opens up a new world of possibilities and indirectly demands a reaction from the reader to the existential proposal it makes manifest" (86).

Finally, the absence of testimonies in *montrage* apocalyptic movies in which the world ends leads us to another feature of them that support the thesis that this kind of cinema can be a special occasion to think earnestly about death: if there is not testimonies, there

is no possibility of mourning, because no one remains alive to mourn. Klein notes this absence of grieving when writing about the possibility of a nuclear war:

> Our culture, such is the hypothesis, is facing the possibility of a futureless future, a time in which it may no longer be possible collectively to mourn the past, a future in which there will not have been a posthumous perspective. It is this altered relation to mourning in a future without future, this negative future anterior, that differentiates what the nuclear fable allows us to imagine from the Nazi holocaust in Europe, whatever its hideous magnitude, which will still have permitted the consolation, the interiorization, the working through of memory, in order to preserve the future from repetition. (Klein 2000, 83)

Thus, I argue that this qualitative difference that Klein underlines between the nuclear possibility and the Nazi holocaust is similar to the one I am trying to defend between apocalyptic films and those that depict the death of one or several human beings. In the former, there is no one to grief; in the latter, on the contrary, the spectator can still experience grief through the characters that surround the dead ones. Thus, as stated, the difference is not quantitative but qualitative. And again, this structure is essentially different from that of the type of cinema that guides or determines the meaning of the narrative, insofar as the annihilation of the possibility of testimonies—and thus the experience of mourning—maintains an open fracture that cannot be closed through mourning, which constitutes an occasion for the spectators to face the inexplicability of death that Kierkegaard describes in "At a Graveside".

Furthermore, I consider that Lifton's postulates in relation to the qualitative change in the perceptions about the continuity of life after one's own death brought by the possibility of the nuclear apocalypse can be also used to defend this qualitative difference between apocalyptic movies in which the world ends and movies that depict the death of one or several human beings. According to Lifton's psychologist approach, although death implies the biological and psychic annihilation of the individual, "life includes symbolic perceptions of connections that precede and outlast that annihilation" (1996, 18). Because of this, we have the necessity to perceive a sense of temporal continuity after our deaths. He calls it "symbolic immortality" (18), which is neither rational nor irrational but "a psychic expression of man's existential and organismic state" (18) that helps us to cope with death. For Lifton, this sense of immortality may be expressed in five general modes: the biological (through one's descendants), theological (through believe in an afterlife), creative (through one's own works and actions and its

influence on others), natural (through the understanding of nature as unending), and experiential transcendence (through ecstatic experiences) (18-35).

Certainly, from the perspective of "At a Graveside", these strategies to deal with the thought of death are nothing other than a non-earnest way to approach it, in the sense that, when thinking about the aforementioned continuity of life after one's own death, the individual thinks about it as an external phenomenon, without confronting the fact that death is completely inexplicable. In other words, with these strategies the individual uses representation in order to avoid the fact that death is his untransferable lot. However, there is one relevant issue for us here that Wojcik notes when approaching Lifton's theory:

> [i]mages of nuclear annihilation and other impending catastrophes threaten or negate perceptions of all the forms of symbolic immortality advanced by Lifton. Rather than a sense of human continuity, the nuclear age is characterized by images of extinction and widespread feelings of imminent and inevitable death, not only individual death but the death of all humanity. (Wojcik 1997, 138)

Taking this into account, I defend that this impact that the nuclear threat may have on the individuals is similar to the feature that, from the perspective of the thought of one's own death, qualitatively differentiates apocalyptic movies and non-apocalyptic movies that depict the death of some individuals. While in the latter, life goes on after the death of the characters—something which is in part manifested thanks to the presence of testimonies—and thus the viewer can maintain what Lifton calls the feeling of symbolic immortality, apocalyptic movies operate as the apocalyptic threat in the sense that they remove any possibility of human continuity. This way, the spectator may be forced to face the absolute inexplicability of death without representations related to any form of human continuity. In fact, it could be said that this symbolic immortality is an extreme form of what Kierkegaard calls the postponement—the unjustified belief that we still have some time to live. This way, apocalyptic movies—which like the atomic bomb have the potentiality to transmit a sense of powerlessness—would be an occasion to erase this illusion and confront the fact that death is my own lot.

This parallelism between nuclear threat and apocalyptic movies in relation to the absolute absence of testimonies and the annihilation of what Lifton calls symbolic immortality can also be approached through Derrida. When relating our nuclear epoch with deconstruction and literature, Derrida affirms that "nuclear war is equivalent to the

total destruction of the archive" (1984, 28). In this sense, it is absolute annihilation. For Derrida, "[a]n individual death, a destruction affecting only a part of society, of tradition, of culture may always give rise to a symbolic work of mourning, with memory, compensation, internalization, idealization, displacement, and so on" (28). On the contrary, a nuclear apocalypse "would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity, would destroy the 'movement of survival,' what I call *'survivance,'* at the very heart of life" (28). That is, the imaginary of nuclear apocalypse destroys the possibility of what Lifton calls symbolic immortality. Hence, again, I believe that this idea can be applied to the cinematographic dichotomy that I am establishing here. While movies focused on the death of some human beings allow a symbolic work or mourning, *montrage* apocalyptic movies destroy such possibility in a manner that might confront us with what for Derrida is "the absolute effacement of any possible trace" (28), which at the same time is "the trace of what is entirely other" (28).

Hence, again, I defend that this suspension of the possibility of grieving—which is related to the absence of testimonies—might put the viewer in the position to recognise that the only thing that can be said about death is that it is inexplicable. Indeed, the philosophical problem of death—and specifically the thought of one's own death—is not just ontological or psychological, but mostly linguistic: the (im)possibility of its representation. Therefore, the issue is not just *what* do we say or think about death, but *how* do we say or think about it despite the fact that there is nothing we can say or think about it. And although apocalyptic movies in which the world ends contain some reflections on death, one of their defining features is the fact that, annihilating any testimony and thus the possibility of mourning, they can show us the absolute interruption of communication that death imposes between the dead and the living. This way, they might confront us with this unthinkable limit, which is not only the limit of human existence but also the limit of language. In other words, I defend that, in a similar manner as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside"—which, in order to approach death, forces language to the same extent that death forces conceptual thought and interrupts the traditional laws upon which rational discourse is based—some *montrage* apocalyptic movies, imposing the silence of the absence of testimonies and mourning, might confront us with our life-views to inspect if we have understood the personal interrogation that death imposes unto us, fracturing any unambiguous understanding of existence. And this confrontation can become an occasion to think earnestly about

death, capturing its irreducible personal nature, observing it as our untransferable lot, and thus acting as a teacher that provides the retrospective power in our lives. Indeed, the encounter with the absolute silence imposed by the cinematic apocalypse—a silence that, for its vagueness and for its inexplicability, is absolute ambiguity—might be an opportunity to understand that, as stated in the preface of *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, the only possibility of meaning lies in appropriation—that is, in our case, the subjective appropriation of the viewer—and not in a futile attempt to define death. Because death is precisely characterised by the impossibility of its definition, something underlined by the absence of testimonies and grief in *montrage* apocalyptic movies as *4:44 Last Day on Earth* and *Melancholia*. In the end, as Szendy points out, it is "the limits of signification—or (…) of *cinefication*—that apocalypse-cinema seems to want to test" (2015, 40). For as death itself, these movies push us to the limits of signification while explaining nothing. And as stated in "At a Graveside" only earnestness can attempt to define its enigma through the appropriation of the thought of one's own death. The black screen is "death's earnest warning to the living: I need no explanation; but bear in mind, you yourself, that with this decision all is over and that this decision can ant any moment be at hand" (TDIO, 100-101). It is in this sense that I defend *montrage* apocalyptic movies as an occasion to think earnestly about death.

Furthermore, if cinema has indeed an apocalyptic nature, it seems that those apocalyptic movies which conclude with the end of the world might constitute a paradigmatic example, not just of apocalyptic cinema in particular, but also of cinema itself. As Szendy argues, apocalyptic movies can be interpreted as an attempt of cinema to grasp itself (2015, 116), something that, again, defines apocalyptic cinema as a discourse at and about the limit of what can be thought. Szendy explains it as follows:

> by narrating and auscultating itself from the perspective of its disappearance, cinema touches on a limit that is different from the one that would place the image and the fable in opposition within it. At stake is what we have called its cinefication: in other words the constitution of the cinema and of its signs propped up on or dependent on the ultimate reference of its cineration, its becoming ash. In other words: Cinema attempts to grasp itself not—or not only—by thwarting the stories it has to tell, but rather from the perspective of *the end of film in general*. (Szendy 2015, 117)

However, as Szendy notes and as we have seen when explaining the secularisation of the apocalypse, the end of the world in apocalyptic movies does not reveal another

world—or, better said, another cinematic world (117). There is nothing beyond. This way, every apocalyptic film in which the world ends is at the same time the end of the world and the end of the film. However, according to Szendy, "since neither the one nor the other unveils a revealed otherworld, they thus open the world onto itself by bringing bubbles, fractures, and fissures to emerge within it" (117). Therefore, apocalyptic cinema can be interpreted as a discourse that, as Kierkegaard's anxiety, opens the viewer to the ambiguity and constant fracture of existence, becoming this way an occasion to reflect on death as one's own death. And as stated from the beginning of this dissertation, I consider that *Melancholia* is a paradigmatic example of the type of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema that I have defended here. Szendy, who also shares this consideration, argues as follows:

> Never, to my knowledge, has a film so closely conformed to what would be the strictest law of the apocalyptic genre (if indeed there is a genre): that *the end of the world is the end of the movie*. Or vice versa (because this terrifying equation of filmic eschatology can be reversed without being changed in the slightest): *The end of the movie is the end of the world*. Never, then, in cinematic history had it been exposed in so drastically exact a way what an apocalyptic film worthy of this name should, in all rigorousness, be. In *Melancholia*, there is something like the strictest radiography of the skeleton of a genre, in other words that ineluctable and radical sign of the equality or coincidence of, on the one hand, the annihilation of the world, without anything remaining and, on the other hand, the final point of the cinematic work that reaches its end. *Melancholia* will perhaps have been and may perhaps forever be the only film to respond so purely and absolutely to the demand that is proper to apocalypse-cinema: that the last image be the very last image, that is, the last *of them all*—of all past, present, or future images. (Szendy 2015, 1-2)

Indeed, *Melancholia* ends with an apocalyptic cosmic collision between the Earth and planet Melancholia followed by a black screen—or as Szendy calls it "an *archi-fade to black*" (2015, 4) —and the abrupt ending of Wagner's music that was accompanying the images. This ending leaves the spectator testifying the annihilation of any possible testimony. And perhaps this is the only coherent option when trying to speak about what cannot be spoken or represented, which is Trier's problem in *Melancholia* as well as Kierkegaard's in "At a Graveside". In order to deal with this paradox, Kierkegaard used a particular strategy of communication to speak subjectively of what cannot be spoken objectively, forcing the conventions of philosophical language to communicate an ethico-religious truth. Indeed, as Perarnau notes, (2015, 126), in relation to the limit of what can be thought, Kierkegaard changed the paradigm: his interest in this regard

was not merely epistemological but above all ethico-religious. According to Perarnau (127), by this movement the limit is not approached from an alleged neutral and abstract perspective; instead, the thought of the limit becomes a paradox that affects the thinker personally. Because of this, as Llevadot explains, Kierkegaard abandoned abstraction and used procedures as pseudonymity and an open narrative that questions the life-view of the reader (2007, 440). With respect to Trier's work, he has also focused his film career to speaking about the truth of the single individual instead of communicating an objective, abstract, prefabricated, and closed truth. His cinema is an open and direct question to the viewer. As Kierkegaard, Trier had to force the conventions of cinematographic language—which as explained were mainly based on editing—creating a personal style of cinema that introduces an ambiguous narrative and uses techniques as long-shots and hand-held camera in order to shake the viewer and communicate a subjective truth that demands appropriation. After all, cinema itself, in opposition to the conventional methodology of philosophy, which tends to abstraction, is primarily a concrete discourse. Although it can play with abstraction, its constitutive audiovisual materiality leads its narrative to concrete realities[105]. And this feature makes cinema a well-suited medium of expression to incite appropriation and to convey the subjective truth that Kierkegaard tried to communicate indirectly. From this perspective, then, I defend that Trier's *Melancholia*, as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", may constitute a special occasion for the viewer to think earnestly about death; that is, to think about death as his own death. In the light of the foregoing considerations on Kierkegaard and *montrage* apocalyptic cinema, I will argue this thesis in the following and final chapter.

[105] In relation to the concreteness of cinematography, Burch affirms that this medium has a "*proprietary dimension*" (1990, 55) that may push the viewers to think in the possible location of their next holidays when they see a landscape on the screen.

Chapter III: *Melancholia*

1. Initial approach to *Melancholia*

1.1. Reception

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*[106] was presented at the 64th Cannes Film Festival official selection on May 18th 2011, and released in Denmark eight days later. It was recognised with several nominations and awards in many national and international film festivals, such as Cannes, both the Danish Bodil and Robert awards, the European Film awards, and the American National Society of Film Critics awards. And although prizes are not evidence in favour of the philosophical or artistic quality of the film, they certainly offer a measure of its cultural impact. Moreover, it would also be useful to take a brief look at some of the most relevant reviews that *Melancholia* received when it was released, because this will help us to think both the film itself as well as the different methodologies that have been used to approach it so far.

In the first place, it is important to stress that several critics, as for example Sandhu (2011), while praising both the shape and content of *Melancholia*, underlines not just its cinematographic merits but also its philosophical value as a reflection on the meaning of existence, something that I am also defending here. According to Skotte (2011), *Melancholia* presents Trier as a unique and original narrator who captures the viewers' attention and pulls them, awestricken, towards the end of the world. Indeed, as I will argue further on, the cinematic beauty of the apocalypse is one of the characteristics of *Melancholia* that, from my perspective, contributes to making it a special occasion for the earnest thought of death—in a manner similar to Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside".

[106] Although biographical data are not part of the theoretical corpus of my research, it is worth mentioning that *Melancholia* was conceived while Trier was being treated for depression. As Per Juul Carlsen explains (2011) on the basis of Nils Thorsen's book *Geniet: Lars von Triers liv, film og fobier* (2010), a therapist stated to Trier that people affected by depression tend to be more calm in extreme situations than those who are not. The reason for this is that individuals who live with the permanent awareness that all has already ended for them are more likely to believe that they have nothing to lose, and therefore they are more prepared for the actual end. This idea pushed Trier to make a film to examine human behaviour in front of a catastrophe, opposing the attitude of two sisters who react to the apocalypse in a very different manner. In fact—without forgetting that my approach is not psychological—it seems interesting to note that the very title of the film can be related to an engraving by Albrecht Dürer called *Melencolia I* (1514)—which, together with *Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513) and *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1514), is part of a group labelled *Meisterstiche*. In this engraving, the central figure is an angel in a thoughtful attitude and melancholic expression that embodies the state of mind of human beings who are under the influence of Saturn, the planet that, according to Florentine Neoplatonism of that era, guided philosophical contemplation, and, according to astrological theories, connected artistic imagination with scientific rationality. Moreover, at the background of the image, framed by a rainbow, there is a shining comet that resembles the glow of the cosmic collision between the Earth and Melancholia. And finally, as Floquet notes, Justine's claim in a conversation with Claire that she has premonitions and knows that the world is going to end can be related with the allegorical character in Dürer's engraving, "who stares into the distance as the one who sees into things" (2016, 97).

Precisely in relation to this, Skotte points out that Trier approaches death as absolute and irreversible—a death that does not have to be mourned because, according to the film, life on Earth is evil. Additionally, Loeb (2011), who considers that *Melancholia* is close to being a masterpiece—an opinion shared by Iversen (2011), Rodriguez (2011) and many others—, affirms that the opening generates in the viewer a sense of unease that is impossible to shake for the rest of the film. Here I will defend that this sense of unease, more concretely—or rather, more ambiguously—, can be compared with the dynamics of attraction and repulsion characteristic of anxiety as defined by Haufniensis, which, again, is another one of the features of the movie that makes me defend it as an special occasion to confront death in an earnest way.[107]

In this regard, Schwarzbaum (2011), Stevens (2011), Rainer (2011), Neumaier (2011), O'Hehir (2011), Zacharek (2011), Edelstein (2011), Sharkey (2011), and Arias (2011) also underline the ambiguity communicated by *Melancholia*. Schwarzbaum affirms that, while the film is filled with feelings of despair, the spectator may have an ecstatic experience. Stevens states that, from an aesthetic perspective, *Melancholia* contains unforgettable images, but at the same time it is annoying and bullying. In a similar line, Rainer considers that the opening of Trier's film is beautiful and unsettling—a view reinforced in the same language by Neumaier. For O'Hehir, the climax is gorgeous and terrifying. Zacharek writes that *Melancholia*'s images—which are sombre and glorious—generate dread and, at the same time, excitement for the apocalypse that is about to come. In this same line, Edelstein also observes that *Melancholia* is a great and awful movie with a cruel and comforting climax and manifests his desire to join the apocalypse, expressing this way the characteristic ambiguity of anxiety. Sharkey insists in this ambiguity describing Trier's film as horrific and delicious, hopelessness and encouraging, excessive and restrained. And according to Arias, although Trier succeeds in showing the end of the world in a visually bold, virtuous, beautiful, hypnotic, and delicate manner, the film leaves a bittersweet taste, in so far as its discourse is hopeless, pessimist and melancholic. Finally, this idea is also defended by Scott (2011), who,

[107] I would like to stress again that I do not affirm that *Melancholia* necessarily generates in the viewer a sense of unease. On the contrary, what I state is that, through the different elements that we will see in this chapter, Trier's movie has the potentiality to create the conditions to generate in the viewer this feeling of attraction and repulsion which is characteristic of anxiety.

while affirming that *Melancholia* offers a very personal approach to the apocalypse,[108] notes that, although it is not a feel-good movie, it leaves the viewer with a sense of aesthetic satisfaction. Therefore, it seems that many critics concur in the ambiguity of *Melancholia*, affirming that it presents a dreadful event as something beautiful.

This is one of *Melancholia*'s distinctive features that make me defend it as a cinematographic parallel of Haufniensis' anxiety, in the sense that, thanks to this combination—that is, aesthetic beauty and spiritual discomfort—it creates the occasion to generate an experience of attraction and repulsion, which, for its part, can stimulate the earnest thought of death. Scott emphasises this idea when pointing out that, although the end of the world is hard to contemplate, it is at the same time difficult not to think of it because of the possibilities brought by our imagination. This reminds us of Haufniensis claim that the terrible things of life will "always become weak by comparison with those of possibility" (CA, 157). In fact, the combination of cinematic beauty and the experience of anxiety—which, again, shows the essential ambiguity of the film—is a feature stressed by many film critics, as for example Boyero (2011). And although they are not strictly referring to anxiety as defined by Haufniensis, but instead as a psychological state, this tendency certainly underlines that the atmosphere of Trier's movie points to a particular direction, a direction that, as I am defending here, can lead the viewer to the earnest thought of death.[109] Thus, despite having added this overview of some of the most relevant critics that *Melancholia* received because I believe that it helps to locate the movie in cinematographic terms, I have chosen Trier's film to conclude this dissertation not just due to its cinematographic impact, but above all because I understand it as a paradigmatic example of a type of *montrage* apocalyptic

[108] A statement that suggests that, indeed, Trier turns the conventions of apocalyptic cinema upside down—something also underlined by Martínez (2011) and Ebert (2011).

[109] Although the intention of this overview of *Melancholia*'s critical reception is not to determine its cinematographic and/or aesthetic value—because this is not the perspective of my research—, it seems fair to present some of the negative critiques that Trier's movie received. For instance, in Bradshaw's opinion (2011) *Melancholia* is tiresome, facetious, dispassionate, badly scripted, tedious, and redundant. In a similar line, LaSalle (2011) states that Trier's movie, despite containing great actor's performances, is slow, long, boring, and self-indulgent. For Rainer (2011) and Burr (2011), it would have been better if the movie had ended with its prologue. On the contrary, Sánchez (2011) is one of the few critics that made a bad review of the prologue, considering it as a summarised parody of what will happen afterwards that plays with Romanticism's clichés with a kitsch style. Moreover, he considers that the rest of the movie is a useless, annoying, and superficial development of this prologue. Regarding McCarthy's critique, although he praises Kirsten Dunst's performance and the beauty of the prologue, art, music and costume design, he regrets that *Melancholia* is a mixture of *Festen* and *Armageddon*—something also stressed by Debruge (2011) but with a positive consideration—that turns the end of the world in something boring and predictable, lacking the deliberate provocations of other Trier's films. In the end, McCarthy assumes a psychologist approach and concludes that *Melancholia* expresses Trier's depression, a perspective also shared by Gonzalez (2011), who affirms that the anxiety that the movie pretends to convey through its characters is empty and superficial.

cinema that may constitute and occasion to approach death in an earnest way as defined by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". However, before examine the particular reasons that lead me to this statement, it is necessary to make a brief summary of *Melancholia*'s plot in order to inform the reader that has not yet watched it as well as to contextualise the reflections on Trier's movie that will be presented afterwards.

1.2. Synopsis

1.2.1. Prologue

Melancholia begins with an eight-minute overture constituted by a series of hyperrealistic scenes in slow-motion accompanied by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* prelude. This sequence of intense, strange, dramatic, and even surreal audiovisual tableaux—which, as Rodriguez notes (2011), constitute a series of postcards of the apocalypse—is shot and edited from a dual perspective. From a cosmic point of view, it shows planet Melancholia relentlessly approaching Earth until the final and fatal collision. And intercut with this tragic dance, from a terrestrial point of view, we see a series of images that evoke the apocalypse: Justine (Kirsten Dunst) looking emotionless or catatonic while a flock of dead birds falls from the sky; his sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) trying to escape the unavoidable apocalypse with his son Leo (Cameron Spurr) in her arms, stumbling across the golf course while her feet sink into the soil; a black horse collapsing to the ground; Justine amidst a swarm of insects; Justine in the golf course emanating lightning bolts from her fingertips; Justine trapped in a glade of a black forest whose strange roots and branches seem to grab her legs, arms, and wedding dress; Justine floating on a pond, recreating Ophelia's death as depicted by John Everett Millais; etc. I will comment in more detail some of these images further on. What concerns us here is that the prologue reveals to the viewers the inevitable: the cosmic collision between Earth and Melancholia, which will extinguish life on our planet in the same way that intimate melancholia will extinguish Justine's life. Therefore, Trier's movie begins with the end, both of its own narrative and the world itself.

After this opening, the film is divided in two parts articulated from the ambiguous relationship between the two sisters: Justine, the younger one, is a melancholic and depressive publicist that, regardless of her efforts, fails to fit into the social conventions of her bourgeois environment; Claire, her older sister, is the paradigm of a conventional,

pragmatic, sober, and judicious bourgeois who has raised a family and followed the expected path, and now lives in a luxurious and isolated location that works as a metaphor of her social class. While Justine leans towards irrationality and chaos, Claire seems unable to exceed the limits of common sense and the established order. In other words, while Justine is the "abnormal", Claire is the "normal" one, although Trier's approach is precisely to question this binary logic of (ab)normality—a constant exercise in all of his movies—and present it as a vacuous and absurd way of life that turns its back to our humanity in a doomed to fail attitude that has fatal consequences. Regarding this relationship between the two sisters, although it is tempting to understand it as a relation of binary contrast, it is important to stress again that they actually seem to have an ambiguous and indeterminate relationship, insofar as both experience a loss of the world. In sum, Trier uses the planetary apocalypse to peer down the telescope in order to observe the intimate apocalypse. If in the first part of the film Justine's world collapses in a personal apocalypse, in the second one it is the entire world that is condemned to obliteration. That is, and as Pierre Floquet notes, Trier builds an intimate discourse with a cosmic iconography (2016, 98).

1.2.2. Part I: Justine

Justine and Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) are newlyweds. She is a young, beautiful, and successful advertising copywriter, and he is a handsome, kind, naïve, and devoted husband. They seem the perfect couple. The first part of the film begins with the predicament of having to arrive in a limousine to their wedding banquet. The predicament arises because the limousine cannot make a tight turn down a narrow lane. However, instead of being perturbed by this, the young couple seems to be amused. The celebration is held in the palatial mansion of an upscale golf resort owned by Justine's brother-in-law, John (Kiefer Sutherland), a wealthy and arrogant bourgeois who seems to have a solution for any problem—except for the end of the world—and who likes to frequently remind everyone of the huge amount of money that he has paid for the party as well as the fact that his golf course has eighteen holes. This pompous wedding celebration has been meticulously planned and overseen by Claire with the assistance of a wedding planner (Udo Kier) who is always comically irritated.

At the beginning, the atmosphere seems to be tender and playful, but it is soon indicated that the party will not happen as planned. Trier then slowly shows us the tensions

between family members. Most importantly, Justine reveals that she is not the happy young bride that she appeared to be and starts to manifest an erratic behaviour that ranges from depression to euphoria.[110] Although at some point she tries to fit in, she will be incapable of adapting to the social conventions. In the end, she will not be able to maintain the happy facade that is expected from her in these circumstances, and her reaction to social pressure will be a self-sabotaging attitude.

Thus the banquet is a succession of melodramatic scenes through which Trier brings into light an underlying torrent of repressed instincts and emotions—resentment, hate, bitterness, unhappiness—that break over and over the protective barrier of social conventions, showing its artificiality, absurdity, and lack of meaning. What should be a happy event becomes an exchange of reproaches which no one can escape. As we see through the movie, Clair and Justine's character inevitably collide—indeed, their relationship functions as a metaphor for Earth and Melancholia's fatal cosmic dance. Moreover, Justine is also troubled by her boss and Michael's best man, Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), a nasty and ruthless executive who cannot stop thinking about business, not even during a wedding celebration. In fact, his gift to Justine is a professional promotion. But it has an expiration date: she has to propose a good idea for a tagline to an advertising campaign before the party ends. And to make sure she meets the task, he orders a pusillanimous young employee called Tim (Brady Corbet) to follow her everywhere in order to put pressure on her. Furthermore, their parents Dexter (John Hurt) and Gaby (Charlotte Rampling) are divorced and have a very tense relationship that is often shown in public, making Justine and Claire uncomfortable on several occasions. While Gaby is a hostile, bitter, cynic, and misanthropic woman who shows a manifest repulsion for rituals in general and for marriage in particular—in fact, her behaviour is so nasty that John ends up throwing her out—, Dexter is a whimsical and womanising drunkard who exhibits a puzzling, erratic, and distant demeanour. And if this were not enough, Claire is frustrated and angry at her sister because Justine is not as happy as she would like her to be. That is to say, Justine's melancholy does not fit into Claire's wedding plan.

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[110]The critics have defined Justine with a variety of disorders—bipolar, depressive or schizoid—and some of them have insisted in a psychological approach. However, the film does not make any effort to clarify it, because what truly seems to matter is that Justine is essentially a melancholic human being that does not fit the conventions of the bourgeois world to which she belongs or to any other kind of world. Furthermore, as noted, my perspective is not psychological. This is one of the reasons why I will not approach the melancholic state in itself. What concerns me is the aesthetics and the narrative of *Melancholia* as an occasion for the earnest thought of death.

Gradually, Justine drifts away from the celebration—going to the stable to visit the horses or lying in the bathtub while the guests are waiting for her to cut the cake—and shows herself increasingly cold with her husband and family. Realising this, Michael tries to raise her spirit up and presents her with an apple orchard as a wedding gift. But in spite of his best efforts, Justine cannot overcome her condition. After this, in one of her escapes from the party, she has sexual relations in the middle of the golf course with the young man who was following her everywhere by order of his boss. She does it with anger and spite.

At the end, the banquet concludes in a disastrous and precipitous manner: Justine fights verbally with his boss, tries unsuccessfully to talk with his father, Michael abandons her, and all guests leave the party. The tensions among the family have led to the collapse of the wedding, in which every attempted ritual—the toast, the speeches, the cake, the dance—was subtly conflictive and empty of its alleged meaning.

The next morning, Justine and Claire go out with their horses to ride through the surroundings of the palatial golf resort, which they will not be able to abandon because Justine's horse is afraid to cross a small bridge. After that, in the last image of the first part of *Melancholia*, Justine realises that Antares, the star that the previous day was shining with reddish intensity, is gone. Unlike the audience, Claire and Justine ignore that the disputes that have ruined the wedding are irrelevant, since the cosmic collision that is about to come will reduce everything into powder.

1.2.3. Part II: Claire

If the first part revolved around Justine's internal apocalypse, the second shifts the point of view towards the eldest sister and focuses on the characters' reactions when confronting the cosmic apocalypse. Planet Melancholia is inevitably heading towards the Earth and the collision will obliterate humanity along with bourgeois self-indulgence. Therefore, in this second and final part, Trier conflates the external and the internal, the cosmic and the personal apocalypse.

The story continues some time after the wedding with Justine returning to John's estate in an impaired and extremely bad condition. Claire takes Justine in order to help her recover from the depression that started in the wedding celebration and which now has

alarmingly deteriorated, since she is unable to carry out by herself the simplest activities, such as walking, eating or bathing. Meanwhile, the characters discover the existence of Melancholia, a wandering planet much larger than the Earth that is eclipsing Antares and heading towards us after passing by Mercury and Venus. Until now it had not been detected because the Sun was hiding it. In theory, there is no possibility of collision, because, according to estimates, planet Melancholia will just pass close to the Earth. John—an astronomy enthusiast who shows total confidence in science—is very excited about the event and places his telescope in the garden so that the whole family can see the spectacle. Claire, however, does not experience it with the same untroubled spirit. The closer Melancholia gets, the more scared she feels. John, with his usual condescending and know-it-all attitude, tries to calm her with a string of scientific arguments. But this is not enough for Claire and she searches information online, where she finds a webpage that describes the movements of the erratic planet as a "dance of death", the result of which will be a collision with the Earth. Increasingly nervous, she believes that the end of the world is inevitable. Thus, while Justine's mood improves significantly, Claire becomes more distressed. It seems that the younger sister has already accepted the collision and that it pleases her.

The night Melancholia and the Earth will pass close to each other, the family gathers to contemplate the astronomical marvel. Sitting on the porch, they watch the show equipped with a telescope, as well as with a homemade instrument that John has manufactured for his son and that allows to measure the distance between the planets. The attitudes of the characters are diverse and contradictory: Leo and his father are curious and excited; Justine is cold and distant; and Claire tries to disguise her suffering. In the end, apart from a temporary weakening of the atmosphere as a result of the attraction of the two planets that makes breathing difficult for a few minutes, the event occurs as expected. Everything seems to be going well.

However, the next day Claire uses Leo's rudimentary device to watch Melancholia again and discovers that, instead of moving away, the wandering planet is approaching again towards Earth. Terrified, she looks for her husband and finds his dead body in the barn covered with straw horse. It turns out that John had already realised the inevitable tragedy and decided to commit suicide with an overdose of the pills that his wife was saving for the whole family. Although Claire strives to overcome the situation, her mood oscillates between a self-imposed calm and a tremendous despair. In a moment of

panic, despite knowing that there is no possible protection, she tries to flee with Leo to the city in a golf cart in a desperate attempt to find shelter. But as Justine in the ending of the first half of the movie, they cannot leave the boundaries of the property, which has been the location of the entire film. In the end, Claire goes back to the mansion with Leo to face the last moments with her family.

As mentioned, Claire and Justine's attitudes are reversed in comparison with the first half, as if they were trading places. The elder sister, the one bounded to life, the perfect wife, daughter, mother, and host, if in the first part had been calm, rational, and self-assured, now refuses to accept the apocalypse and manifest serious problems to handle fear. And Justine, the one that had been catatonically depressed and incapable to deal with reality, is now revitalised by the prospect of the apocalypse, welcoming it with calm, relief, and even with a sense of contentment. Now that her pessimistic vision of the world has been confirmed, far from being terrified by the imminence of obliteration, she emerges as the strongest character in the movie and accepts it without fear.[111] Indeed, Justine claims that life is evil and that the thought that it will disappear comforts her.

Despite this, Claire wants to organise a farewell party with music and wine. Justine believes that this desperate proposal is pathetic and, ignoring it, she meets with Leo, who feels scared because, thanks to his father's words, he knows that there is no possible escape. However, Justine tells him that she knows how to build a magical cave that will protect them from the collision, in what it appears to be, in contrast with the first part of the film, a meaningful ritual. And so, they all collect logs in order to build a cone structure that looks like a teepee. With planet Melancholia about to collide, they enter the alleged shelter and wait for the end. Claire is still nervous, but Leo and Justine seem serene. In the end, the collision obliterates the Earth and all that remains for us is a black screen.

[111] Earning this way the nickname given to her by Leo in the first part, who called her "aunt Steelbreaker", which is an armoured warrior in the massive multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft.

2. *Melancholia* as an occasion for the earnest though of death

2.1. A cinematic translation of anxiety

In the second chapter, I have argued that there is a type of apocalyptic movies that constitute themselves as a special occasion to think earnestly about one's own death in a Kierkegaardian sense. As explained, these movies fulfil at least three conditions: the apocalyptic context is essential in its plot, the narration stems from the reactions of individuals when facing the end of life, and the use of cinematographic language makes manifest for viewer the ambiguity of existence without imposing a fixed meaning. At the same time, I have also exposed several reasons that attempt to explain the difference regarding the thought of one's own death in these movies and those that depict the death of one or several individuals. And finally, I have stated that *Melancholia* is the paradigmatic example of this type of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema. Now it is time to defend this statement. The common thread that will guide the line of argument will be the consideration of *Melancholia* as a cinematic translation of anxiety. That is, I defend that, from a cinematic perspective, Trier's film shares the characteristics of anxiety as defined by Haufniensis, which makes it an occasion to approach death earnestly, since, as anxiety, it constitutes a fissure in any unambiguous understanding of existence.

Having make that clear, it would be important to remember the connection between anxiety and the thought of one's own death. After all, as we have seen, Haufniensis considers that "whoever has truly learned how to be anxious will dance when the anxieties of finitude strike up the music and when the apprentices of finitude lose their minds and courage" (CA, 161-162).[112] Taking into account that this issue has been already explained, here I will just make a brief summary. Using Heidegger's reading of anxiety in *Being and Time*, we have seen that anxiety is the state of mind that places the individual in front of nothingness, in front of the only possibility that escapes our choice—that is, in front of one's own death. In this regard, Tsakiri understands that, insofar its object is nothingness, "anxiety is best conceptualized when considered in the context of the interplay between non-being and being" (2006, 35). After all, anxiety is always anxiety about the future, because the self has a temporal foundation and because

[112] And again, although it could be defended that this is the case of Justine, who after experiencing anxiety in the first part of the movie faces the apocalypse with courage, I consider that her position is much closer to the attitude of the *Symparanekromenoi*. I shall return to this topic later on.

"[t]he possible corresponds exactly to the future" (CA, 91). And for every individual the future is always death. In this line, Rosenzweig, describes an anxiety that arouses when the individual is faced with death experienced as an "unthinkable annihilation" (1970, 3). And for Tillich, anxiety is the state in which a being is aware from a personal perspective of its possible and inevitable nonbeing (1980, 35). This is the reading of anxiety that helps me to defend that some apocalyptic movies—and *Melancholia* in particular—may be an occasion to think earnestly about death, since they constitute a cinematic translation of anxiety understood as the experience of one's inevitable death.

Finally, before exposing the analysis of *Melancholia*, it is necessary to remember the basic characteristics of anxiety. As explained, these characteristics are essentially the ambiguity of the experience of anxiety and the radical indeterminacy of the object of anxiety. On the one hand, anxiety, the original condition of the experience of freedom when facing possibility, manifests itself as a dizziness that generates a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy, which is an ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion. And on the other hand, the nothingness of possibility that every individual faces is an indeterminate object. As stated, this is the fundamental difference between anxiety and fear, insofar as the object of the latter is always determinate or definite, like a spider or a storm. Anxiety shows us that what is threatened is our whole existence, which points towards the future and is exposed to nothingness. This is why anxiety, as described by Haufniensis, should not be approached from a psychological point of view: while fear is a psychological and physical state, anxiety is an ontological experience characterised by ambiguity and indeterminacy that expresses our finitude. This is why the basis of my approach to *Melancholia* as an occasion to think earnestly on one's own death will not depend on a psychological dissection of the characters but on a cinematographic one.

Therefore, the following analysis will revolve around indeterminacy and ambiguity in the movie. First, I will expose in which ways indeterminacy is cinematographically materialised in *Melancholia*. And then I will argue that the film shows the apocalypse in an ambiguous manner insofar as it is presented as a terrible but also aesthetically beautiful event, in a way that it may generate repulsion but also attraction. In the end, as we shall gradually see, *Melancholia* is in many ways a splintered film that expresses this ambiguity through different dualities, not only through its structure—two narrative parts that correspond to each sister—but also through cinematographic techniques such

as a dual use of camera work. However, it is important to note that I am not considering these dualities as opposites in a binary logic relation. Instead, I state that each duality that I will approach in Trier's film constitutes an ambiguous relationship and is a source of unresolved tension that, precisely, questions binary logics.

2.2. Indeterminacy of the object and fantasy realism

In the first place, the main object upon which the narrative of *Melancholia* is built is indeterminate, much as the object of anxiety. For obvious reasons, a statement like this might seem strange, insofar as this object is a massive turquoise planet, extremely determinate and concrete. Moreover, its audiovisual presence increases as the movie unfolds, to the point that at the end it is literally impossible to avoid. However, there are several reasons that allow me to interpret the planet as an indeterminate object. On the one hand, the real threat is not the planet itself, but the nothingness of the inevitable and absolute obliteration, from which the planet works as an agent and as a symbol. On the other, the planet has several characteristics that contribute to make it indeterminate and that we will approach in the following.

Indeed, unlike what is common in films that revolve around cosmic threats, we do not discover Melancholia's properties thanks to professional astronomers that warn us of its presence through the media. The movie does not make any effort to describe the planet from a scientific point of view, and this compounds its indeterminacy. The few things that we know about Melancholia are communicated to us through John and his son—that is, through an amateur astronomer and a little child. If Trier's film elaborated the attempts that worldwide scientists would engage in a situation like this to analyse and explain the phenomena, the spectator would have more opportunities to visualise planet Melancholia as a concrete and understandable object. This, however, is not the case. Thus all of this lack of information generates the perception of the constitutive indeterminacy of the rogue planet. In fact, the only information that comes from media is provided by a non-reliable Internet search performed by Claire, who discovers a diagram online entitled "Earth and Melancholia. Dance of Death" that describes the planet's erratic movement towards the Earth.

Hence, the wandering trajectory of the planet also provides an element of indeterminacy, and thereby uncertainty, which reminds us of one of the basic features of

death in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside". Indeed, the constant presence of planet Melancholia seems to work as a reminder of the certain uncertainty of death, something that can put the viewer in the position of questioning the illusion of the postponement. The aforesaid diagram depicts Melancholia surrounding our planet, receding away from it, and finally turning around to chase down the Earth from behind until the final collision—an element of surprise that, again, fractures the illusion of the postponement. For Mark B. Sandberg, this erratic approach of Melancholia "undermines any sense of regular order in the skies" (2016, 110). Moreover, as Sandberg notes, this diagram that Claire founds online contains an "element of nonsensical humor" (110), insofar as the path described by Melancholia would only make sense if the Earth was not orbiting.[113] Therefore, the lack of sense of the approach of Melancholia contributes to introduce indeterminacy into the narrative.

However, Sandberg goes even further with his analysis and provides us with another argument. As he notes, the trajectory of Melancholia is so strange—and in this regard it must be reminded again the absolute absence of any scientifically authorised explanation—that "figuring out how to measure the planet's position objectively with respect to the observer becomes a real problem" (111). In fact, during the first part of the movie, the spectators notice the presence of Melancholia through Justine: in her first look at the sky, she does not see Melancholia but the red star Antares; in her second look, while urinating in the golf course, she realises that a blue dot has replaced Antares; and in her third look, at the end of the first part, she dispassionately affirms that Antares has disappeared. However, although we notice the presence of Melancholia through Justine, the problem is that we can barely see anything. Thus the way Trier shoots the sky has an element of indeterminacy that hinders the visual comprehension of it.

In sum, as Sandberg points out, the information about planet Melancholia in the first part of the film is so indeterminate that it "comes only from the verbal explanations of what one is *supposed* to be seeing as one shares the view of more knowing characters" (111). And here we find again a parallelism with "At a Graveside", in the sense that, as

[113] It could be also argued that this strange trajectory of plant Melancholia is a mistake due to a lack of technical documentation. However, if we take into account Trier's particular sense of humour and spirit of provocation, the idea that is a joke appears more plausible.

with death, planet Melancholia seems so impossible to determinate or to define that we can only talk about it.

Moreover, this indeterminacy of planet Melancholia is also related to an essential aspect of death that Kierkegaard underlines in "At a Graveside": its subjectification. Indeed, as pointed out, despite the institutionalisation, medicalisation, sanitation, and externalisation of death that contemporary Western societies have experienced in the last centuries, individuals still have troubles thinking and confronting their own death. And the reason for this is that death cannot be externalised because it has a personal, subjective and untransferable character. This is why Kierkegaard criticises the abstract approach to death—as in Epicurus' formulation—that ignores its irreducible personal aspect. The earnest thought of death demands a radically subjective approach and the individual's appropriation of it. To think death earnestly is to think about it as one's own death. As Stokes remarks, the question of death is radically subjective in the sense that it "addresses itself directly and *personally* to the contemplator" (2006, 410). In this sense, and in relation to what concern us here, the agent of obliteration in Trier's movie—namely, planet Melancholia—also seems to address itself personally to the viewer. In other words, Trier presents the wandering planet as if, just as death in "At a Graveside", it only could be approached through subjective appropriation—or from the cosmic, external, and objective point of view of the prologue, which confirms that this is the only possible way to represent it, insofar as its indeterminacy makes almost impossible for the characters to comprehend it. Thus it could be said that the consequence of the indeterminacy of Melancholia is the impossibility to represent it in objective terms. As Sandberg notes, this subjectification of the planet stems from its indeterminacy.

Expanding further on the characteristics of planet Melancholia, there are other aspects of it that contribute to its indeterminate nature that leads to its subjectification. For instance, the perception of its size and colour varies as the film unfolds. In relation to colour, John notes that it changes from black to turquoise. And regarding its size, while for obvious reasons at the beginning we can barely see it and at the end it is impossible to avoid, there is a significant difference in the way that Justine and Claire perceive it. In one of the most noteworthy sequences of the second part of the film, when Claire is already afraid of the planet and Justine's condition is improving, the former follows the latter in the middle of the night through the forest surrounding the mansion. At the

beginning of the sequence, when Justine leaves the house, Melancholia shines in the sky with the size of a regular moon. But in the following scene, when Claire finds Justine naked in the bank of a river bathing in Melancholia's turquoise light, the rogue planet looks much bigger. And this variability of its size responds to a difference of perspective: while in the first scene Melancholia is perceived through Claire's distressed point of view, in the second one the planet is depicted in relation to Justine's desire.

Another indicator of this subjectification through the variability of the planet's size is Leo's rudimentary astronomic device that serves to measure Melancholia's movement and thus its fatal approach to Earth. To use this handmade tool, the stick must be hold against one's chest in order to watch the sky through its circumference-shaped wire: if the planet grows bigger in relation to the wire, it is approaching; and if grows smaller, it is moving away. Therefore, as Sandberg explains, the need for corporeal anchor that this amateur device requires "acknowledges the relativity of time and makes clear that the truth of the planet must be filtered through the individual body and its relation to the events" (2016, 113). Again, then, the indeterminacy of planet Melancholia serves to its subjectification—which, as stated, might be considered as a parallel of the unavoidable subjectivity of the earnest thought of death. Indeed, the fatal approach of Melancholia is not speaking to humanity but to every single individual—or more specifically, to *me*.

And finally, in relation to this indeterminacy that contributes to Melancholia's subjectification through the variability of its perception, Sandberg underlines a paradigmatic example that can be found in the first part of the movie. One of the cheesiest moments during Justine's wedding celebration is the release into the night sky of paper hot-air balloons that contain good wishes for the newlyweds. But as it might be expected, things do not go as well as the organiser would have liked: although it is not a complete disaster, one of the balloons bursts into flames, introducing tension and uncertainty—after all, the narrative of *Melancholia* is an escalation of tension that ends in the first part with the apocalypse of the wedding and in the second with the cosmic apocalypse. The image of the balloons floating in the sky while one of them is burning can be read as a metaphor of a constellation that announces the imminent fate of the Earth. As Sandberg notes, when Justine metaphorically contemplates this fate through a telescope, "the concerns of the fictional world on the ground commingle with the astronomical realties of the sky" (112). Therefore, if this scene contributes to the subjectification of planet Melancholia, it is because, as Sandberg stresses, "[t]he

equation of earthly projections with the objective relations of the planets contaminates the one with the other, making clear that the skies cannot be used as an epistemological or temporal anchor" (112). The whole universe has been subjectified, just like—as stated in "At a Graveside"—the thought of death should be.

In the view of some critics, this indeterminacy is negative insofar as it confers the movie an unrealistic tone. For instance, Bradshaw (2011) considers strange that, when the apocalyptic threat seems a real possibility, no one in the movie turns on the television to obtain information about what is going on—something that Skotte also comments (2011). However, like Sandhu (2011), I consider that the absence of scientific plausibility does not diminish the realism of Trier's movie, because again, I believe that the essence of the narrative of *Melancholia* does not depend on this scientific, objective, and external plausibility, but on the personal and subjective anxiety of the confrontation with the nothingness of one's own death. In fact, as argued, I understand that the deliberate absence of specific astronomical information contributes to confer to the movie an indeterminate atmosphere, which is an essential element of what makes it a special occasion to think earnestly about one's own death.

Actually, it does not seem fair to accuse *Melancholia* of lack of realism. Firstly, because it is quite obvious that it does not want to be a realistic science fiction movie, but an apocalyptic tragicomedy. Just as in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", what truly matters is not the cause of death or the specifics of external and internal obliteration, but the fact that *I am* going to die and that death is *my* death. This is why Trier's movie is not focused on scientific data but on the reactions of the characters—in their emotions, conflicts, and contradictions—when faced with internal and external apocalypses, with the inevitability of one's own death. And, secondly, because, even if it intends to be realistic, cinema—as we have seen with Bazin—is always a lie, an artifice, and the vast majority of apocalyptic films that, in principle, offer detailed scientific information in order to achieve a sense of veracity, in the end deceive us with strategies to create the illusion of veracity. That is, the aim of science fiction movies it is not so much to be a realistic documentary but to create a cinematic narration—more or less spectacular depending on each case—with an atmosphere of realism. Thus from this point of view,

Melancholia is more realistic than most of apocalyptic movies that offer a stream of objective and scientific data.[114]

In this sense, I claim that if Trier's movie is able to transmit an indeterminate atmosphere it is thanks to the fusion of two essential elements: on the one hand, the realism of the script regarding the characters; and on the other, a magical, enigmatic, and mysterious audiovisual tone than stems in part from the lack of scientific information. Although, for the reasons already stated, an exhaustive analysis of the characters will not be a part of this dissertation, I will approach some relevant issues of this topic further on. And regarding the audiovisual elements that contribute to generate an atmosphere of fantastic or magical realism, most of them overlap to those that will be used to describe the end of the world as an aesthetically beautiful event, something that I shall discuss later when writing about the beauty of the audiovisual landscape that communicates the experience of attraction and repulsion characteristic of anxiety. Therefore, for now I shall confine myself to describing a couple elements related to the location of the film that contribute to create a mysterious and magical atmosphere.

In the first place, the very location of the film—which takes place entirely in John's mansion and its surroundings—is undetermined. Hence, using the same strategy that some fantasy stories use, the film never informs the viewer about the specifics of its location. It could be located in Denmark—because we know that this is the nationality of the production company—or in any English-speaking region—since this is the language of the film. Moreover, the architectural and decorative beauty of both the building and its surroundings, as well as the elegance of the costumes, is so far removed from the everyday life of most spectators that, even taking into account the realistic treatment of the characters' emotions and relations, the film places us in a world that seems unreal for the most of us, almost like a fairy tale—but with an opposite narrative of that of fairy tales. In short, as in the case of planet Melancholia, the deliberate lack of information regarding the location, combined with the beauty of the scenography, confer the story a fantastic atmosphere that is crucial to create an undetermined atmosphere, attractive and disturbing at the same time.

[114] To take an extreme example, it is worth mentioning that—as Daven Hiskey (2010) and Tanya Lewis (2014) among many others explained—*Armageddon* contains at least 168 scientific mistakes or inaccuracies, making an average of more than one error per minute. In any case, we don't need to resort to such an extreme case, because scientific inaccuracies can be found in almost every science fiction film—something that, as suggested, is understandable, insofar as cinema, as well as science, is grounded upon the imperative to imagine other possibilities.

This beauty and indeterminacy of the mansion and its surroundings is also related to the second element associated to the location that I wanted to underline: the fact that, throughout the film, the characters never leave this setting and the viewers just abandon it temporality when Trier shows us the cosmic dance between Melancholia and the Earth. And this, along with the beauty of the location, helps to create an atmosphere of uncertainty. Indeed, when the camera reaches the mansion, both the characters and the viewers cannot escape, as if some kind of magic attraction was exerted. It is possible to enter, but not to get out. And this feature is linked to the former one insofar as it can also be understood as a critique of a decadent bourgeoisie that, although the elegance and aesthetic beauty of its existence, lives isolated and trapped in a net of absurd and oppressive social conventions. As noted, the luxurious and secluded mansion is a mini-Versailles of astonishing architecture with impeccable gardens, horse stables, and an eighteen-hole golf course. The isolation of this resort and the difficulties to access it indicate to us that the people in the wedding form part of a privileged minority. As Steven Shaviro notes, "the other Ninety-Nine Percent might as well not even exist" (2012, 7).

This isolation and the impossibility to leave from the mansion are shown in four scenes that virtually develop the role of an impassable border. The first occurs at the beginning of the first half, when the limousine that brings Justine and Michael to the celebration has severe difficulties to negotiate the turns of the narrow road to the state. It is a bad omen and a harbinger of things to come that Trier presents with a significant shoot from a bird's-eye perspective. Placing us in the point of view of an external and even cosmic observer—as planet Melancholia itself—, a fixed camera films the winding road while the fancy car slowly appears, so that the camera, instead of following the car—which gets stuck even before achieving its goal—, shows it to us entering a place that we will never leave.

The second scene is the last one of the first part. The day after her failed wedding and during a horseback ride with her sister, Justine tries to cross a small stone bridge, which represents a symbolic separation between the location of the film and what lies beyond.

But Justine's horse, called Abraham, repeatedly refuses to cross it.[115] And this will happen again in the first third of the second part of the film, with the difference that this time, depressed and frustrated, Justine beats the horse to make him obey—again, without success.

And finally, the third scene is found at the end of the film, when Claire, making a futile and desperate effort to escape with his son from the cosmic collision, tries to reach the nearest town—which, by the way, is also indeterminate, insofar as the film does not offer any information of it. But their attempt to flee from the mansion fails, because the electric golf cart that Claire was driving——in what it seems another ironic and critical detail about the bourgeoisie—breaks down at the beginning of the same bridge that Justine's horse didn't want to cross. Neither the characters nor the spectators can escape from the mansion because there is no place to go. As Shaviro writes, "[t]he world of *Melancholia* is a tiny, self-enclosed microcosm of Western white bourgeois privilege; and this microcosm is what gets destroyed at the end" (2012, 7). According to him, this feature of *Melancholia*—that is, the impossibility to escape from the location—is an analogy of what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism" (2009, 2), which is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). In this context, for Shaviro, apocalyptic movies would offer "the only conceivable way out" (2012, 8), because, as Fisher notes when reminding us a sentence attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (2009, 2). Having said that, and although Shaviro and Fisher's approach is certainly enlightening, I would go even further to affirm that this feature of *Melancholia* is one of the aspects that contribute to make it an occasion to think the unthinkable, not in relation to capitalism, but in relation to one's own death.

[115] Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the horse is named after the patriarch that, in the Book of Genesis (22: 1-19), accepts the divine command to sacrifice his son Isaac. The figure of Abraham is a key element of *Fear and Trembling*. Making the leap of faith, he suspends ethics to obey God's command. Abraham's position demands absolute dedication and generates anxiety. But he accepts the sacrifice God asks from him. Justine's horse, on the contrary, refuses to comply with the order. The animal experiences fear, but he cannot experience anxiety because, as we have seen with Haufniensis, this experience is exclusively human. Without sacrifice, then, there is no humanity. Moreover, the biblical patriarch is also known to intercede before God for Sodom and Gomorrah without success (Genesis 18: 16-33). In this sense, Justine's horse could be a sign of the fact that, as with Sodom and Gomorrah, the apocalypse is inevitable.

2.3. Indeterminacy in the transgression of cinematographic genre

Another feature of *Melancholia* that, on a narrative level, makes indeterminacy one of its essential characteristics is that in it Trier systematically destroys the conventions of disaster movies—the genre to which apocalyptic movies belong as a subgenre. Indeed, as Shaviro makes clear, "[d]espite its apocalyptic vision (...), *Melancholia* is not a disaster film" (2012, 6). And, in Sandberg's words, Trier's movie "plays with the expectations of apocalyptic fiction only to undermine them" (2016, 103). As it is known, cinema tends to be a game of mirrors in which the director and the audience are staring at each other knowing what to expect. Not surprisingly, as explained, many critics consider it the most conservative art. But the truth is that *Melancholia* does not meet the conventions of apocalyptic cinema. Because of this, the experience of the viewer—who knows from the prologue that is watching a film about the apocalypse—is likely to move away from the usual expectations, and this fracture might contribute to generate an atmosphere of indeterminacy.

Thus in this section I will address a summary of the conventions that *Melancholia* transgresses. But first, it is worth remembering that the act of transgression is essential to understand anxiety as well as repetition, faith, and the earnest thought of death. Indeed, as we have seen in the first chapter, God's prohibition awakens in Adam the desire to transgress, which provides the knowledge of freedom and therefore the experience of anxiety. Regarding repetition, we have seen that is an act of transgression that exposes the singularity opposed to the particulars that are subjected to law. In this line, faith—and more concretely, the double movement of faith—is a transgression that forces the boundaries of thought and leads to the experience of the impossible. For all this, as argued, anxiety, faith, and repetition imply a parallel movement as the one that stems from the earnest thought of death, a movement that breaks the laws upon which rational discourse has been considered to be based, constituting this way an interruption of the regime of the possible. From this perspective, I understand that, apart from introducing another element that creates indeterminacy, the transgression of the genre conventions may contribute to make *Melancholia*, as "At a Graveside", an occasion to think the unthinkable—namely, one's own death. Taking this into account, then, in the

following I will attempt a review of the conventions of disaster and apocalyptic movies that *Melancholia* transgresses.[116]

As stated, I am defending that *Melancholia* is a paradigmatic example of a *montrage* apocalyptic cinema that constitutes an occasion to think earnestly about death. But outside the framework of my research, it may only be considered as a disaster film in its apocalyptic version, a genre that is characterized by its topic: an imminent and concrete catastrophe threatening a large group of people or the entire humanity. Usually, special effects have an important role in this type of cinema. As for the story, the narrative of this genre tends to be focused on the desperate attempts of a group of characters to survive the tragedy, either averting it or escaping it. Although this group can be more or less large, the stories do not tend to be coral. Normally, there is one specific character that develops the role of the brave hero that guides the rest. For this reason, suspense and action are essential elements of disaster films, because the fundamental question that the narrative must respond at the end is whether or not the characters are able to survive.

[116] At this point, although this dissertation is not about Trier's filmography, it will be helpful to underline that the destruction of the genre conventions is a constant in his work, as the eight rule of the Dogme 95 manifesto indicates. Just to put some examples, let us consider *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), and *Antichrist* (2009). In *Breaking the Waves*, Trier overturns the conventions of melodramas. Usually, this genre is characterized by a sumptuous, baroque, and unrealistic audiovisual treatment that allows the viewers to stay comfortably away from the emotions of the characters, or, in other words, to contemplate them from an external perspective. In contrast, the style of *Breaking the Waves* is documentary, claustrophobic, and hyper-realistic, the editing is dynamic, and the hand-held camera is hyperactive. All of this creates an uncomfortable atmosphere, close and tense, distanced from the usual audiovisual tone of melodramas; in sum, an atmosphere that, instead of offering an external perspective, drags the viewer into the narrative, stimulating a subjective point of view. With respect to *Dancer in the Dark*, it turns around the conventions of musical films. It tells the story of Selma (Björk), a Czech immigrant living in the United States that is losing her vision due to an ocular and hereditary and degenerative disease. She is working as hard as she can in a in a factory to pay and operation for his son that would prevent him of this same disease. However, as a tragic heroin, she goes through severe problems that will end with a death sentence. Thus *Dancer in the Dark* is a social, tragic, and realistic musical—which is almost a contradiction in terms. Indeed, classic musical films like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Stanley Donen, 1954) and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) tend to be light, optimistic, and superficial movies that entertain the audience with stereotypical romantic plots, a familiar sense of comedy and musical interludes. In fact, this choreographed fragments—which are in the end what defines the genre—are the paradigmatic example of the subversion of genre conventions in *Dancer in the Dark*, because, while in traditional musicals these interludes do not have an essential connection with the plot, in Trier's film these scenes are fundamental to understand it. Moreover, musical transitions in *Dancer in the Dark*, in contrast with the rest of the movie—which is filmed with muted colours and a hand-held camera—, are shot with several fixed cameras and saturated, intense, and cheerful colours. Thus it seems that, unlike what is usual in most musical films, *Dancer in the Dark* does not intend to entertain us but to disturb us. And finally, *Antichrist* would be an example of the subversion of the horror genre. The film revolves around two central themes: the suffering of a mother for her son's death, which she feels responsible for, and the suspicion that the world is the devil's work. And these themes fuse together in such a manner that, as the movie unfolds, the mother appears to be the carrier of evil. In this sense, if *Melancholia* stems from the last book of the Bible, *Antichrist* seems an inversion of the book of Genesis, with the couple returning to a twisted forest that looks as an anti-Eden just to bring forth evil. With these elements, and unlike what is common in many horror movies, Trier does not terrify the viewer with horror shocks, but with a distressing atmosphere. And it does so deforming the conventions of the genre. *Antichrist* contains everything that horror movies usually contain: explicit violence, mutilations, a cabin in the woods, craziness, sex, religious symbols, etc. These elements, however, are not combined with the usual clichés of the genre—at least in its pop-corn version—, but with an escalation of tension and unease—close to Japanese films as *Dark Water* (Hideo Nakata, 2002)—that is difficult to decipher.

A first characteristic of this genre that Trier's movie subverts is the uncertainty of the object that it has been argued above. Therefore, here I would just like to recall that, from my perspective, the fundamental difference between *Melancholia* and conventional disaster films is that, while in the latter the threats are concrete and well-defined—as for instance the monster in *Cloverfield*—, the indeterminacy of the planet in the former makes it an audiovisual representation of Haufniensis' anxiety.[117] Having said that, and taking into account that this feature has been already argued, we must go deeper and examine another feature of disaster movies that *Melancholia* transgresses.

Being usually focused on the efforts of the characters to avoid the threat, the narrative of conventional disaster and apocalyptic movies tends to emphasise action and spectacle. Thus, as argued, they are action movies with a catastrophic or apocalyptic context. To a large extent, this is strongly related with the previous feature, in the sense that the threat can be avoided precisely because it is concrete and determinate. After all, on a narrative level, the threat plays the role of the antagonist, and as such it moves the characters and puts the plot in motion. In contrast to this, *Melancholia* is not an action film. In the first place, while conventional apocalyptic films put the emphasis on spectacle, fireworks, and adrenaline, Trier's movie revolves around anxiety, despair, melancholy, and depression. Although it could be argued that, in one way or another, all disaster films play with the anxiety generated by the proximity of the cataclysm, here I am claiming that one of the distinguishing features of *Melancholia* is that it approaches this anxiety as Haufniensis anxiety and not as the fear of something concrete, that it does it from a very subjective perspective rather that the external point of view that is common in most apocalyptic films, and that, for its cinematic construction, constitutes a materialisation of this anxiety. Moreover, the truth is that most apocalyptic films do not materialise this threat insofar as, at the end, after some vicissitudes and several action scenes, the apocalypse is averted. *Melancholia*, then, invites the spectator to a deeper reflection about anxiety, which is the centre of the narrative and not a pretext to stimulate the action of some terrified people who are trying to escape from an apocalyptic menace. In Floquet's words, Trier "is not interested in the end of one world,

[117] The name of the planet clearly indicates its symbolic status as a materialisation of melancholy itself. That said, as explained, my approach is not psychological. And this is why, instead of exploring in further depth the role of melancholy in Trier's movie, here I am basically arguing that the planet might work as cinematic materialisation of anxiety.

as many (...) Hollywood disaster features may show it; he rather looks into the end of *the* world and into the personal issues such an ultimate situation entails" (2016, 91).

In this sense, the development of *Melancholi*a's plot is not a race for survival. As Shaviro points out, Trier's movie does not contain "the hyperbolic devastation, and frenetically edited chaos, that we find in Hollywood disaster movies like Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998), or Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009)—or, for that matter, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997)" (2012, 6). In other words, *Melancholia* "avoids shock tactics, and does not assault the viewer" (6), which, as explained, it is a distinctive characteristic of *montrage* films, those that seek a subjective truth and expose the constitutive ambiguity of human existence. Thus *Melancholia* is by no means an action movie. John commits suicide as soon as he discovers the inevitability of the end. He does not make any attempt to escape—or rather, he only makes one and he does it in the most non-spectacular way. Certainly, his death is the antithesis of the usual model of brave and heroic death that can be found in disaster films, insofar as he dies completely alone in the stable, between straw and horse dung. For her part, Justine also makes no attempt to escape a fate that she considers desirable, a feeling that contrasts with the survival instinct of the characters in conventional disaster films. Thus John and Justine destroy any possibility of action in *Melancholia*'s narrative. And the only attempt to escape from the apocalypse and therefore the only opportunity for action—namely, Claire's race with the golf cart—is desperate, pathetic, frustrated, and brief, almost like a parody of action films. Part of this pathos comes from the fact that the audience knows since the opening that the collision is inevitable. As Justine, we are aware of the futility of Claire's efforts. And this knowledge destroys in advance any possibility of the suspense needed for an action plot. It is as if Trier was playing role of that insensitive friend who tells you the ending of a novel or a movie when you are about to begin it. The last scene of the opening leaves no room for doubt: obliteration is inevitable and imminent. Action narratives only make sense if there is suspense—we suffer for the characters in *Cloverfield* because we do not know if their efforts to survive will succeed. And *Melancholia* eliminates this possibility from the beginning, which impedes the feeling of suspense. Hence, in Trier's film, planet Melancholia performs two crucial destructions: at the end of the story, it destroys the Earth and the life it contains; and at the beginning, on a narrative level, it erases the possibility of suspense and the excitement that it could have generated.

In this sense, another convention of disaster movies and its apocalyptic subgenre that *Melancholia* subverts is the optimism that can be found in pre-9/11 apocalyptic films. As we have seen, these movies, after shaking the viewer with mass panic and the menace of absolute destruction, develop a plot in which humanity—or the group that represents it—is finally saved, usually through a heroic action that initially had few opportunities to succeed. In contrast, as many post-9/11 movies, Trier's film lacks any sense of hope. Obviously, this subversion is related to the previous ones insofar as, without the possibility of what is considered a "happy ending", action scenes in particular and suspense in general would make no sense. After a series of ups and downs, explosions, acrobatic scenes, and some suffering, the audience tends to expect an ending that offers closure and meaning, turning tragic deaths into meaningful sacrifices. But *Melancholia*'s message is just the opposite: it is hopeless and pessimistic, a message that Justine summarises when, towards the end, she tells Claire that life on Earth is evil and that they do not need to grieve for it.[118] Unlike biblical apocalypse—and the most part of disaster films—,there is neither a triumph of good over evil nor an ultimate meaning: there is simply obliteration and cosmic indifference. The message that remains at the end is Justine's message: the Earth deserves its end. And one of the merits of *Melancholia* is that, after watching the movie, this message is not easy to deny.

In this section I have tried to show in which ways *Melancholia* subverts the conventions of disaster and apocalyptic movies in order to offer another argument to support the thesis that it has an indeterminate nature that makes it an audiovisual translation of anxiety. I believe that the genre transgressions that I have exposed so far are the most relevant. But there are others, such as the inversion of the cliché of the romantic subplot, which is a common side plot that supports the main one. For instance, at the end of *2012*—in which the complete obliteration is avoided thanks to the construction of several enormous boats that function as arks—the main character is finally reconciled with his ex-wife. This romantic subplot can be found in one form or another in almost every disaster movie and its apocalyptic subgenre. In contrast, the first part of *Melancholia* represents the constant failure of the classic love subplot, castrating any possibility of it. And finally, another subversion of the genre has already been pointed

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[118] Scene no. 12: "Live on Earth is Evil," *Melancholia*, 2011, DVD, directed by Las Von Trier (New York, NY: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2012).

out before when arguing the indeterminacy of the object: *Melancholia* does not play with the always present cliché of the mass media broadcast of the apocalypse; that is, it does not show journalists and scientist informing about the facts that suggest or prove the imminence of the disaster; there is no public pronouncement by politicians or public servants, no summit meetings, no declarations of the state of emergency, no riots in the streets. In sum, there is no spectacle. Indeed, as Shaviro underlines, *Melancholia* "refuses to present us with a grandiose and sublime spectacle of destruction" (2012, 6). In any case, the aim of this part of the dissertation was to provide arguments to defend that one of the main features of the film is its indeterminacy, and the most relevant have been exposed. The following step will be to find in *Melancholia* another essential element of anxiety: its ambiguity.

2.4. A *montrage* ambiguity

2.4.1. Structure

As largely explained, there is a type of cinema that, in opposition to the classic style of editing, instead of imposing a fixed interpretation to the viewer, introduces into the cinematic narrative the inherent ambiguity of existence, leaving open space to different readings and thus offering a non-deciphered reality that demands an active subject to interpret it. This way to understand cinematographic art—that following Lapoujade I have called *montrage* cinema—is an attempt to think about the unthinkable and to represent what cannot be represented, in much the same way as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside". And just as Kierkegaard, in order to undertake this task, filmmakers had to force the usual conventions of cinematographic language, which, as shown before, include long shots, depth of focus, a hand-held camera that follows the action, and, last but not least, the unity of space-time continuum through a reduction of editing, which avoids the causal continuity of fragmented shots that offers a fixed meaning. Thanks to this alternative understanding of cinema, reality is approached in its full ambiguity, and a certain meaning, if any, only emerges when the viewer reflects upon the film from a pointed position of freedom. Such a position of freedom exists when the viewer is not subjected to an imposed meaning but is free to construct their own. Taking this into account, let us now have a look at the use of cinematic techniques in *Melancholia* that

support the statement that it can be considered as a *montrage* film that faces us with the constitutive ambiguity of existence.

One technical feature of *Melancholia* that is worth mentioning is the camera use, which contributes to generating ambiguity through duality. Although in this film Trier was no longer following the vow of chastity of Dogme 95 manifesto—as evidenced for instance by the special effects, the use of artificial illumination, and the non-diegetic use of music—, he still maintains in a certain degree the hand-held use of the camera in a large part of the movie. Indeed, as Shaviro notes, the development of

> *Melancholia* is quite different stylistically from this opening sequence. Far from holding back to provide static, long-shot tableaux, von Trier's camera pushes aggressively into the faces of its subjects. Everything is too close, too stiflingly intimate (…). The camera is handheld, and it flutters about continually, never staying still and never steadying itself, but instead continually indulging in swish pans, readjustments of focus, and nervous reframings (…). The camera always seems to be in the midst of the action (…). (Shaviro 2012, 15-16)

This use of the camera subverts the classic notion of framing and generates a tense and threatening atmosphere that remains throughout the film. And above all, following the actors to the drama instead of forcing them to adapt to a certain frame, this technique introduces ambiguity in the sense that the camera is not serving the capture of an alleged objective and universal truth or reality, but the approach to the subjective truth of the individual—in this particular case, Claire and Justine's truths.

At the same time, we also find some sequences in *Melancholia* filmed with a more classic style of camera—namely, a fixed or with smooth movements—, which offers a more sober atmosphere. Apart from the opening, a good example of this use of the camera is found at the end of the first part in the aerial shot of the two sisters riding a horse in the midst of the fog. These solemn scenes, like in some of the most outstanding films of silent movies—as for *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)—show a very meticulous and pictorial work on the balance and expressiveness of the composition. Thus in *Melancholia* there are two camera styles that create opposing atmospheres. While the hand-held camera approaches the drama from an intimate or subjective perspective, the fixed one observes the story from a cosmic or more objective point of view; and while the first one agitates and stirs, the second one dazzles and fascinates. Hence, this dual use also contributes to introduce ambiguity in *Melancholia*.

Another cinematic characteristic of *Melancholia* that makes it a *montrage* movie is precisely the editing style, which also subverts what Bazin called classical editing. Its use in Trier's film is parallel to the dual use of camera. In contrast to the opening and to those sequences in which the camera and the editing style are more classical, the editing of the rest of the film, as Shaviro explains, is "rough and abrupt, filled with jump cuts and abrupt transitions" (2012, 16), and therefore in line with the use of the hand-held camera. Certainly, as Shaviro underlines, sometimes Trier "conforms to shot-reverse shot structures and other traditional continuity rules; but at other times, he casually ignores these conventions, flipping around spatial relations and scrambling perspectives" (16). In sum, *Melancholia* transgresses the usual editing logic through techniques such as jump cuts, violations of the continuity in the shot scale, and temporal discontinuity. For this reason, Shaviro calls *Melancholia* a "*post-continuity* film" (16). One example of this can be found in the first part of the movie, when, after the toasts, Jack presents a musician called Catherine that will entertain the guests. Just when a close-up shot shows us that she is about to start playing the guitar, a sudden cut takes us with Justine to the exterior of the house. With this, as Aaron Rodríguez Serrano notes, the film fractures the usual narrative expectations, which are based on the desire of a perfect closure, both narratively and aesthetically (2016, 130). In fact, for Rodríguez Serrano, this violent and crude style of editing that joins extremely brief close-ups with long shots contributes to create the sense of loss and estrangement and the physical and spiritual violence that fills the movie—or, in other words, generates a cinematographic incommodity parallel to that of the narration (129-130). Therefore, as Shaviro states, this *montrage* style of editing together with the use of the hand-held camera give the film a "pseudo-documentary look and feel" (2012, 16) that, being itself a cinematic fracture, approaches the subjective truth and constitutes an occasion for the spectator to face the essential ambiguity of human existence.

This ambiguity is also introduced in *Melancholia* by means of the only non-diegetic music of the film, namely, Wagner's *Prelude* to the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*, which is not only repeated throughout the narration, but it is also repeated every time from the beginning—in a non-Kierkegaardian repetition insofar it is not a transgressor movement but, on the contrary, the absence of motion. As Shaviro states, due to this repetition, "the deeply ambivalent emotions aroused by this piece of music are never altogether abolished" (2012, 13). Apart from noting the inherent ambivalence of the

Prelude—in the sense that it is beautiful and tragic at the same time—, what is most relevant for our line of argument here is that, being, in Shaviro's words, a "sticking-point for the film, a moment that we return to incessantly, because it can never be surpassed" (13), this music never provides closure. Certainly, this repetition of the *Prelude* can also be interpreted as a musical expression of Justine's depression or melancholic condition, insofar as it represents a motionless state, the inability to move on. However, I want to put the emphasis on the fact that this repetition introduces ambiguity in *Melancholia* as far as the music creates tension without resolving it. Therefore, in contrast to the apocalyptic tradition, Trier's film does not offer any sense of release or any kind of fixed meaning in the form of a resolution—by contrast, it points out the essential ambiguity of existence. This way it becomes an occasion to the viewer to find an explanation by himself, just as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside".

2.4.2. Intimacy

Hence, *montrage* apocalyptic cinema—which, according to my thesis, *Melancholia* represents paradigmatically—seems to constantly point in the same direction, namely, in what in Kierkegaard's opinion philosophy had abandoned as insignificant crumbs: the concrete existence of the single individual and the impossibility to approach it from a universal and objective perspective. As explained, Kierkegaard reacted to this with a strategy of communication that, in opposition to speculative systems, incarnated different life-views in several pseudonyms, creating what can be called an intimate philosophy. In a similar line, I have stated as a criterion to define *montrage* apocalyptic films the ability to focus on the experience of the individuals when facing imminent obliteration. And *Melancholia* constitutes a paradigmatic example of this. Indeed, unlike most apocalyptic films, Trier's movie is focused on the experience of the single individual: it does not attempt to universalise the experience of the apocalypse or describe from an external point of view the reaction of the entire humanity; there are no grand speeches praising the civilisation or human beings in general, just an intimate confrontation with imminent obliteration.

At this point I should like to state clearly that I am not claiming that what makes *montrage* apocalyptic films a special occasion to think earnestly on death are the specific moods and reactions of the characters in the movie. That would mean that the vehicle to the possibility of the earnest thought of death would be empathy, and my

approach is not psychological. Indeed, my aim is to analyse *Melancholia* from a formal perspective in order to search within its cinematographic structure for the reasons that make it an occasion to think earnestly about death. I am not defending that the thought of one's own death can be stimulated when watching a movie through the empathy with the characters, but through the cinematic organisation of the film, which, as noted, is parallel to anxiety insofar as it opens a fracture in any unambiguous understanding of existence. For this very reason, I will not focus my investigation in the melancholic mood itself and its relation to anxiety, because, although it is certainly a Kierkegaardian topic, I am not interested in a psychological approach of the characters in *Melancholia*—and even less in a psychological interpretation of anxiety. Furthermore, my dissertation is not about examining a movie to find the philosophy of Kierkegaard—if there is a "Kierkegaardian philosophy" at all. Even if sometimes I flirt with this approach because it helps me to offer a deeper analysis, my main interest is to examine how *Melancholia* constitutes an audiovisual translation of anxiety for its very cinematographic structure, not due to the behaviour of its characters. That is to say, just as Kierkegaard's approach to anxiety is ontological and not psychological, I do not carry out a psychological interpretation of apocalyptic films in general and *Melancholia* in particular to defend them as an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death, but, instead, an ontological interpretation from a cinematographic perspective.

However, this does not mean that the approach to the characters cannot bring added value to my research. As stated, I consider that a central criterion to define *montrage* apocalyptic films is precisely their ability to focus on the experience of the individuals when facing imminent obliteration, which is another element that contributes to bringing into light the truth of the single individual when anxiety creates a fracture in all meanings and categories. Again, the mechanism is not just empathy, but above all the creation of an atmosphere through cinematographic arrangement. Thus the characters in *Melancholia* are relevant for my investigation insofar as the cinematic approach to them is an element that introduces ambiguity, something that contrasts with editing-based films that leave no space for open interpretations. And this ambiguity stems from the intimacy of the apocalypse, which Shaviro also underlines:

> The aesthetic of *Melancholia* is anti-spectacular, anti-sublime, and quietly deflationary. (…) Although *Melancholia* envisions the complete destruction of the Earth, its action unfolds in a sort of parenthesis, between the first intimations

> of this destruction and its final advent. It is less concerned with the actual mechanisms of cosmic disaster, than with how the prospect of this disaster affects its two protagonists. (…) The film moves directly, and without any mediation, from intimate melodrama to cosmological drama and back again. It connects inner personal experience with ultimate cosmic realities, skipping over whatever might lie in between. (Shaviro 2012, 6-7)

Indeed, Trier does not approach the apocalypse from an external point of view, but from the perspective of the single individual, putting the emphasis on subjective truth, the one that demands subjective appropriation and, as anxiety, creates a fissure in any unambiguous understanding of existence. Therefore, from this perspective, I will now carry out a brief overview of the characters in *Melancholia*, because its intimate treatment is one of the elements that contribute to make Trier's film a *montrage* apocalyptic movie. In the end, both Trier's and Kierkegaard's works avoid the pretension of objectivity and aim to the existence of the single individual.

In the first place, Justine, who can be considered the main character in the film, suffers from a condition that the critics have defined in several ways, being depression the most common; a description that I am not interested in, insofar that, as stated, my approach is not psychological. What interests me from Justine is that her condition is basically ontological. As Shaviro explains, her state

> cannot be characterized as just a contingent response to one particular set of circumstances. For it involves the rejection of any "particular circumstances" whatsoever. Justine's depression marks a rupture with the social order *as such*: an order that cannot function without the tacit complicities and denials that are understood, and entered into, by everyone. In refusing this, Justine enters into a condition that is absolute and unqualified. Her depression is ungrounded, self-producing and self-validating. It needs no external motivation or justification. (Shaviro 2012, 19)

From this perspective, taking into account that it does not have any particular object, Justine's state can be read as Haufniensis' anxiety—or better said, a cinematographic representation of it. However, Justine's character is best interpreted at the light of the *Symparanekromenoi*, the Fellowship of the Dead, those reflective aesthetes who suffer from melancholia and do not fear death because they consider that the worst tragedy is

to live since the recollection of happy moments dies with them.[119] The *Symparanekromenoi* believe that the best would have been not to be born and thus they conspire with death against life. And taking into account that they writings are posthumous, their society is actually apocalyptic. In fact, the discourses of the aesthete in front of their fellows are literally apocalyptic. At the beginning of *Silhouettes*, for example, he states that the doctrine of the *Symparanekromenoi* is the "doctrine of the downfall of everything" (EO, vol. 1, 167) and that they are waiting for the apocalypse.

As the *Symparanekromenoi*, Justine is blocked in a state in which she does not see herself as part of the world, since, for her, the world has already fallen apart. Because of this, her condition improves with every signal that indicates that the cosmic collision is inevitable. While Claire is increasingly afraid, Justine celebrates it. As the *Symparanekromenoi*, she is already dead and sees the apocalypse as a blessing. In Shaviro's words, "Justine is not worried about the fate of the Earth, precisely because for her the catastrophe has already happened" (2012, 25). She represents the depressive individual that longs for death as an escape from life. And as we know, this attitude of not fearing death and desiring it is criticised in "At a Graveside" as cowardice. It is mood, not earnestness. Indeed, rather than the proper approach to death—namely, the one that fears it but also thinks about it as one's own death in a way that provides the retroactive power in life—, Justine embraces global obliteration because it means the end of her own misery. This way death has not its retrospective power because, after all, Justine does not want to live.

[119] In this regard it is relevant to note that Dunst's role shares her name with the main character of Marquis de Sade's *Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue* (1991), a young woman seeking for virtue who endures a long process of suffering and humiliation only to end fatally struck by a bolt of a lightning. Moreover, one of the most characteristic features of Sade's novel is that it shows a relation between eroticism and death, something that Trier's Justine also manifests in the aforesaid scene in which she bathes completely nude in the light of planet Melancholia. As explained in the first chapter when exposing Ariès theory, this erotisation of death started between the 16th and 18th centuries and originated the Gothic sensibility. Ariès underlines this in a way that contributes to understand Trier's Justine: "Like the sexual act, death was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world. Like the sexual act, death for the Marquis de Sade is a break, a rupture. (...) From now on [death] would be thought of as a *break*" (Ariès 1974, 57-58). And indeed, Trier's Justine is a transgressor character that seeks in sex and death a way to escape from her life, a character that, as anxiety, repetition, and death, represents an interruption. Thus probably the name of Dunst's role is not coincidental, especially considering that *Melancholia* is not the first movie in which Trier seems to draw inspiration from Sade's novel—the leading role in *Breaking the Waves* (1996), for example, was a sexually exploited and feminine figure with the slaughter capacity of a saint. To deepen into this comparison would take us away from the main purpose of this dissertation, but it is worth noting that both *Melancholia*'s Justine and the main role in Sade's novel are ambiguous characters that, as anxiety, concentrate in themselves innocence and transgression.

What indicates to us that Justine is experiencing a loss of the world is above all her incapacity to fit into the social conventions of her environment. As explained, the first part of the movie describes the tension between the emotions that we repress in order to live in society and the protective wall of culture that eventually will end up collapsing. In fact, it seems that *Melancholia* warns us that, although we believe that we have tamed nature—both our instincts and the Universe itself—, it is always threatening us. In this sense, both social conventions and science are useless. Trier, then, uses the wedding to make a philosophical exercise that is usual in his films: investigating taboos, breaking down the stability of what is assumed, and shocking the audience by showing us what is hidden and putting us in front of the mirror. This way, *Melancholia* faces us again with the essential ambiguity of human existence through the presentation of the absurdity of social conventions, an absurdity that the apocalypse—both interior and exterior—makes evident, especially considering that we know from the beginning that the Earth will disappear. Indeed, Trier makes us observe the conventions of marriage in light of the apocalypse and this destroys them one by one: the toasts are depressing; Justine is incapable of throwing the bridal bouquet and Claire takes it from her hands and throws it with irritation; the wedding night ends before its beginning in a pathetic way; the wedding organiser is extremely worried about every detail and specially about a ridiculous competition that encourages the guests to conjecture the exact number of beans in a bottle, etc. Thus Justine is trapped in the conventions of a world to which she no longer belongs. And everybody pressures her to be happy, especially his sister and his brother-in-law. For instance, when Justine leaves the party for a moment to be with his nephew, John demands her to be happy remembering her how much money the wedding has cost. However, despite the pressure of the others and her own efforts to be happy, Justine is increasingly sad, isolated, and melancholic. The first scene in which the viewer begins to realise the growing unhappiness of Justine is very important for the present dissertation because it shows us another essential element of anxiety: the desire for transgression awakened by the prohibition. In this scene, Justine leaves the wedding, walks through the golf course, stops in front of the eighteenth hole, pushes her wedding dress up, and urinates in the middle of the lawn. She could have done it in any of the dozens of luxurious toilets of John's mansion, but this way she is transgresses the conventions that oppress her—just like Trier does with genre conventions.

After this point, the rest of the first part of *Melancholia* tells the progressive collapse of both the celebration and Justine. She stills makes efforts to be happy and to behave as expected. But again she will transgress repeatedly. The most paradigmatic transgression occurs during one of the most symbolic conventions. The sequence begins with a first scene in which Justine and Michael, alone in their suite, are about to consummate the marriage. And although Michael tries it, Justine's face and attitude not only indicate that she does not want to have sexual relations with him, but that just the possibility of it disgusts her. In fact, the scene is so subversive that it ends just the reverse of what it is supposed to. After an uncomfortable attempt to undress themselves, it is obvious that Justine does not want to be there and Michael has to fasten Justine's dress. Then, Justine precipitously leaves the room. To increase the pathos of the situation, the scene ends with Michael alone in the room, absolutely bewildered, wearing only underpants and a white shirt, and slowly raising his socks. And in the following scene occurs the great transgression. Justine maintains a sexual relationship in the middle of the golf course with the young man that her boss had hired to follow her at all times. As we have seen with Haufniensis, the freedom that constitutes us produces anxiety, which is a mixture of attraction and repulsion.

In order to probe further into *Melancholi*a's intimate atmosphere that contributes to make it, through ambiguity, a *montrage* apocalyptic film, it is also important to say a few words about Justine's relationship with her nephew, Leo. As noted before, they get along very well and have a special complicity. Leo loves, trusts, and even idolatrises Justine. But most of all, he accepts her as she is and, unlike the rest of her family, does not pressure her in any sense. And for her part, Justine takes care of him and comforts him, which is something that she seems incapable to do for herself. However, in spite of this, they find few occasions to stay together. As Shaviro notes, the reason for this is that they have different experiences of time (2012, 44). As the *Symparanekromenoi*, Justine is a living dead. For Shaviro, while she is forced to live and represents the absence of future, Leo "lives in a time that is all future: a time of excited anticipation and continual deferral" (44). And in relation to this, there are two details that I would like to bring about. On the one hand, the figure of Leo is another transgression of the apocalyptic narrative, insofar as, if in those films children usually represent the hope for a future and the survival of human beings, Leo, by contrast, represents the absence of hope and future. In other words, although Leo lives in a time of anticipation, the viewer

knows that this anticipation, this possibility, will never be a reality. Hence, on the other hand and from a Kierkegaardian perspective, the character of Leo constitutes an occasion to awake from the illusion of the postponement—that is, the unjustifiable idea that, ignoring death's uncertainty, makes me believe that I have still some time to live because my death will occur at some point in a distant future. Indeed, Leo, who in Shaviro's words "clings to his expectations of all the things that have been promised him for later" (44), embodies the illusions of the postponement.

However, as Shaviro points out, Leo and Justine's temporality will come together "at that unthinkable, unrepresentable moment" (44) in which the world ends, awakening us of the illusion of the postponement. It is at this final moment when her relationship becomes more intense. Calmer than ever, Justine continues doing for him what is incapable of doing for herself and creates a consoling fiction to protect him emotionally from the apocalypse. She tells him that she knows how to build a magic cave that will keep them safe. With this, Justine does for Leo what John should have done and did not do, insofar as he not only killed himself abandoning his family, but he also told Leo that it would be impossible to hide from the apocalypse. Thus, indirectly criticising John's rationalistic perspective, Trier shows us Justine and Leo gathering sticks to build a magic cave—which is in the end a tepee frame—that, although it will not protect them from the apocalypse, at least it will comfort them, something that science has proved incapable to do. Again, as with the opposition between the scientific telescope and the amateur device to observe planet Melancholia—being the latter the one that finally tells us that the end is unavoidable—, what finally seems to work is what initially appeared to be useless. Therefore, it seems that Trier's movie constantly aims to a radically subjective approach and to the necessity of appropriation by the individual. As suggested in "At a Graveside", the abstract, external, and allegedly objective perspective does not work to face the thought of one's own death.

Regarding Claire, the first dialogue of the second part of the film indicates that her process is the inverse of Justine's—although, as stated, their relationship implies a questioning of the binary logic of (ab)normality. In this conversation, Claire shows that she is afraid of planet Melancholia and John tries to comfort her with aesthetic and scientific reasons and a patronising attitude. But his efforts are useless. Although at the beginning she tries to overcome her fear and takes care of Justine, as the film unfolds and the apocalypse appears to be inevitable, Claire will progressively break down. In a

way, her process has some similarities with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, which has been used at the beginning of this dissertation to illustrate the possibility that some human beings think about death as a universal syllogism that only affects others—that is, the external and non-earnest perspective denounced by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". Unlike Justine, Claire is commonsensical and perfectly adapted to the social conventions of her bourgeois environment, doing always what she is supposed to do in an effective way and playing the traditional woman's role in a patriarchal society. She herself seems to be the product of these conventions, to the extent that one might say that her life does not belong to her or that she does not have her own private space. Indeed, with no need to have a job, Claire's occupations are always related to caring for others in almost an obsessive manner. As Shaviro explains, her "whole life is consumed by domesticity" (22). But planet Melancholia and the obliteration that brings with itself constitute, just as death and anxiety, an absolute interruption of everydayness and of the regime of the possible that surpasses any attempt of rational comprehension. Therefore, when Claire discovers that the apocalypse is imminent, she collapses. The end of the world is not a domestic problem that she can take care of.

From this perspective, Claire's character in the second part of *Melancholia* can be interpreted through Heidegger's reading of anxiety in *Being and Time*—which, as explained in the first chapter, seems to be based in Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside". Heidegger postulates that in everydayness each individual lives in a state of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) in which he melts into the anonymity of the crowd (*das Man*), imitating others with an attitude that escapes the responsibility of choice, and, therefore, of its authentic existence: a being-possible indefinite and free to choose himself. In this context, Heidegger defines anxiety as the basic state of mind which is inherent to the individual and that situates himself in front of the possibility, in front of himself as a being-in-the-world. With this, anxiety pulls the individual out of his state of thrownness, singles him out, breaks his everyday familiarity and shows him his freedom to choose himself. This way, the individual discovers that, from all of the possibilities, there is one—death—that escapes his choice and which manifests itself as the inevitable destiny. Thus anxiety situates us in front of nothingness, revealing to us that death is our ownmost and always imminent possibility. And for Heidegger, the only way to have a proper or authentic existence is to face our own mortality, become a being-toward-

death. However, as Heidegger notes, in everyday life death appears to be something that happens to others:

> In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is 'known' as a mishap which is constantly occurring—as a 'case of death'. Someone or other 'dies', be he neighbour or stranger [Nächste oder Fernerstehende]. People who are no acquaintances of ours are 'dying' daily and hourly. 'Death' is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. (Heidegger 1962, 296-297)

Kierkegaard explains in "At a Graveside" that this abstract knowledge of mortality is understood in everydayness through the illusion of the postponement. We theoretically know that we will die, but not yet. And we hide death under the fear of specific injuries as well as through immediate concerns, as we have seen in *Melancholia* in Claire's obsessive organisation of the celebration as well as in John's pragmatism. This way, we transform anxiety—which has an indeterminate object—into the fear of determinate threats, burying our most certain authenticity: that death is possible at any moment. Hence, Heidegger, just like Kierkegaard, insists on the necessity of thinking death as one's own death and criticises the evasive concealment of death in everydayness which prevents facing its decisive character. At the beginning of this dissertation I have wondered if we really know we are mortal. And it is reasonable to believe that some of us, like Tolstoy's Ivan Illich, think about death in an abstract way, as something external that only affects others, without seeing it as our lot. This is why Kierkegaard wrote in "At a Graveside" that the proper way to approach death is the earnest thought. Heidegger's anxiety is the state of mind that makes us see death as our own death—and thus, from a Kierkegaardian framework it can be said that it pushes us to think about death in an earnest way—, something that Claire realises when she discovers that planet Melancholia is inevitably heading towards Earth.

Indeed, *Melancholia* presents us three different attitudes when facing the evidence of imminent death. Firstly, that of John, who has always lived immersed in the instrumental rationality characteristic of the businessman, and now, after realising—as the powerful men in the Book of Revelation—that his power is just an illusion, he cannot bear the thought of death and, cowardly and ironically, commits suicide in a cold, calculated way that is devoid of any ritual manner. Secondly, Justine's perspective, which, as mentioned, is similar to that of the *Symparanekromenoi*. And

finally, Claire's attitude, who in front of planet Melancholia experiences the anxiety that pulls her out of the state of thrownness, understanding this way—as Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich—that death is not an abstraction that happens to others but also her own inevitable lot. Shaviro explains these three different positions using Thacker's concepts:

> In *Melancholia*, Claire is concerned with the world-for-us. As a figure from melodrama, she is entirely confined to the domestic sphere; even her dreams and desires do not extend beyond this sphere. John, as the ostensible man of action, with his scientific hobbies and his telescope, would seem to be concerned with the world-in-itself. At the very least, he pretends to such a concern, with his pronouncements about the "wonderful planet" Melancholia, and his assurances that its passage will leave the Earth unscathed. Justine, however, in her melancholic withdrawal from both of these worlds, is attuned instead to the deep enigmas of the world-without-us. (Shaviro 2012, 38-39)

Thus in a similar manner to John, everydayness had concealed from Claire her ownmost possibility. And the suspicion of the inevitability of the apocalypse that concerns her at the beginning of the second part of the film gradually opens her to the understanding of her temporality and to the world-without-us that Justine has already envisaged—which, just as death in "At a Graveside", is beyond our comprehension because, as Shaviro notes, it "does not conform to human concepts, or to any sort of humanly-imposed order" (2012, 39). In fact, there is a dialogue between the two sisters that makes evident Claire's confusion during this process of realisation of death's certainty. When Justine is telling her that she believes that Earth is evil and that existence is about to end, Claire asks: "But where would Leo grow up?"[120] As if she were unable to fully understand the implications of the apocalypse—just as Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, who has troubles to accept that his condition is terminal. In this sense, it can be said that Claire represents the attitude of denial, which, as explained at the very beginning of this dissertation, seems to be a usual human reaction in front of death. And actually, Claire's behaviour until the end, which will be an erratic struggle to accept the situation, expresses our constant struggle to deal with the certain uncertainty of death. Let us look at this briefly.

After discovering the corpse of her husband, she prepares breakfast and withholds John's suicide from Justine and Leo, telling them that he has gone to town. But during breakfast, she experiences a growing discomfort that pushes her to confirm again that

[120] Scene no. 12: "Live on Earth is Evil," *Melancholia*, 2011, DVD, directed by Las Von Trier (New York, NY: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2012).

Melancholia is fatally approaching. Panic-stricken, she bursts into tears and takes Leo to attempt the pathetic and useless aforementioned escape. But the golf cart beaks down just in front of the bridge and, once again, just like with Justine's horse in the first part, they cannot cross it. At that point, it seems that Claire is starting to realise that, in much the same way as Justine could not escape social conventions, nor can she and Leo escape the apocalypse. Thus she takes Leo in her arms and returns to the mansion, making a brief and dramatic pause in the middle of the golf course during a hailstorm. It must be noted that this pause is made in the nineteen hole, which only appears another time in the opening. As explained, John repeats several times during the film that the golf course of his resort has eighteen holes, something that, as Sandberg explains, is "a running joke that not only underscores his crass materialism, but also reminds viewers continually that a golf course has *only* eighteen holes—making clear that the nineteenth hole shown in the opening tableau is the extra, leftover position" (2016, 114). Thus, from Sandberg's point of view—who follows the analysis of Rodriguez (2011)—it seems that the nineteenth hole, as the rest of the images of the prologue, is a sign of the post-apocalypse (115), and therefore, a way to tell "the spectator that everything that follows in the film will similarly have the status of the 'nineteenth-green,' a tale from beyond the ending" (115). Is it as if the film had ended with the end of the prologue and the only one who knows it is Justine, whose life seems to be already over. From this perspective, then, the fact that Claire stops in the nineteen hole with an attitude that indicates a mix of desperation and resignation appears to be a way to demonstrate that she is beginning to accept that the world is about to end.

Back at the mansion, Justine is waiting for Claire and Leo with the condescending look of who has overcome a situation that the other one still refuses to accept. And although from this moment on Claire will try to accept the inevitability of the end, she will be upset when Justine rejects unpleasantly her proposal to spend the final moments together drinking a cup of wine in the terrace, in what appears to be, in Shaviro's words, "a desperate effort to keep up the appearances, and maintain the values of family and civility, for one last time" (2012, 23). As explained, instead of this phony convention which represents a continuation of those that oppressed her, Justine builds a teepee with Leo in which the three of them will await the collision in circle and holding their hands. In this sense, the final moments suggest that the only possibility to find any kind of meaning—if there is any—involves the destruction of the empty and imposed

conventions and the return to a more atavistic, simple, and personal rituals. In the end, Claire understands that there is nowhere to run, because we cannot escape from our own death. As we have seen in "At a Graveside", the proper approach to death is through as a personal confrontation with our own mortality. And *Melancholia*'s final moment shows clearly that, although Justine, Leo and Claire are together, they have to confront death for themselves, singularly. In other words, as I am defending here, Trier's movie seems to work as a cinematographic reminder of Kierkegaard's advice in "At a Graveside", exposing the crucial importance of thinking death as one's own death and thus criticising the approach to it through moods, an approach that prevents the individuals to confront its decisive character. As Shaviro explains, "Trier underlines the literalness of annihilation (…) by making it imminent, bringing it into our present moment as *what is about to happen*" (42). In this sense, again, *Melancholia* constitutes a reminder of the lie of the postponement, insofar as "the prospect of extinction has to be faced *here and now*" (42), and thus an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death.

Finally, as noted, *Melancholia* ends with the end of the world. The last scene shows us the three characters inside the tepee—Justine and Leo stand still and Claire moves restlessly—while the wandering planet collides with the Earth. After that, a black screen. As Shaviro notes, "[c]atastrophe goes unrepresented, because it literally, actually happens, in the diegetic world of the film, and in that way marks the absolute limit of diegetic representation" (42). In this sense, Trier's movie faces the problem of representing what cannot be represented that Kierkegaard also faced in "At a Graveside". While Kierkegaard criticises the representations of death but has to represent it to some extent, Trier cannot represent absolute obliteration in the diegetic narration and does it from a cosmic and thus external perspective, something that, in a way, suggests that death could only be represented from a non-human perspective. For us, death is an absolute limit and remains indefinable and inexplicable.

And yet, the collision is not exactly the end of the film. The cosmic blast is followed by a flash of light and then we are confronted with twenty-five seconds of black screen accompanied by the roar of the aftermath of the explosion. As Sandberg underlines, this sound of the apocalypse is "a reverberation, an echo of an absent cause; it is sound from the nineteenth green, so to speak" (2016, 115). With this, Trier gives us "an extra space in which to continue human perception after the humans are gone" (116). And thus, as

explained before, *Melancholia* makes us testify the absolute absence of testimonies, which is a fundamental characteristic of what I have called *montrage* apocalyptic movies that shows us that, as Kierkegaard stated in "At a Graveside", death explains nothing. In the end, the universe remains indifferent to our extinction and faces us with the paradox of thinking the unthinkable, which is the necessary condition to think about death. Therefore, putting us in this position, Trier's movie—which does not offer a fixed meaning and leaves free space to imagination and reflection—can constitute an occasion to generate the earnest thought of death, at least if the spectator accepts the responsibility to deal by himself with death's enigma.

2.5. The aesthetic ambiguity of the apocalypse

I have stated before that, as most critics agree to highlight, thanks to the combination of aesthetic beauty and spiritual discomfort, *Melancholia* can stimulate the ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion characteristic of anxiety as defined by Haufniensis, insofar as the sense of aesthetic pleasure stems when faced with the apocalypse.[121] That is, Trier's movie can make us wish for the end of the world, to see it, to experience it. And at the same time, we want nothing to do with it. It is an ambiguous combination between attraction and repulsion that, as anxiety, lies in our existence; and perhaps similar to that of the individual in front of the abyss that Haufniensis describes: "Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down" (CA, 61).[122] This way, I am trying to argue that *Melancholia* might function as an audiovisual translation of anxiety and therefore become an occasion to think

[121] This ambiguity of the attraction to contemplate something threatening even though it generates repulsion could be compared with the one that transmits the narrator of Wells' *The War of the Worlds* and the one that Lovecraft's characters experience when faced to unnameable monsters. It can be objected that, unlike anxiety, fear stems in front of a definite threat. But I believe these two parallelisms deserve to be considered insofar as both Martians and Lovecraft's cosmic entities are so unknown that cannot be considered a definite threat. In any case, I will not deepen into these comparisons—which could also lead me to Freud's uncanny—because that would be the subject of another dissertation.

[122] It is interesting to note that the word "angst" comes from the Latin substantive *angor* and the corresponding verb *ango*, which means "to constrict", as well as a cognate word is *angustus*, which means "narrow". In fact, as Crocq notes, the relationship between anxiety and the oppression derived from narrowness is also found in Biblical Hebrew, as it is attested when "Job expresses his anguish (Job 7:10) literally with the Hebrew expression 'the *narrowness* (tsar) of my spirit'" (2015, 321). Therefore, from an etymological perspective and regarding Haufniensis reference to the abyss, the word "anxiety" already contained a geological reference and a connection with the experience that it generates.

earnestly about one's own death. So far it has been already explained which elements of the movie can generate a sense of unease. Hence, in order to analyse the other element of this dichotomy—namely, attraction—, in this final section I will expose some elements of *Melancholia* that contribute to justify the claim that it contains audiovisual beauty.[123]

In this regard, the first thing that needs to be done is to examine the temptation to affirm that, insofar as it seems to be related to the experience of attraction and repulsion, Trier's movie can be described more accurately through the category of sublime rather than with beauty—and more concretely, the dynamically sublime, which, as Kant affirms in the *Critique of Judgment*, is "[n]ature considered in an aesthetic judgement as might that has no dominion over us" (2007, 90). For Kant, while the experience of beauty is finite and complete, that of the sublime brings into play the idea of infinity. In the case of the dynamically sublime, the "immeasurableness of nature and the inadequacy of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*" (91) show us our limitation. And in this sense it seems that the experience of the dynamically sublime could be linked with the contemplation of planet Melancholia, which exceeds human scale. At the same time, Kant states that we experience the dynamically sublime when we perceive nature as fearful, and yet we are not afraid because we are in safe place. In this case, "our judgement takes the form of our simply *picturing to ourselves* the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile" (91). As such, and regarding that, while watching *Melancholia*, nature has no dominion over us—just as when watching any work of art—, it seems that we have another argument to support the thesis that Trier's movie can be interpreted through the category of the dynamic sublime—especially taking into account that Kant put as examples overhanging cliffs, which can be related to the abyss we face when experience anxiety. Indeed, the sublime, as the apocalypse of Trier's film, produces both an

[123] This strategy to shake the viewer shooting unpleasant events with audiovisual beauty is usual in Trier's filmography, as for instance in *Antichrist*'s prologue, which has much in common with *Melancholia*'s overture. This prologue recounts the tragedy that initiates the story: while a couple is making love under the shower, their toddler gets out of the cradle, climbs on the table, and falls into the void through the window just when his mother is reaching the orgasm. From a cinematic point of view, the prologue is an audiovisual wonder: a sequence of powerful black and white images in slow motion accompanied by Handel's *Lascia ch'io pianga*. Thus it appears that Trier strives to challenge the traditional link between beauty and good, delighting and disturbing us at the same time, making us feel the ambiguity and the contradiction between the horror of tragedy and the pleasure of beauty.

unpleasant and pleasant impression—that is, an ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion—that only occurs in the contemplation of a natural element that surpasses us.

However, although we have arguments to link *Melancholia* and the dynamic sublime, Trier's film can also be interpreted through Shaviro's framework, which affirms that *Melancholia* is an expression of the "Romantic anti-sublime" (2012, 42). And certainly, as noted, despite the fact that *Melancholia* can be seen as a spectacular film, the truth is that it avoids the kind of spectacle that is usually seen in apocalyptic films. For Shaviro, *Melancholia* refuses sublimity because it "presents us with a deflationary, disillusioned account, both of the existing world, and of its disappearance" (8). With regard to the idea that Trier's film could awake the experience of the sublime insofar as, when watching it, we perceive nature as fearful while being in a safe place, Shaviro denies it because, for him, the film lacks the metaphorical element of the sublime that arouses in the subject "a sense of its own greatness" (42). Indeed, as Shaviro notes, the sublime in Kant is metaphorical insofar as, by some type of transference, "we transform actual catastrophe into a figuration of our own power" (42). But in *Melancholia* the apocalypse is literal and thus not sublime, because it erases the possibility of any metaphorical process of transference. Shaviro explains as follows:

> If *Melancholia* is anti-sublime—and anti-modernist as well—this means above all that its vision of extinction is deeply, and designedly, *disappointing*. The film deprives me of everything that I would be offered by the sublime. It does not allow me to discover an "ability to resist" within myself. It prevents me from developing any sort of recuperative self-regard. Its underwhelming presentation of the end of the world frustrates my narcissistic fantasies of universal devastation. The film even denies me the pleasures of Nietzschean "active nihilism," by withholding the anticipated spectacle of massive destruction. In all these ways, *Melancholia* is not sublime, but beautiful. It offers a strange beauty that is altogether indifferent to me. I can only enjoy this beauty aesthetically, which is to say disinterestedly; this means that I must enjoy it, as it were, in spite of myself. (Shaviro 2012, 43)

Therefore, *Melancholia* can also be interpreted through the category of beauty. In the end, I do not see the necessity to affiliate the film either with the sublime or the beauty, insofar as both categories seem to help us to delve into it as an occasion for the earnest thought of death. And although Shaviro's perspective is fertile, it is not less true that the category of the sublime seems to be certainly fruitful to interpret Trier's movie. Indeed, the sublime generates in us both an unpleasant and pleasant impression, which is the

ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion that defines Haufniensis' anxiety. And I defend that the movie also generates this ambiguous experience. In Kant's words,

> The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law. (Kant 2007, 88)

From my perspective, if planet Melancholia and *Melancholia* itself disturb us and, as anxiety, create a fracture in the external understanding of death—becoming this way an occasion for the earnest thought of death—, it is not just because it pleases us as something beautiful, but because it fascinates us, arising in us both pleasure and displeasure. Therefore, as mentioned, I believe that Trier's movie can be interpreted both through the category of beauty and the category of sublime.

With this in mind, I will examine in the following some elements of the film that contribute to justify the claim that it contains cinematographic beauty. And in this sense, it is appropriate to begin by pointing out that, as Shaviro notes, *Melancholia* "is both a Romantic work, and a profoundly (and surprisingly) anti-modernist one" (2012, 26). For him, the film dismantles three modernist aesthetic dogmas that nowadays are usually taken for granted:

> First, it refuses any reduction of form to function, insisting instead upon gratuitous and nonfunctional (or even outright dysfunctional) pictorial excess. This is evident in the strained tableaux of the Prologue, as well as in the restless, excessive camera movements of the main body of the film. Second, *Melancholia* rejects the idea that form can be expressive in its own right, apart from (or in the absence of) some extrinsic narrative and representational content. The shots in the Prologue, like the pre-Raphaelite paintings that they mimic, are *illustrative* in nature—something that nearly all versions of modernism find inherently objectionable. Rather than being self-sufficient and self-referential, these images refer to a content that extends beyond them, and that they are themselves unable to contain. And third, the film flirts openly with kitsch and cliché. (Shaviro, 2012 26)

Shaviro focuses his argumentation on the prologue because in a way it synthesises the film's aesthetics and represents its peak. However, before analysing the prologue, first it

will be useful to examine some other elements of the film that contribute to its cinematographic beauty, elements that follow the style of Romantic aesthetics.[124] In this regard, as mentioned before, filming location, landscape, scenography, and costumes give the film a fairytale atmosphere, beautiful and disturbing at the same time. While the vast majority of disaster films disturb partly thanks to the spectacular destruction that they usually depict, *Melancholia* disturbs through an audiovisual environment of Romantic beauty. The mansion has a refined decoration, with some arabesque details mixed with a typical European interior design, and the wedding that takes place in it unfolds in elegant luxury. The gardens and the golf course are meticulously manicured, something that gives them a disturbing perfection and an air of unreality, which is accentuated through three very special features: a sundial of cyclopean dimensions located in the centre of the garden; the double shadow casted by two parallel rows of teardrop-shaped bushes due to the dual illumination that comes from the Sun and planet Melancholia; and the mysterious hole number nineteen. Not to mention the distinction conferred by the horse stable—which has a dramatic key role as Justine's refuge and John's tomb—, the elegance of costumes and the refinement of cutlery. All these features, combined with *Melancholia*'s narrative, contribute to create an ambiguous atmosphere, attractive and repulsive.

Another factor that helps to create this atmosphere is the landscape, which is a fundamental dramatic agent of this movie. Indeed, following the tradition of German expressionism, *Melancholia* uses light and natural elements to express externally the drama of the characters, as well as chiaroscuro lighting effects and disproportionate shadows. Thus the use of lighting is essential to express the ambiguity of anxiety. The light tone of the first part of the film—which begins at dusk, ends at dawn, and takes place in the interior of the castle, the gardens, and the golf course—is yellowish and warm. But this apparently comfortable lighting that was supposed to illuminate a happy

[124] As Shaviro explains, this rejection of modernist aesthetics through the use of Romantic conventions—such as extraneous decoration and extraneous narration—is also dramatised inside *Melancholia*'s narrative (2012, 27). Near the end of the first part of the film, when the failure of the wedding is already evident, Justine enters John's studio, where she finds her groom and her sister. Immediately, Michael leaves the room showing his discomfort. And then, Justine tries to convince her sister that, contrary to what people seems to think, she is happy. But Claire rejects her explanations and abandons her. After that, visibly sad and angry, Justine stands in front of the room's bookcases, removes several modern art catalogues—many of them showing suprematist abstract paintings by Kazimir Malevich, such as *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*—, and violently replaces them with images of figurative paintings such as Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, Hill's *Crying Deer*, Millais' *Ophelia* and *The Woodsman's Daughter*, and Brueghel's *Land of Cockaigne* and *Hunters in the Snow*—which, as *Ophelia*, also appears in the film's prologue.

event is opposed to the content of the narrative, which is tense, bitter, troubled, and depressed. And in the second part of the film—which as we know is focused on the end of the world—the lightning has a bluish and cold tone, partly as a result of the light projected by the wandering planet. Thus the apocalypse is narrated with colours that tend to be used to convey serenity, tranquility, and dispassion—which is precisely Justine's emotional state as the end approaches. Instead of depicting the end of the world with warm and passionate colours or dark and gloomy tones, *Melancholia* seems to invite the viewer through a cold light to accept the end of the world without drama. With this, Trier uses ambiguity to subvert both the general assumption that considers that the apocalypse would be a tragedy and a usual convention of the disaster genre in the use of lightning. *Melancholia*'s beauty stems from ambiguity, from the dizziness in front of the abyss.

Another key ingredient that helps to generate the characteristic ambiguity of anxiety is planet Melancholia itself, insofar as it is the agent of the apocalypse and, at the same time, one of the most beautiful elements in the film. In fact, it could even be said that it is the source of all beauty, insofar as most of *Melancholia*'s disquieting and fantastic atmosphere is constructed from the blue and enigmatic aura that emanates from the enormous wandering planet. Indeed, this ambiguity of the star— the attraction and repulsion that arouses in the characters—is emphasised several times throughout the film. We can find clear examples of this, some in the narrative and some purely audiovisual. Here I will confine myself to underline one of each type.

The example inside the narrative is a conversation between Claire and John at the beginning of the second part of the film,[125] which has at least a twofold function: on the one hand, it introduces the specific plot of the second act, namely the apocalyptic threat of planet Melancholia; and on the other, it presents the two contrasting attitudes when facing it, which will contribute to make ambiguity the fundamental basis of *Melancholia*. In this dialogue, while Claire makes clear that she is afraid, John, in order to calm her down, asks her to trust in science and tells her that Melancholia is a wonderful planet and that its sight will be the most amazing experience in their lives.

[125] Scene no. 9: "Part Two: Claire," *Melancholia*, 2011, DVD, directed by Las Von Trier (New York, NY: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2012).

Thus this scene represents the ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion characteristic of anxiety embodied in two opposite characters.

The audiovisual example is the aforementioned sequence that ends when Claire finds Justine naked in the bank of a river bathing in Melancholia's turquoise light.[126] In this particular scene—certainly one of the most pictorial of the movie—the light is again an ambiguous element. Indeed, much of the beauty of the first part of the sequence—when Claire is following Justine—comes from the fact that the night is illuminated simultaneously by two opposing lights: on the left of the image, a yellow and warm light reflected by the Moon; and on the right, the cold blue light that emanates from planet Melancholia. The contrast is absolute. And when Claire—hidden among the trees like Actaeon spying on Artemis—discovers Justine naked and bathing in Melancholia's light, the scene looks like a hyperrealistic painting with a visually striking combination of lights and shadows. In any case, beyond the pictorial comparison, what concerns us here in relation to the ambiguity that characterises anxiety is the different attitudes of Claire and Justine: while the latter gives herself over to the planet with pleasure and satisfaction, the former observes her young sister with displeasure.

Finally, if *Melancholia* begins with the end, I want to end with the beginning—which as we know is also the end. Thus, it remains to approach the prologue as one of the main sources of the film's beauty—and therefore one of the elements that contributes the most to generate the characteristic ambiguity of anxiety. This non-narrative and eight-minute-long introductory sequence is constituted by sixteen hyperrealistic scenes filmed in slow motion with a fixed camera—a style that contrasts with the hand-held camera of rest of the movie—and accompanied by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* prelude. Each one of these tableaux anticipates the film's development. However, as Sandberg points out, they do it in an approximate way, insofar as "[n]one of the tableau scenes repeats exactly later in the film, but closely enough to be recognized as an approximation" (2016, 113). In the end, these beautiful images are, in Rodriguez's words (2011), "postcards from the apocalypse" that synthesise the essence of Trier's *Melancholia*. Moreover, this prologue also plays with ambiguity using two different perspectives to show the apocalypse: on the one hand, from a cosmic point of view, we

[126] Scene no. 10: "The Path of Melancholia," *Melancholia*, 2011, DVD, directed by Las Von Trier (New York, NY: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2012).

contemplate the fatal dance between Earth and Melancholia that ends in the last shot of the prologue with a spectacular collision; and on the other, we are thrown into a human scale to face the apocalypse from the inside together with the characters. This dual approach materialises on the screen the mixture of attraction and repulsion that characterises anxiety: while from a cosmic and therefore emotionally detached perspective we contemplate the magnificence and beauty of the apocalypse, from a human perspective we are obliged to face the fatal consequences of it. In a way, for all we are seeing, it seems that *Melancholia*'s prologue has the function to suggest the viewer into the proper mood to deal with death and the apocalypse, a strategy that, as explained in the first chapter, Kierkegaard believed that needed to be carried out in relation to ethico-religious questions, insofar as they demand a certain psychological orientation and a subjective interest to be understood properly[127]—and the proper state to approach death is earnestness. Thus most of the beauty of *Melancholia*'s prologue comes from a hypnotic use of cinematographic language, which seem to aim to suggest the viewer to feel the essential ambiguity that stems from the experience of enjoying the beauty of disaster, as the experience of the individual who, in front of the precipice, stares at the abyss experiencing both attraction and repulsion at the same time.

Before approaching the particular content of the prologue, it is important to note that the extreme slow motion of the images and the fact that they are non-narrative can be related with the concept of time-image, which provides the prologue with the temporality encouraged by the earnest thought of death. On the one hand, as explained through Deleuze's concepts, time-images, in opposition to movement-images, are not limited to show actions and reactions, but also different layers of time that converge with the present. In this sense, time-images can express a present that constantly creates links with the past and the future. This is precisely the temporality of the prologue, insofar as the tableaux that constitute it anticipate the development of the movie in an approximate way—perhaps suggesting the impossibility of repetition. And on the other hand, the earnest thought of death is an anticipation of one's own death that allows the individual to make a leap forward and then jump back into the present "to win

[127] This strategy is quite common in Trier's filmography. We have already seen that *Antichrist* also opens with a prologue of a similar nature. But it is at the beginning of *Europe* (1991) when this strategy of suggestion is clearer. This film opens with a repetitive shot: a fixed camera located on the front of a locomotive in motion films in black and white the railroad tracks. And meanwhile, as if we were standing in front of a hypnotist that makes us look at a moving clock, the voice of Max von Sydow recites a text that tells us that we are about to enter Europe. Cinema is a fiction and we need the right mood to enter.

everything in life" (TDIO, 76). This present, however, is not the present inscribed between the past and the future, but the one in which the past and the present are inscribed. From this perspective, then, the earnest thought of death follows the model of existential thinking that, as it is affirmed in *Repetition*, encourages the circumnavigation of life, because this leap forward and back compels the individual to think about his life as a whole, a leap forward and back that it seems the one made by *Melancholia*'s prologue. Therefore, combining these two elements—the concept of time-image and the temporality of the earnest thought of death—, it seems again that Trier's movie constitutes a paradigmatic example of *montrage* apocalyptic movies, insofar as presents a temporality in which the present seeks ties with the past and the future and encourages the circumnavigation of life.

That said, the beauty of the prologue not only comes from the slow motion camera and the cosmic point of view, but also from the following elements: the emphasis on the shape, the twilight shades of the lighting, the artistic references, and the fusion with Wagner's music. I will approach them through some scenes of this initial sequence, but taking into account that the division between these elements is purely methodological, insofar as each shot contains the majority of them.

The prologue begins with a fade from black to a close-up of Justine's face, which, illuminated with the colours of an apocalyptic dusk, expresses her emotional state—the one that gives its name to the film. She slowly opens her eyes and directs her gaze to the camera. After that, behind her, dead birds fall from the sky. It is the first anticipation of the apocalypse that is about to come. From this very first scene it is evident that the shape or the geometrical equilibrium will have a central importance in *Melancholia*'s cinematography, which, as explained, is build upon a pictorial excess that rejects any reduction of form to function—opposing this way a modernist aesthetic dogma. The second image of the prologue is a good example of this. It is an extreme wide shot of the Versaillesque garden of John's mansion—which, as Dargis notes (2011), clearly evokes the garden in Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961)—that, in its formal organisation, shows two parallel rows of bushes and a sundial at the centre, with all this elements casting an uncanny double shadow that comes from the double illumination that stems from the Sun and planet Melancholia. In the distance, a feminine figure holds Leo with her arms making him turn in the air. These figures, however, are barely recognisable in a shot that, as the cosmic ones, detaches the viewer from the human

perspective. And another outstanding example of this geometric harmony is the eighth tableaux, which is an extreme long shot divided into three parts, just as a triptych. In the garden at night, with the mansion behind them and in front of the camera, we see Justine, Claire, and Leo standing in parallel in their wedding costumes. In the sky, aligned with the characters—and thus associated with them—, there is planet Melancholia, the Moon, and the Sun. The artificiality of the scene is a visual example of the enigmatic drama of the opening.

In relation to the use of lightning, scenes seven and ten stand as two paradigmatic examples of it. On the one hand, the seventh tableaux shows an expressionless Justine in the middle of the frame, standing on the golf course in her riding clothes, forming a cross with her arms, and surrounded by a swarm of insects that emerge from two points located on the ground. This indicates that the external apocalypse, as the internal one, reveals to an allegedly idyllic surface a disgusting life that is normally hidden. This almost biblical scene[128] takes place at night, and the lighting enhances three essential elements of the image: at the back, a light in low angle illuminates the trees of the golf course; in the middle, a soft and homogeneous lighting emphasises Justine's relevance; and between her and the audience, flurries of insects fill the space with a depth of field that blurs them as they approach the camera. As the first tableaux of the prologue, this image anticipates the apocalypse through the chaos of the natural world. And on the other hand, the tenth scene is a medium shot of Justine again in the golf course surrounded by a pale and misty illumination that announces the imminent apocalypse. Beyond this premonitory light, the essential elements of the image are the mysterious lightning flashes that rise towards the sky from Justine's fingertips and from the electricity poles, revealing the proximity of the wandering planet. The expression of fascination that transmits Justine's face is the expression of the individual who, in front of the precipice, blinded and hypnotized by its beauty, jumps into it.

In relation to the slow motion, there are two scenes noteworthy for their drama that are worth commenting on. Firstly, the fifth tableaux, in which we see a distressed Claire in the golf course holding Leo in her arms, trying to escape the tragedy, and gradually sinking into the grass of hole number nineteen while leaving behind a trail of footprints.

[128] "For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations" (Isaiah 51:8).

The fact that at this point we already get the idea that her attempt is pointless adds more drama to the scene. And secondly, scene number six—in which the apocalypse is suggested again through natural disorder—depicts the collapse of Justine's horse. As in the other images of the prologue, the slowness of Abraham's collapse adds a drama that is accentuated by photography work. The scene takes place at night, the horse is absolutely black, and the lighting—which highlights surfaces and textures—is a reminiscent of the characteristic chiaroscuros of Romanticism. This scene could even be read as a reversal of the magnificence of an equestrian portrait: instead of displaying the grandeur of a king, the horse shows us our inevitable end, and with it, the end of our vanity. In fact, as Dargis points out (2011), the image of a horse without a rider is an elegiac one and recalls military and state funerals.

As stated above, the artistic references also contribute to beautify the opening, and thus the end of the world. I would like to highlight two of them. One is found in the third scene, in which we see a reproduction of Peter Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow* burning. This work—which also appears in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972)—depicts three hunters returning from what it seems to be an unsuccessful expedition. Although the meaning of this painting in *Melancholia*'s prologue might have different interpretations—one of them being a reaction against modernism—, it seems evident that it is an anticipatory metaphor of the imminent obliteration. And taking into account that the painting is burning, it is clear that the collision will destroy not only the Earth, but also our works. There will be nothing left of us. In sum, as explained, there will be no testimonies.

The other artistic reference that I wanted to stress appears in the fourteenth scene and has its inspiration in the painting *Ophelia* (1851-1852) by English Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais. The similarities are evident: a medium shot shows Justine floating down the river in her wedding dress, facing the camera with her eyes closed, and holding with his hands a bridal bouquet which, as Dargis notes (2011), is made of lilies of the valley, also known as Eve's Tears because those were the flowers that Eve shed while she and Adam were expelled from Eden—a symbolic relation links again Justine with *The Concept of Anxiety*, since this work is focused on the first anxiety experienced by a man in the state of innocence, namely, Adam's possibility to eat from the forbidden tree. In Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Ophelia is a young Danish noblewoman that has a relationship with Hamlet and, after an act of madness, dies due to drowning, remaining unclear whether it was suicide or an accident. When

Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and mother of Hamlet, reports her death, says that, before dying, Ophelia was singing songs as one incapable of her own distress. Ophelia is an innocent character in a tragedy of power and corruption who accepts death as an escape from a life that she cannot withstand. In this sense, Ophelia is similar to Justine, a melancholic and (not so) innocent young woman oppressed by conventions that she does not understand who, in the end, will accept the death that the cosmic collision is offering her as an escape from his inner apocalypse.

Finally, it remains to note the importance of the only non-diegetic music of *Melancholia*, namely, Wagner's *Prelude* to the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*, which, apart from being repeated from the beginning throughout the narration, has a central role in the prologue. Indeed, if Trier's movie is an occasion for the earnest thought of death through the cinematic expression of anxiety, it is partly thanks to the ambiguity that emanates from the aesthetisation of the apocalypse. This is something that cannot be explained without mentioning Wagner's music, which not only represents an important source of ambiguity itself—because, as noted, it is beautiful and tragic at the same time—, but it is also merged with the images with such harmony that one might be tempted to think that it has been specially composed for the movie. On the one hand, the opera's text can be related with *Melancholia*'s narrative, in the sense that, in order to be together, Tristan and Isolde must give themselves to death, and therefore, as in Ophelia and Justine's case, the embrace of death is an essential element of Wagner's piece. And on the other hand, from a purely musical perspective and as explained, the fact that the prelude is constantly repeated from the same point makes it an interruption, an absence of motion that cannot be surpassed and never provides closure. In this sense, as death in "At a Graveside", constitutes an absolute and inexplicable limit and suggests the ambiguity of existence. From this perspective, Wagner's prelude contributes to build *Melancholia* as an occasion to the viewer to reflect and find an explanation by himself, just like Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside".

Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to analyse the possibility that some apocalyptic movies would have a philosophical value as an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death in the terms explained by Søren Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". Since its beginnings, cinema has given life to specters, and I have attempted to prove that it can also have the potentiality to put us in front of our own death, becoming a driving force for philosophical thought in relation to the earnest thought of death and pushing us to think the unthinkable.

In order to defend this thesis, I have first analysed cinema understanding it as a collection of testamentary images and, thus, as an apocalyptic medium in itself—that is, as privileged medium to convey the apocalyptic imaginary. The aim of the apocalyptic genre has always been to provide meaning to existence, and cinema is in the end a meaningful organisation of images—something that might explain the close and permanent connection between cinema and the apocalyptic narrative, not to mention the fact that cinema has always documented crucial catastrophic events of the history of humankind. Indeed, for its very structure, cinema is a cyclic materialisation of the apocalypse. Every movie gives birth to a unique world that, as our own lives, is inevitably doomed to disappear. In this sense, cinema faces us to the essential inexplicability and certain uncertainty of death that Kierkegaard underlines in "At a Graveside".

More concretely, in relation to apocalyptic cinema itself, I have argued that, for its aesthetisation of the apocalypse derived from its characteristic format and language, it has the capacity to push the viewers to think the unthinkable, which in the particular object of study of this dissertation is the thought of one's own death. In other words, I have argued that certain apocalyptic movies which narrate the death of all living creatures constitute an occasion to confront this unthinkable thought. As we have seen when examining "At a Graveside", death is completely inexplicable and thus constitutes an absolute limit for the usual language, also of philosophy. In front of the thought of one's own death, philosophy reveals its boundaries. However, here I have observed the possibility that the unthinkable thought of one's own death can be approached through a non-philosophical language. This thought, as Kierkegaard explains in "At a Graveside" cannot and must not be approached from an external and objective perspective, but from the subjective and earnest appropriation of it—which means to understand death as one's own personal, inevitable, and untransferable death. And I have defended that

some apocalyptic movies have the potentiality to become this non-philosophical language that exists at the borders of the unthinkable, that puts all categories in question and, as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", has the capacity to show to us the inexplicability of death, an inexplicability that awake us from the illusion of the external perspective of death as something that happens to others as well as from the illusion of the postponement. In other words, confronting us with the inexplicability of death, apocalyptic movies can push us to an existential model of thinking that implies subjective reflection on one's own death. Situating us in a position in which we contemplate the end of all existence, some apocalyptic movies function as the thought of death and convey an absolute interruption of language that breaks all continuities and the traditional laws upon which rational discourse has been considered to be based. In this regard, I have proposed that some apocalyptic movies can be interpreted as the experience of anxiety in a Kierkegaardian sense, insofar as they have the capability to stimulate in the viewer the *ambiguous experience of attraction and repulsion which is characteristic of anxiety. Indeed, as anxiety, some apocalyptic films* constitute a challenge to our explanations and to what is usually taken for granted. This way, putting us at the limits of the unthinkable, they can open us to our inevitable mortality and push us to self-knowledge.

However, I have also argued that not all apocalyptic movies have the potential to become an occasion to think earnestly about one's own death in the terms exposed by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". Acknowledging the impossibility to apply my thesis in general, I have defined a specific type of apocalyptic films that here have been called *montrage* apocalyptic movies, and defended them as an occasion for the earnest thought of death. Several characteristics have been provided to defend this type of films. From a narrative level, the plot of these movies has to be focused on the apocalyptic threat—instead of using it to develop a movie of another genre—as well as on the subjective confrontation with extinction experienced by the characters. In other words, these movies, as Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", attempt to enlighten the truth of the single individual when facing the thought of his own mortality. And from a structural level—that also determines the narrative itself—, *montrage* apocalyptic films subvert genre conventions and use the cinematographic techniques in a manner that, as Kierkegaard's philosophy, attempt to move the viewers without imposing a univocal meaning from a position of authority, encouraging subjective appropriation. This way, contrary to

classical editing-based films, *montrage* apocalyptic movies introduce the essential ambiguity of existence that we have seen in Haufniensis' understanding of anxiety, causing predetermined meanings to collapse. At the same time, if these movies play with ambiguity and encourage subjective appropriation, it is because, as "At a Graveside", they acknowledge the impossibility of the representation of death and assume that the essential problem is how to think the unthinkable. However, just as Kierkegaard's discourse, they embrace the paradox and also represent death—or total obliteration—to some extent, showing this way the inevitable relation that we have with our own death, and creating the occasion for us to question not just *what* do we say or think about death, but *how* do we say or think about it. In sum, they constitute an occasion to face the inexplicability of death, to understand that the external approach to it is an illusion, and that we must confront it subjectively.

The next step of this dissertation has been to delve into the reasons that, according to my research, make *montrage* apocalyptic movies a privileged occasion to reflect earnestly about death, in order to distinguish them from those films that depict the death of one or several individuals. Firstly, I have argued that the narrative structure of *montrage* apocalyptic movies can undermine the deception of the postponement, insofar as, within the narrative, the apocalypse becomes a real menace much faster than it was predicted. This way, these apocalyptic movies might confront us with the certain uncertainty of death. Indeed, there are lots of non-*montrage* apocalyptic movies—such as *The Day After Tomorrow*—that also have this narrative structure. In the end, it is a convention of the genre. However, the difference between them is that in *montrage* apocalyptic films, focusing on the anxiety experienced by the characters, the apocalypse is not just a pretext for action and spectacle but an occasion to reflect on one's own death.

Secondly, I have defended that a fundamental qualitative difference between films that depict the death of one or several individuals and *montrage* apocalyptic movies is that, when watching one of the former, the viewer have an equivalent experience of that provided by moods in the way described in "At a Graveside". That is, the spectator is watching the death of another and thus could be conceiving it as something external. In other words, the representation of the death of another might prevent the viewer to think death as his own condition, sanitising the thought of death in the terms stated by Kierkegaard in "At a Graveside". In contrast, when threatening existence as a whole, a

montrage apocalyptic film constitutes an occasion to face the certain uncertainty of death and to awake from the illusion of the postponement. Moreover, for the same reason, facing us with the possibility of the world-without-us, these movies deal with the paradox to represent something that cannot be represented. And this provides the possibility for the thought of the unthinkable, opening us to the fact that death is inexplicable and thus pushing us to the earnest thought of death.

Thirdly, another feature of those *montrage* apocalyptic movies in which the world ends that confronts us with the inexplicability of death is that, through them, the spectators testify the absolute absence of testimonies, which implies the very negation of thought itself. In other words, these movies have a testamentary structure that offers no explanation, which is the necessary condition to think earnestly about death. This way, *montrage* apocalyptic cinema leaves the viewer alone without any other explanation other than one's own lack of explanation. That is to say, the paradox of attempting to represent what cannot be represented—the obliteration of life itself—confronts us again with the paradox of thinking the unthinkable and shows us that death is an unsolvable enigma. In this sense, *montrage* apocalyptic movies, just as death and anxiety, might constitute an absolute interruption of the regime of the possible. And thus, facing us with death's enigma, *montrage* apocalyptic cinema becomes an occasion for a countermovement in which death's inexplicability pushes us to a model of thinking that is not the model of conceptual thought that approaches death externally, but a self-reflection on one's own death from an earnest perspective that can provide death's retroactive power. In sum, testifying the absence of testimonies and therefore the absence of any explanation, these movies leave us with the responsibility to deal by ourselves with the inexplicability of death, which implies the occasion understand that death is our own inevitable and untransferable condition.

Finally, if there are no testimonies, there is no possibility of mourning either. And this characteristic of *montrage* apocalyptic films in which the world ends underlines again a qualitative difference with those films that depict the death of one or seven human beings. In the latter, no matter how many people die, there is always the possibility of grieving, and thus the movie will always offer some kind of explanation. However, if existence is wiped out, the only thing that remains is silence. This way, this type of apocalyptic movies faces us with the absolute inexplicability of death that Kierkegaard describes in "At a Graveside". At the same time, it eliminates again the illusion of the

postponement, insofar as, removing any possibility of human continuity, it dynamites any form of symbolic immortality. Therefore, I propose that, just as Kierkegaard's discourse, some *montrage* apocalyptic movies impose the silence of the absence of mourning and thus the absence of explanation. Therefore, without imposing a predetermined explanation and fracturing any unambiguous approach to existence, these movies face us with the interrogation that death's inexplicability imposes unto us. And this interrogation compels us to examine our life-view from a subjective an intimate position that becomes an occasion to think earnestly about death.

The last part of this dissertation entails an analysis of Trier's *Melancholia* to defend it as a paradigm of this kind of *montrage* apocalyptic cinema that can be an occasion to think about death as one's own death. Moreover, I have argued that this film might be a cinematographic parallel of Kierkegaard's "At a Graveside", in the sense that it might have the same effect that the discourse intends to produce in the reader, which is to push us to subjectively appropriate the earnest thought of death. In sum, and remembering that the analysis of *Melancholia* was not the main purpose of my research but just an example of the potential of the theoretical framework that I have attempted to build, I have argued that Trier's movie is a paradigmatic occasion for the earnest thought of death because, apart from the aforesaid features of *montrage* apocalyptic films, it is also successful in creating the conditions to convey an anxiety that opens us to the understanding of death as our own death. And the reason for this is that *Melancholia* shares the essential characteristics of anxiety and death: indeterminacy and ambiguity. On the one hand, I have examined the ways in which indeterminacy is cinematographically materialised in *Melancholia*. And on the other, I have argued that Trier's movie utilises the cinematographic language to approach the apocalypse as an aesthetically beautiful event, generating this way the occasion to experience aesthetic pleasure when watching the end of the world. And in this sense, it might instil in the viewer a *sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy characteristic of anxiety.*
Finally, considering the opportunities for further research, the investigation that I have undertaken for this dissertation has build a theoretical framework that I would have the opportunity to enrich, reinforce, expand, and modify if necessary. More concretely, taking into account the mass appeal for apocalypticism and thus assuming that the production of apocalyptic films will continue, I would like to examine if there are further films that may become an occasion for the earnest thought of death in the

Kierkegaardian sense. This would provide me with the opportunity to delve into the reflection about cinema as a driving force for philosophical thought that does not use the usual philosophical language that works with (sometimes imposed) abstract concepts, but that approaches (and expands) the limits of what can be thought by means of what Sontag called "sensuous elaboration" (1967, 2012). In other words, I would like to continue investigating the production of apocalyptic films to see in which ways and through which audiovisual techniques cinema might be an occasion for the viewer to confront by himself the earnest thought of death. As far as I remember, since I started reading philosophy, I was strongly interested in anxiety. However, I never appropriated it personally until I saw Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Written philosophy provided me with the means to approach anxiety conceptually and from an abstract perspective, but Trier's film became an occasion for me to experience it personally. This dissertation has been an academic attempt to explain philosophically this intuition, that is, the intuition that cinema can be the vanguard of philosophical thought by means of a non-philosophical language, the occasion to face subjectively the thought of the unthinkable. If this work has been successful, it can be a useful opportunity to sink into further research in relation to this intuition.

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Kierkegaard and *Melancholia*

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