

MELANCHOLY AND SACRIFICE IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

Ivan Pintor Iranzo

ivan.pintor@upf.edu

SUMMARY

In an constant gaze to September 11's zero hour, the image of Apocalypse in contemporary science fiction appears tinged with melancholy. By recognizing the threshold of 2001 as a crack in History's *continuum*, a significant number of today's American science fiction films, from the last works of Spielberg to M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008), explores the different tensions that relate the manifestation of temporality with the essential patterns of Apocalypse. Through the image of a black sun, these films find a common link with superheroes comics, television series such as *Lost* (2004-2009) and with other expressions of contemporary plastic like the ones from the Danish artist Oliafur Eliasson.

KEY WORDS

Cinema, Sèries de televisió, Còmic, Ciència ficció, 11-S, Malenconia, Sacrifici, Apocalipsi, Catàstrofe, Acedia, Sol negre, Oliafur Eliasson, Shyamalan, Spielberg, Lost, Agamben, Fractura identitària, Terror, Temps perdut, Redempció messiànica, Imaginari simbòlic

ARTICLE

In a constant look at zero hour of 9/11, the image of the Apocalypse in contemporary science fiction appears tarnished by melancholy. By recognising on the threshold of 2001 a rupture in the *continuum* of History, a significant number of current US science fiction films, ranging from Spielberg's latest works to *The Happening* (2008), by M. Night Shyamalan, explores the different tensions with which temporality can be manifested in respect of the elementary pattern of the Apocalypse, that is the fundamental fulfilment of the messianic economy of redemption. In the image of the black sun, of the veil of sadness with which nature reveals itself with regard to the self burdened with melancholy, these films find a common nexus with the superhero comic strip, with TV series such as *Lost* (2004-2009) and with some expressions of contemporary plastics like those of Danish artist Oliafur Eliasson.

When in the autumn of 2003, the Turbine Room of the Tate Modern in London housed Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, Internet portals such as *Youtube* became an extension of the atmosphere achieved. The huge semicircle of incandescent lamps which, like a black sun, reflected on the glass surface of the ceiling became the seed of a large number of new forms captured by the videos recorded by visitors and later posted on the net. The triangle of physical laws – perception - environment present throughout Eliasson's work and his constant allusion to the *epoché*, the process of knowledge as dealt with in Husserl's phenomenology, make each of those private videos an interval from which to surprise the surroundings, a unique watchtower from which to apprehend the present in the anachronism of a *now* that is a *not yet* and at the same time a *too late*.

If one of the goals of science fiction is to "change the world to recognition" and to extend a bridge between the past and the future in which the *facies arcaica* of the present is revealed, then the appearance of contemporary science fiction can be re-read as a parenthesis around 9/11. Embracing that date, in the proximity of its ruin, the distance between *The Weather Project* and Eliasson's previous intervention *Your Sun Machine* (1997), at the Foxx Gallery in Los Angeles, poses changes in the register of vulnerability, the imagery of catastrophe and the permanent possibility of the other that shape science fiction. On the now old sun which illuminates *Your Sun Machine*, the new sun of *The Weather Project* not only exhibits the new forms that are adopted by certain, always latent fears in society but, based on the melancholic experience, points to the present as an untimely conscience of being in a fracture in the historic sense of the human.

1. Around noontime

Often compared to his two most famous works, *Beauty* (1993) and *By Means of a Sudden Intuitive Realization* (1996), *Your Sun Machine* confronts visitors with their own situation in space by causing the slow streaming of light which is filtered in the empty room through the opening in the ceiling. Subject to the rotation of the planet, the passing light unfurls around the suspension of midday, when the ellipse changes to a circle, a bright beam falling vertically before the observer. At this moment of intimidation, in which the austerity of the room turns the visitor on himself, the profound difference between this installation and *The Weather Project* can be seen. The pause to which Eliasson alludes as "seeing yourself sensing" and which betrays the obsession of contemporary museistic practice for the value of *experience* is revealed in *Your Sun Machine* as a critical evaluation of one of the capital slants in the plastic representation of the nineties: the lukewarm despondency of acedia (accidia), daytime melancholy.

Also known by the patristic tradition as noontime demon, acedia constitutes an emotive disposition or *stimmung* at the limit of which the inauthentic dimension of the "self" appears. Behind the identity between acedia and what Heidegger calls *everyday banality* is hidden, in addition, a correspondence between its symptoms and the infernal cohort of the *filiae acediae*, the visible signs of acedia: *malitia*, *pusillanimitas*, *desperatio*, *torpor* and *evagatio mentis*, always presided by that iconography which, in medieval paintings, arranged the scene around a sundial with the inscription *circa meridiem*, around noontime. "Ceaselessly beside me the demon writhes; / He swarms around me like impalpable air / I swallow him and feel me burning my lungs / And filling them with an everlasting guilty love", goes the first of the poems of *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857), in which Baudelaire devotes himself to the iconographic tradition of acedia and peers into the affliction and uneasiness that accompany the two fundamental categories of modernity.

The preference which, according to the fathers of the church, the *noontime demon* feels towards members of religious orders acquires full meaning with the choice of this iconic motif by Baudelaire, since his verses sketch out the intuition of the pseudo-religious condition towards which late modernity and post-industrial societies lead all individuals just for being among them: consumption, as an unavoidable cult of capitalism, invests the latter with the characters of a religious phenomenon that develops parasitically on the basis of christianity, in a perennial celebration that does not take into account working days or holidays nor seek any expiation whatsoever. Far from aspiring to surrender, the cultural devotion of capitalism pushes the subject towards guilt and, therefore, towards the anomy and expressive incapacity that characterise acedia. At its zenith, the sunlight does but recall the sufferer of his debility, the perpetual excitement of desire before an object that is always delayed and whose attainment is devoid of compensation.

Intimidated to live in such a bright world as that of advertising hoardings, making them the profession of a faith whose only way out is symbolic shattering, the being-in-acedia is identified with the perplexed expression worn by the protagonist of *The Truman Show* (1998), by Peter Weir, upon discovering in broad daylight a set where he was under the impression was the horizon, an expression that is repeated in a group of coetáneas and similar films: *They Live* (1988), by John Carpenter, *Total Recall* (1990), by Paul Verhoeven, *Strange Days* (1995), by Kathryn Bigelow, *The Game* (1997), by David Fincher, *Abre los ojos* (1997), by Amenábar, *eXistenZ* (1998), by David Cronenberg and even the later *Paycheck* (2003), by John Woo and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), by Richard Linklater, abound in the idea of a false “liquid” appearance, a mental *software* aimed at hushing up a conspiracy or tricking the individual in order to hide the abyss of the real on which his own exploitation is forged.

This paranoid fantasy, whose direct precedent can be found in stories by Philip K. Dick like *Time Out of Joint* (1959), in some chapters of the *The Prisoner* (1967-68) series, *Dr. Who* (1963-1989) and *The Twilight Zone* —the episode filmed by Ted Post *A World of Difference* (1960)— reveals middle class workers whose whole life is a lie, a film set in whose constitution the fundamental turn towards which the nineties lean is shown: the omnipresence of a model of representation based on the theme park, a “site of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish”, as Walter Benjamin defined Universal Expositions. Upon this outline of (in) habitability, whose best definition is found in German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of a sphere and in the honeycomb cubicles in which the humans sleep in *Matrix* (1999), by the Wachowsky brothers, its most accurate image, the Borgian, sterile obsession of Cotard, the protagonist of *Synechdoche, New York* (2008), by Charlie Kaufman, is hatched by transcribing his experience to a model.

2. The dark side of the aurora

Before the diaphanous uneasiness of acedia, before its ability to show the unrealization of otherness in the form of a model, the black sun that dominates *The Weather Project* and reduces the Turbine Room to a two-tone vision points towards a nocturnal melancholy, towards that form of black bile that medieval humoral cosmology associates with the earth and with the sign of Saturn in accordance with a tradition that traces back to Aristotle’s famous *Problem XXX*. If what afflicts the slothful, as appears described by Saint Thomas and is mentioned by Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas, the word and phantasm in western culture* (2006), “is not the awareness of an evil but the vertiginous and frightened withdrawal (*recessus*) when faced with the task implied by the place of man before God”, saturnine melancholy manifests inclination to sexual behaviour which, unlike acedia, pursues enjoyment. But the enjoyment longed for by the melancholic offers the paradox of a pitiful intention that precedes and anticipates the loss, the rupture unleashed by his own mood.

What seeks to satisfy black melancholy is the narcissist negation of the external world as an object of love and the pursuit of a phantasm: "Melancholy would not be so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as lost", deduces Agamben (2006). It is what is unobtainable of the object that escapes, that substitutes the pure retraction of the slothful individual and it does so thanks to grief, mourning that contemporary science fiction has turned into the fundamental stage of the disruption of the space and time coordinates following 9/11: the black sun, the eclipse that constitutes the emblem of television series *Heroes* (2005-2008) and of films like *Knowing* (2009), by Alex Proyas denounces the attention that post 9/11 iconography concedes to the counterimage, to the vestige, to the forced return of a forbidden darkness, of an intimate dissimilarity of the events with regard to the very model of History.

The danger that lies in the dark mist that, like a primitive divinity, shrouds the island in the series *Lost* (2004-2009) and in the biblical plagues that are about to precipitate the end of History in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), by Scott Derrickson, *Children of Men* (2006), by Alfonso Cuarón and *The happening* is not, in fact, the confrontation with the other, rather an endless absence. The cloud covered sky that augurs the climatic catastrophe in *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), turns *Minority Report* (2002) into a parable on post 9 /11 general immunology and is unleashed in the sinister childbirth of *War of the Worlds* (2005) —all by Spielberg—. The sky houses a privation which is the root on which the whole phenomenological experience is revealed. Such privation, in which the impossibility of exchanging in fear (fear of something) is apparent, pure anguish corresponds to the experience of a threshold that is escaping: like the brightness of the stars that distance themselves at a speed greater than that of light, the black sun of today's science fiction constitutes the dark side of an aurora which has in fact never been possessed.

Under the daytime desperation of the genre in the nineties, that glance into darkness tries to reveal, even in a film prior to the fracture of 2001 such as *Matrix*, fleeing darkness, the eclipse of the unapproachable, the "desert of the real" in which Neo's search acquires the nature of a post-religious mission. If, for the melancholic, "the libido behaves as if a loss had occurred although nothing has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had perhaps never existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost" (AGAMBEN, 1995). The loss of a loss that weighs on Neo —"was already too late before the infertility thing happened", also says the protagonist of *Children of men*; "they already know their fate. They intuit it", the Klaatu of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*— also constitutes his *hybris*, which inflates him with energetic, heroic and even irascible behaviour.

Indeed, in the heat of the waning sun of 9/11, capable of snatching the shadow of a shadow from a bright hero such as Spiderman, the dark creature called Venom in *Spiderman 3* (2007), by Sam Raimi, the two poles between which the distress that impregnates current science fiction thickens gain strength: a Saturn whose iconographic characterisation as Father Chronos, as devouring time, links late Antiquity with a contemporary stripping whose emblem lies in the sun of *The Weather Project* and some heroes who, also, recover the platonic “divine furore”, confrontation with a madness that, as in the case of the Homeric Bellerophontes, leads them to err alone “over the Aleian plain he would wander, eating his own heart out / avoiding the pathways of mortals” (Iliad VI, verses 200-202), pulled, perhaps, by the perpetual desire to be contemporaries to themselves, to establish the present, like the protagonist of *Minority Report*, between a yesterday and a tomorrow to the same extent apocalyptic, to look directly at the sinister number of the far off.

3. The second Eve

In apocalyptic iconography, terror before an imminent natural disaster or a nuclear catastrophe usually gives way, once the noise and the fuss have died down, to the titanic silhouette of the individual forced to survive in a hostile environment, to found a new Eden on the ruins of civilisation. Unlike the catastrophist subgenre associated with the oil crisis in sixties and the memory of Hiroshima in the cinema and Japanese *manga*, the plague of sterility that parches the human species in *Children of men* buries, with its initial image, the epic of a new origin under the melancholic *pathos* of extinction. From his living room, Theo witnesses the murder of the youngest inhabitant of the planet, the last creature to have been born before the epidemic, whose disappearance becomes the sterile sacrifice of an unfortunate Messiah since it does not manage to redeem anyone.

Only a second death, that of Julian, prophetic leader of the resistance group The Fishes, and the revelation of Kee's pregnancy in the penumbra of a humble stable trigger an itinerary on which biblical meanings are hinted at with the turbulent images of a world close to home: the arduous mass migrations, the armed funerals or the buildings whipped by bursts of machine gun which Cuarón portrays are the same that extend beyond the comfortable isolation of contemporary cities. It is the absence of distance in the forms that frightens by transforming dystopia into a natural and immediate prolongation of a present into a state of exception, that is, in which the exception has become, *de facto*, undecidable in respect of the rule —as Benjamin points out in his eighth thesis on the concept of history—. Behind the barbed wire of a refugee camp is hidden the last frontier of the promised Land to which Theo must guide humanity's only daughter, like a Moses whose journey inverts the

direction of the one made by Bernard together with the savage John and his mother in Huxley's *Brave New World*.

But in the absence of drugs and therapies that suppress freewill, like those in *Brave new world*, the chaos that surrounds Theo, Kee and her daughter is closer to the realism of Jack London's *The iron heel*, to the politics-fiction of the Yugoslav Enki Bilal's comic strips and of script writer Alan Moore or the overpopulated societies of novelist Harry Harrison than the aseptic state control against which the protagonists of *1984* and *Brave new world* react. In part indebted to certain details of the latter, the original novel by P. D. James, *Children of Men* confides, in the hands of Cuarón, in the vertigo of the shot sequence and the *steadycam*. The linearity acquired by the story and the continuity of the shot distance themselves, via this figure of style, from the far more segmented montage of films such as the aforementioned *Matrix* and *Minority Report*, in which the fragmented *mise en scène* recounts the juxtaposition of alternative realities and identities.

The mission with which Theo is commissioned reiterates a feature that is present in some films of the seventies such as *Zero population Growth* (1971), by Michael Campus and *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975), in which the director Robert Clouse, famous for his martial arts films, showed a Yul Brinner ready to fight to the death to save some valuable tomato seeds, the promise of a new harvest fertilised in the shadow of the proud outline of the still standing Twin Towers. It is, however, the *mise en scène* that, in the integrity of the shot, highlights the body of Kee and gives the childbirth the statute of a mutation, that is, an extreme ignorance. There is an identity in the way of showing the labour and the way in which the body of the Hulk becomes somewhat strange, in turn inheritor of Cronenberg's films of the eighties. If the Cold War enabled projecting on the idea of the mutant, the anxiety of losing the human essence due to technology, *Children of men* goes into the mistrust at losing the human due to the human machine of recognition itself, a fear which crystallises above all in another film, the aforementioned *The happening*.

In *The happening*, the circular trajectory on which Shyamalan's previous films uphold his immobile journey breaks down in the centrifugal flight towards an apocalyptic exterior. The streets of Philadelphia become, as a newspaper headline coins, bloody Killadelphia, and throughout the north east of the United States, the population begins to commit suicide *en masse*, while the media speculate as to a possible biological terrorist attack, a CIA experiment of an environmental catastrophe. To the astonishment of Elliot, Alma and little Jess, the question "How much longer 'til the end?" "How long is left?" rings out from the tables and lecterns of the news programmes, while an unusual imagery of cruelty is deployed in Shyamalan's cinema, a warning as to the nature in which the Ballardian Apocalypse of *The drought* (1965) is re-enacted via an imbued model of transcendentalism.

4. The time remaining

Around the abyss of some of the visual motives which, laconically, reinvent the imagery of the catastrophe from the parks and wooded corners of New England, the time of the end that guides the messianic wait of *Lady in the Water* (2006), *Signals* (2002) or *Unbreakable* (2000), in *The happening* becomes the end of time: the mercurial tracking of the revolver which, from one hand to the next, triggers a string of suicides in a traffic jam and the dark, low angle shot silhouettes of the construction workers leaping from the outline of building works are cracks that transport the viewer towards the off-camera of absolute exteriority. In that Shyamalan turned the visual inversion between the camera and the threatening off-camera of the dead into a figure of style since, in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) Vincent shot Crowe to the cry of "You failed me", from the other side of the threshold of his closed frames, this filmmaker has always left the living, and with them the conscience of guilt and finitude itself.

The deaths, sacrifices and accidents with which all of his films open, give way in *The happening* to a pandemic of remote origin, to a response by nature with no other image possible than a spiral of empty shots of fields and trees blown by the wind. In accordance with the reading of Tournier and of the Hitchcock of *The Birds* (1963), *The happening* makes an abstract otherness of nature and the ironic cause of all evil of human gregariousness. At the moment of pause prior to the self-mutilations, Shyamalan invokes a model-installation in tune with the model of space-time understanding of *The Weather Project* —in which one could even imagine a variety of home videos capturing the motionlessness of the figures—. The unapproachable invades even absorbing the upsetting of time at the moment of the loss, and both dispossession and profanation are extinguished, since the human being appears confronted with a historical *telos*, his historical *telos*, which forces him to return to an origin marked by depolitization. In the inflection recreated by Shyamalan, only a political purpose can exist and that is the assumption of biological life itself.

The fact that the plants give off a neurotoxin that is capable of attacking increasingly small groups of humans gives cause for sounding out a circuit of small communities where the logic of power and the reconsideration of the regime of belief rehearsed in *The Village* (2004) once again evokes the memory, the dread and the faith of the early christians. Both those who were awaiting the second coming of Christ like the puritans who wanted to start a new Eden in the United States are confronted by a world that is alien to the numinous throbbing of nature. The toing and froing of dead leaves and branches that announces the anger and punishment rings out the ambiguous warning that renaissance painting associated with the index finger pointing towards the sky in Leonardo's

paintings, the *signum harpocraticum*: Look above!, Shyamalan seems to say, also exhorting the angel of melancholy. A dumb witness, the sky contemplates an earth on which human life is in danger embodied in the symbolic meaning of the bees, which in almost all traditions are psychopomps, escorts of souls.

In the absence of such escorts, individuals appear equally disconnected from nature and their own individual finitude, within and not without the parenthesis that includes the present, but in reality incapable of looking. As Shyamalan's previous films indicate, the individual cannot outwardly be guided fully consciously, although he is called —“let each man persist in the calling (*klesis*) in which he was called”, says Paul the apostle in his *Epistles*— But called to what? Called to contemplate a darkness like that proposed by Durero and Eliasson; called, like the Ethernaut to look at the mass of a time that does not allow itself to be seen as otherness, which in its intimate ruin cannot return the gaze. In the same way as David Lynch in the realm of the fantastic, Shyamalan insists on the blind spot of the lost resemblance, on that strange rock, a thwarted figure that, on the horizon of *Melancholy I* constitutes an anomalous piece, an obstruction, and it is also the privation that characterises contemporary science fiction.

Through the meeting between tragic *fatum* and melodrama, *The happening* reads the whole field of science fiction in the light of the fantastic. Only in accordance with that generic exercise can the perfect assembly between the Hitchcock and Spielberg's inheritance, b-movies be understood —from the productions of the RKO to *The naked jungle*—, the apocalyptic cartoon strip by Richard Corben or the transcendental fantastic of cartoonist Moebius in series like *The gardens of Edena* (1988), in which a couple removed to a future of isolation and asepsia is returned to the hostile and paradisiacal memory of the wood. Lovelock's famous Gaia hypothesis, which considers the planet as a supraorganism or the formative causality of embryologist Rupert Sheldrake are the common ground on which Shyamalan's jungles and Moebius's capacity to simulate grow, like at Eliasson's installations, the experience of the exterior and the interior —which is fundamental in *The hermetic Garage* (*Le Garage Hermétique*, 1979) and is common in paradoxical environments such as the *inside-external* of the saga of *The Incal*, (1981)—.

As for Moebius's characters, the permanent twisting of time carries along the characters of *The happening*, in keeping with a logic of shipwreck similar to that of *Lost*, towards the sources of an aloof revelation. It will not be the last day, but the very last day, the one when a Messiah comes whose word is not enough to plug the separation, the split already highlighted in the introduction of *Lady in the water*. By not knowing himself, the human being is always before the world, passing before it without sharing the invitation offered by his environment, and from that insurmountable

fracture arises the terror of the open. It is perhaps the fundamental nucleus of contemporary science fiction, as outlined between *Your Sun Machine* and *The Weather Project*, and it is also that terror that delimits the scope of melancholy as an axis of the contemporary political subconscious against the external. In that exterior, the one described by Shyamalan, those who attempt to save themselves pester Elliot. As in one of the most dramatic prophetic passages, in Isaiah, they seem to ask "Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?", which could also be said by the visitor to *The Weather Project*, as they move on between a wind that envelops them like the centrifuge tie of a spiral, a gazeless wind that threatens with the exterior caress of a waiting time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AGAMBEN, Giorgio, Estancias. La palabra y el fantasma en la cultura occidental. Valencia: Pre-textos, 2006.

AGAMBEN, Giorgio, Profanaciones. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2005.

AGAMBEN, Giorgio, L'Aperto. L'uomo e l'animale. Torí: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.

IVÁN PINTOR

Professor at the Audiovisual Communication Studies in Universitat Pompeu Fabra and Professor of the MA in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies at the same university. Ph.D. in Audiovisual Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra. In his doctoral thesis, *Visual continuity and discontinuity in the comic strip*, he has studied the relations between film language and forms of visual narration such as comic. His main research interests focus on myth critics, studies of the imagery and symbolic hermeneutics, applied both to contemporary cinemas and to sequential storytelling and its narrative structures. He is a member of the research group CINEMA (Center of Aesthetic Research in Audiovisual Media). He writes and contributes to a number of publications, general interest magazines and academic journals. He has directed videos on film, poetry and comic strip and has been advisor and documentarist on expositions and television series.