

Mourning and *Melancholia*

Stephen Keating

Chicago Theological Seminary

“The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing investment energies to itself from all sides and draining the ego to the point of complete impoverishment” (Freud).

*Melancholia* (the 2011 film), by so dispassionately portraying the end of the world, prevents the viewer from taking the usual jouissance of apocalypticism. It is not a film that begs the now banal line about it being easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. What I argue is that *Melancholia*, though clearly depicting the former, actually gives us the latter. This reading is therefore about the libidinal and political economies that create and sustain individual melancholia for their reproduction. Justine’s (the main character of the film) melancholia reveals the violence of the social that circulates through oppressive institutions, and ultimately melancholia is the key to their destruction.

“The desire to survive, ‘to be,’ is a pervasively exploitable desire. The one who holds out the promise of continued existence plays to the desire to survive” (Judith Butler).

The tricky thing about a psychoanalytic reading of *Melancholia* is that it is almost too obvious. Commentaries on the film have pulled selected quotes from Freud’s “Mourning

and Melancholia” to analyze Justine’s condition. She is clearly suffering psychic pain and we, the audience, are tempted to name her state after the film’s title. Never in the film is Justine’s melancholia spoken of. In itself, this repression of her mental state is not all that curious. Families often ignore their internal struggles, but it is possible that something deeper is happening in this situation. This paper will draw on explorations of melancholia by Judith Butler and Robin James, but especially by the affect theorist Eugenie Brinkema to explore the dual critique capitalism and heteronormative kinship in the film. As James shows, “multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy” finds ways to incorporate pain and damage into the reproduction of capitalism. However, in Brinkema’s deconstructive reading of melancholia, as it appears in Freud and Butler, seeks to keep melancholy unproductive, singular, and let the dead clutter life, instead of being redeemed.