

“The End” From *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity* By Katharine Sarah Moody

One of the very best books on the work of Pyrotheology and how it fits in with Radical Theology is by Katharine Sarah Moody. As well as deeply understanding the theory of Pyrotheology, Moody spent a lot of time following the Transformance Art (the practice of Pyrotheology). In what follows she describes an event that took place at Peter Rollins’ Wake festival in N.Ireland.

Inside a large industrial barge in Belfast, chairs are set out across half of the room, an aisle down the centre, all facing a small stage decorated with dead flowers. On the stage, there is a black coffin. Projected onto a screen above is the opening sequence of Lars von Trier’s (2011) film *Melancholia*, which depicts the destruction of the earth. Žižek notes that in most Hollywood movies an ambiguous Thing both impedes the coming together of a couple and enables the creation of the couple at the point at which they overcome this obstacle. In this film, however, the Thing – the celestial object-obstacle, the planet on a collision course – is not averted but destroys Earth. For Žižek, this means that it is ‘the Thing – das Ding at its purest, as Heidegger would have it: the Real Thing which dissolves any symbolic frame – we see it, it is our death, we cannot do anything’, and he says that the character of Justine is ‘the only one who is able to propose an appropriate answer to the impending catastrophe, and to the total obliteration of every symbolic frame.’ Her answer is to create a space of protection – a magic cave – that functions, not as a ‘beautiful lie’ preventing the destruction of Earth, but as a ‘symbolic fiction’ or sustaining fantasy that enables us to joyously accept the End.’

We line up to pay our final respects to the figure in the coffin but inside a mirror reflects back to us our own image; this is our funeral, our end. A reworking of W.H. Auden’s ‘Stop the Clocks’ encircles us, in which there is a shift in perspective from the original text so that it becomes the deceased who is speaking: ‘I was your North, your South, your East and West, / Your working week and your Sunday rest, / Your noon, your midnight, your talk, your song; / You thought that love would last for ever: You were wrong.’ Pall bearers step forward and take the coffin from the stage to the centre of a space behind us and we form a circle around it, creating the outer edge of the round face of a clock, the Roman numerals marked out on the ground beneath our feet. We fill out our own death certificates, light our candles in darkness and silence, and hold each other’s hands, creating our own magic circle, together in the face of the certainty of our eventual end.

This performance, entitled *The End*, was part of Rollins’ 2013 *Idolatry of God* retreat, and, as such, many of those gathered had high expectations of this evening, as well as reservations, given Ikon’s reputation for not only thoughtprovoking but also existentially-disturbing artistic events. But much of this transformance art piece revolved around very familiar ideas, images and themes about endings, mortality and death. Remarking upon the clichéd nature of the different elements of the performance in my field notes, I felt as if this gathering was telling me something I already knew. But I also knew that drawing mere intellectual assent from those present – that we know we are going to die, that the end is already and always nigh – could not be all that this transformance art event was ultimately about. Indeed, *The End* illustrated well the need to move from an intellectual engagement with the themes and ideas of a particular performance piece to an embodied experience of the existential moment that an idea permeates through to the body – although it did so in a way unforeseen by its creators, for I later found out that the moment that created this shift for me was completely unintentional and unanticipated.

A man entered the circle that we had created, lifted the coffin to his shoulder and threw it down onto the ground. The coffin breaks open, spilling forth black cloth, ribbon and paper, and spewing out a cloud of dust. During the minutes of silence after this act, a ripple of coughs slowly erupts around the circle as the billowing dust rises up from the coffin and around the room, slowly reaching our lungs. At that moment, *The End* was not merely about affirming knowledge that we already had – one day, we will be dead, we will decay, we will be dust. Rather, it became about allowing our bodies to ingest this idea, letting our bodies know what we already knew but refused to know. We know that we are finite beings, that one day we will be dead and gone. But, through what Julian Barnes refers to as ‘the sin of height’ and what Brewin further characterises as ‘our fascination with transcending our limited finitude’, we tend to disavow the knowledge that death means a return to this world rather than a flight to another. We know that we cannot escape death, and yet in our everyday lives, material actions and social interactions we turn to technology, pharmacology, art, sex or religion to help us achieve distance from this knowledge, enabling us to persist in activities that thereby maintain the ideological illusion that escape is possible: ‘The hope of flight is the hope of overcoming death.’ Perhaps this was why we were resistant, staring at the floor, blinking at each other, our throats tightening, each trying to resist that tickle at the back of our oesophagus, none of us wanting to be the first person to cough, the first person to ingest the disturbing idea of our mortality or of our complicity in the desire to escape death. For, in our everyday, material actions and social interactions, we disavow this knowledge of death; we do not know that we know we will die, not if the true site of our knowledge and beliefs is our bodily practices. This is the difference between the things that we know and the things that we know but do not know that we know, that we refuse to know, because to truly know these things, to make them fully known or wholly realised, would be too traumatic. During this moment of *The End*, we took physically into our bodies, into our material reality, something that we already knew – we are mortal and are going to die – but the artistic form enabled us to do so in such a way that we could participate in a bodily realisation of our own mortality and relation to death without its weight completely crushing us. We ingested the idea of death and decay materially by physically ingesting the dust, which encouraged us to move from intellectual assent to embodied existential experience.

But perhaps neither this moment (the dust cloud) nor this movement (from intellectual knowledge to transformative existential embodied experience) would have been so powerful, if what had gone on before this moment had not been quite so predictable. It needed all the customary images of death and decay that quickly gained our assent, precisely in order to expose the merely intellectual nature of this assent and to prepare us for existential and bodily experiences of death and decay as well. However, the dust cloud was an unplanned element within the performance; Ikon had not realised that ash from a fire place would, when thrown from a height, billow up and be breathed in by those assembled.

It is perhaps also fair to say that it was not their intention that (at least some of) the audience would find the performance to be so clichéd. It was only by happy accident, then, that this gathering as a whole enabled me to reflect further on the role of transformance art in the relationship between ideas and the material ingestion of ideas. But such performances are by their nature also always unique experiences, with different points being transformative (or not) for each person in attendance. And sometimes, as one member of Ikon told me, ‘the accidents are everything.’ As another Ikon participant comically defined it in a comment on social media, which Ikon then used as part of their promotional literature during their Greenbelt 2013 performance of *The End*, transformance art is ‘an embarrassing series of clichés put together so ineptly as to be profound!’ It is always only ever pure chance, after all, if an event occurs during these gatherings.

But Brewin warns against what he calls 'spiritualising failure', or translating a particular performance 'into other spheres as a way of excusing something that, artistically, just didn't cut it.' Precisely as art, transformance art is surely open to artistic question. But is this the question of the critic, approaching it not with music on his lips but with the comment, 'that's the way (or not), that's how the rules of aesthetics say it should (or shouldn't) be done'? Is it the failure of the artist or of the audience or of both if a specific occasion does not create a welcome for the incoming event or enable the move to material engagement?