February 1, 2012
Teleconference Room
Alexander Library
4:30-6:30pm
Lecture by Steven Shaviro

2012 Comparative Literature Spring Event
New Feelings: Power and Aesthetics Today
A Lecture by and Roundtable with

Steven Shaviro

"Melancholia, or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime"

Lars von Trier’s film *Melancholia* (2011) moves from domestic melodrama to cosmic catastrophe. It works as what used to be called a "women’s picture," giving the portrait of a female character’s clinical depression when confronted with the prospect of a bourgeois family lifestyle. But the film also envisions the extermination of all life on Earth; this serves as a kind of objective correlate to the protagonist’s depression. In contrast to other recent apocalyptic films, however, *Melancholia* refuses to present the audience with a grandiose and sublime spectacle of mass destruction. Its apocalypse is disconcertingly intimate. *Melancholia* offers a deflationary view both of ongoing life and of its extinction. The film rejects conventional art-house standards of construction and form, with its disjunctive structure and its use of Dogme-style unsteady handheld camerawork. But *Melancholia* is also filled with Romantic allusions, from the music of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* on the soundtrack, to visual tableaux that recall Pre-Raphaelite paintings. It treats these allusions in a strangely distanced way, however, framing them as beautiful objects of contemplation in a manner that, for some viewers, might even seem to border on kitsch. In deploying this Romantic imagery, and reverting to a Romantic pessimism reminiscent of Leopardi and Schopenhauer, von Trier breaks away from the Modernist obsession with estrangement-effects, self-reflexivity, irony, and the "unpresentable." Against the Romantic and Modernist sublime, *Melancholia* offers an aesthetico-ontological vision of desolate beauty. In its reference to a certain side of German Idealism, its radical anti-anthropocentrism, and its entertainment of the thought of extinction, the film parallels recent developments in so-called "speculative realism." But in its own right, *Melancholia* offers at least one possibility for a new aesthetics of the 21st century.