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Melancholia

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Melancholia

Abstract

This is a film review of *Melancholia* (2011) directed by Lars Von Trier.

Ever wondered about the “end of the world?” In America such speculation is both a shared disease and a profitable industry. In Lars von Trier’s recent film, *Melancholia*, the prospect of apocalypse receives an interpretation that neither fuels the disease nor will (alas) reap massive profits. Prosaically, the film is the story of a newly discovered planet, Melancholia, that is on orbit to collide with Earth. More substantially, the film reveals a theology of the cross in cinematic splendor. It’s apocalypse new.

The Dane, von Trier, is a frequent cinematic commentator on religion. In *Breaking the Waves* (1996), he analyzed a conjunction between trauma, religious rigorism, and sexual libertinism. The result was a brutal study of a distinctively modern form of religious masochism and sexual sadism, with a cheap (to my mind) resurrection at the end. In *Antichrist* (2009), von Trier again explored sex and guilt, and a living hell of torture and misogyny absent of any resurrection. But in *Melancholia*, von Trier announces a new thread that works through cataclysm to the virtues on the other side. It is apocalypse beautiful. His awful comments in an interview at Cannes ought not, to my mind, detract from appreciation for this work of art.

The film has precedents. It’s not Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, and it’s not Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*, but it has elements of both. It was filmed, like both predecessors, on location in Sweden—with its austere light. Von Trier, in *Melancholia*, is also as critical of conventional faith as Bergman in *The Seventh Seal*, and as languorous about life as Tarkovsky in *The Sacrifice*. The theme of languor comes through especially in the way the female lead, Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst, appears in the film. She’s mad but beautiful; fragile but substantial. Much commentary has focused on a scene where Dunst drapes her naked body across a rock in

Melancholia's blue light. But I found more compelling a scene in a bath where her body is a dead weight of corporeal compression. She sags like the walrus-Dali in *The Persistence of Memory*. Unlike *Breaking the Waves*, this film has none of the cheap romanticism of *Left Behind* that imagines a "happy escape" for the holy. It also does not doom the rest of us to the tribulation of military (or psychological) struggle (with victory for those converted to the pious way, of course). This apocalypse claims all. It spares none. Some, however, are better prepared to endure it and, perhaps, even to rise to the occasion in witness—even if only to a few intimates, even if only through the few minutes of a film.

The plot is announced in a long "Prologue" that plays to a Wagner soundtrack (*Tristan and Isolde*). In a series of tableaux that move at interminably slow motion (actors appear almost entirely still, but then are revealed to be moving ever so slowly), von Trier visually introduces the three chief characters. Justine (Dunst) is a twenty-something blonde beauty who is celebrating her wedding. Claire (Charlotte Gainsborough) is Justine's slightly older and plainer brunette sister who is stage managing Justine's wedding to make her "happy." John (Kiefer Sutherland) is Claire's husband, and an amateur astronomer who is convinced Melancholia will come near the Earth but miss it. John and Claire have a son. The setting throughout is the Versailles-like palace where John and Claire live. The palace is beautifully shot throughout, shrouded in gold and blue especially.

Each character is a type as well as an individually wrought persona. John's conventional rationality (one can trust "science") is shown to be superficial, and Claire's conventional morality (one should be "happy") is shown to be fleeting. Only Justine—who is so overwrought by melancholia that she refuses to consummate her wedding and so loses her husband—has the

courage to face the end with equanimity. In this film, the end of the world is a welcome end to suffering—and it brings more than a share of beauty. Long shots of the palace that housed the wedding banquet (an apocalyptic metaphor of its own, of course) are juxtaposed with close shots of the characters that reveal their human, all-too-human, fragility. At the end, Justine and Claire and her son huddle under a fragile canopy as the light of Melancholia envelopes them.

Of course the film is a metaphor. Von Trier's personal struggles with depression are well-known. The planet melancholia is a looming presence in the film that represents Kierkegaardian dread as vividly as any I can remember in cinema. The movie consequently has the suspense of a Hitchcock thriller, even though one knows the outcome from the opening scene. Yet I came away from the film oddly at peace and even grateful. Such gratitude—not only for the art of a filmmaker, but for the beauty of life in all its fragility—is what makes the film a theology of the cross in cinema.

Melancholia is the best cinematic counter I have seen to the typical American apocalypse: wealth-weary and exhausted, caught up in military (scientific) sacrifice yet distracted by spectacle, enwrapped in the ennui of convention yet longing to escape into the “authentic.” The film allows no escape. Only those deluded by a superficial rationality, or by cultural convention (which may be the same thing), would wish to escape the end that is the fate of all the living. Better to face the Kierkegaardian dread with equanimity, and to take a leap of faith into the light. *Melancholia's* affirmation of resurrection is therefore more durable than most, and signals von Trier's maturation as a filmmaker. All one has is the film itself, its distinctive and fragile grace, and the faith of the viewer. And in this case, that's enough.