



Films

MELANCHOLIA

Stefan Bolea takes us on a tour of European nihilism

“We don’t need an atom bomb at all; the uprooting of human beings is already taking place... It is no longer an Earth on which human beings live today.”
Martin Heidegger, *Der Spiegel* interview, 1966

Lars von Trier’s latest movie *Melancholia* (2011) could be interpreted as a logical consequence of the history of European nihilism, whose most significant proponents were the philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and E.M. Cioran, and poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Maurice Rollinat and Lautréamont. In the film, the Danish director seems to be constructing an argument which not only “questions the value of life” (Nietzsche) but also invites us to change our status from “mortals to moribund beings” (Cioran).

The planet Melancholia is on a collision course with the Earth. This film’s terrifying apocalypse is completely original, focusing not on the biological or physical destruction of our planet and species as do more trivial productions such as *Independence Day* or *2012*. Instead it emphasizes the psychological distress of two particular Earth-dwellers, the severely melancholic Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and her sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg).

Night Moves

Melancholia’s intro is a depiction of the planetary dance of death between Melancholia, a planet the size of Saturn, and Earth, combined with an ironic introduction to the history of art. The soundtrack of the intro is provided by Wagner’s prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, a post-Romantic manifesto which proposes the clash and the final union between two opposing principles, *love* and *death*. Here the music symbolizes the astronomical (and perhaps astrological) clash of the two planets. The intro is shot in slow motion, almost as an MTV Wagner music video, and it could be seen as an abstract of *Melancholia*, summarizing the whole movie.

If the alliance between love and death, and the subsequent destruction of the principle of love, are the atmospheric message

of von Trier’s intro, the nihilistic motto of the whole film would be: “The Earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it” (Justine). This attitude is reminiscent of gnosticism, seen as a forerunner of modern nihilism by scholars such as Hans Jonas and Ion Petru Culianu. Its first principle was that the world of matter (or the Earth) is evil, and that humankind is the damaged creation of an evil divine power. The

sphere of the bourgeois celebration reminded me of the satirical movie *Festen* (1998), the first Dogme 95 film, directed by Lars’ colleague Thomas Vinterberg. Justine is visibly distressed by her mother Gaby’s (Charlotte Rampling’s) disturbing speech (“Enjoy it while it lasts. I myself hate marriages”), and her aura of self-control begins to shatter. This speech is particularly significant because it claims that



nihilism proposed in the 20th century by various writers, such as Cioran, Marinetti and Gottfried Benn, draws the similarly disturbing conclusion that because of our inherent defects, human beings must be destroyed – adapting one of the four noble truths of Buddhism, that suffering must be annihilated by *nirvana* (which means ‘snuffed out’). Lars von Trier illustrates a similar destructiveness, in both his earlier *Antichrist* (describing the apocalypse of a relationship) and in *Melancholia*, in depicting the *noche oscura* (‘the dark night of the soul’ – St. John of the Cross) of a human being (Justine) together with the *universal night of St. Bartholomew* (the death of the world). As we shall see, the personalized dark night of the soul may be even more significant than the dark night of the world.

Justine’s own *noche oscura* begins at her wedding party, organized by her rich and arrogant brother-in-law John (Kiefer Sutherland). Lars von Trier’s impression of the hypocritical and artificial atmo-

marriage is something despicable, something to be loathed and feared. Justine is afterwards confronted by her sister Claire, who hints that the shadow of Justine’s depression could further ruin the party. Her controlling attitude contrasts with Justine’s passive and guilty response. The sisters give the suggestion of a sadomasochistic couple or of the feed-back dynamics between a psychiatrist and reluctant patient. It is interesting

that at the end of the movie this relationship is reversed. Justine’s doubts about the marriage (which may be existentially flawed, as Gaby suggested) become visible as she becomes more withdrawn, taking a nap and later a bath, ruining the schedule of the wedding. More important, she experiences the demise of her marriage from day one, firstly by dismissing her husband’s (Alexander Skarsgård) project of curing her ‘sadness’ with the picture of a tranquilizing apple orchard, and secondly by rejecting him and having sex with the first man available. Many people find out that their relationships or marriages are collapsing after months or perhaps years of invisible fragmentation. Justine finds this out the hard way, on her wedding day, her illness making her almost prescient.

In a twist which reminds me of Lawrence Durrell, the second part of the movie focuses mainly on Claire. One of the most important features of this section is its portrait of John, Claire’s husband.

“The real scientists, all of them agree: Melancholia is gonna pass just in front of us and it’s gonna be the most beautiful site ever” is John’s initial statement. He is the archetype of the rational scientist; but he ends as a Stoic philosopher. His creed might be: *pereat mundus et fiat scientia!* (“Though the world perish, let there be knowledge!”)

The end of the movie brings back the Wagnerian motif, as the two sisters and Claire’s young son Leo (Cameron Spurr) face the apocalypse in a ‘magic cave’ (a shelter made of wooden sticks) constructed at Justine’s suggestion to comfort Leo. Claire breaks down completely while her melancholic sister keeps calm, suggesting the theory that mentally ill people face external catastrophes more easily because they’re more accustomed to traumas and intense psychological imbalances. This could make intelligible the idea hinted at by the film that *noche oscura* (the nihilistic night when I inwardly die, descend into hell and cannot imagine a return from the inferno – when my entire world dies inside me) is even scarier than the night of St. Bartholomew (the sense of cosmic death). This thesis would be absurd if considered from a rationalistic perspective: how could the spiritual death of one individual count for more than the demise of mankind?

Death, Universal & Personal

Lars von Trier’s vision of apocalypse in *Melancholia* puts it in the same category of Romantic nihilism as Byron’s *Darkness*, Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* and Cioran’s *A Short History of Decay*. All of them start from the psychological disintegration of the individual and move out to a project of universal destruction. First one of us dies on the inside, and then all must follow: this is the incontrovertible rule of nihilistic violence:

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish’d, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air...
The world was void,
The populous and the powerful – was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless –
A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay.

Byron – *Darkness*

Byron’s poem proposes a sort of spectacle of imploding anxiety, which might be summarized through Samuel Beckett’s construct, ‘lessness’ (“rayless”, “pathless”, “seasonless”, etc). In the imaginary universe of *Melancholia*, lives are similarly transformed into an ode to death. Consider for instance the scene in which Justine gives herself to the Planet of Death, worshipping it naked



Justine: a picture of serenity in the face of death

MELANCHOLIA IMAGES © ZENTROPA ENTERTAINMENT 2011



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as Melancholia menacingly approaches. Consider also this quote:

“If the face of the earth were covered with lice as the sea-shore is covered with grains of sand, the human race would be destroyed, a prey to dreadful pain. What a sight! With me, motionless on my angel wings, in the air to contemplate it!”

Comte de Lautréamont – *Maldoror and Poems*, translation by Paul Knight.

Lautréamont’s apocalypse has a sort of evolutionary feeling to it. From his point of view a race of predators (lice) replaces a race no longer creative, caught up in a spiral of decay. This spectacle of human disintegration is presented with cynicism and sarcasm. Moreover, the poetic subject seems to observe the apocalypse as if from Planet Melancholia, taking a non-human (or anti-human) point of view: “With me, motionless on my angel wings in the air to contemplate it!” We can observe a detached, non-human point of view in Cioran too: “The spectacle of man – what an emetic! Love – a duel of salivas... All the feelings milk their absolute from the misery of glands. Nobility is only in the negation of existence, in a smile that surveys annihilated landscapes.” (E.M. Cioran – *A Short History of Decay*, translation by Richard Howard.) This is the inner contradiction of a nihilism which goes beyond the self: a nihilism that firstly wants to destroy and secondly wants to watch destruction from above.

If Cioran’s “smile that surveys annihilated landscapes” is evocative of the horrors of WW2, what would the cosmic destruction in *Melancholia* suggest? Perhaps the Danish director is expressing our deepest unconscious desire to be absolved of existence: he’s expressing the mysterious *will to die*, the instinct of death, which has its roots in the core of our civilization. However, remembering the significance of the Wagnerian soundtrack from *Tristan und Isolde*, if death and love collide, we must hang on to our capacity for love until it transforms the power of death.

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