

FREEDOM IN OBLIVION: POST-FEMINIST POSSIBILITIES IN LARS VON TRIER'S *MELANCHOLIA*

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THE UNCATEGORICAL

What is Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*? Why does it have such a powerful effect on so many people who see it? Whether they love it or hate it, very few people walk away from this film unmoved. Set in the isolated world of the very privileged bourgeoisie, the film is the story of a wedding gone wrong, a woman afflicted by extreme depression, and the end of the world. So how exactly should we categorize it: as an end-of-the-world disaster film, a family melodrama about emotional despair, an exercise in sublime nihilism, a romantic flirtation with the apocalyptically sublime? Is it literal or a metaphor? A dark dream or a bleak reality?

Melancholia is all those things and none of those things, and the very fact that we can't pigeon-hole the film into simple categories is a large part of its message. Just as the planet Melancholia changes its course into a "slingshot" orbit – breaking through all scientific predictions and obliterating the planet –, the movie itself operates in its own slingshot orbit, turning everything back in on itself and resisting a fixed and predictable position. The only thing we know for sure is that everything is going to explode. It is a movie about the undoing of the categorical world, the unraveling of order and dismantling of systems and, ultimately, the freedom that is found in oblivion even when oblivion comes in the form of a giant random planet crashing into the Earth. In *Melancholia* there are no "exact" answers, and attempts to contain, quantify, measure or predict – whether through science, economics or social convention – prove futile in the face of random and chaotic cosmic forces.

What is truly remarkable about this film is that it contains multiple disaster narratives – the wedding disaster, the emotional disaster, and the apocalypse disaster – and has very few concrete pieces of "hope" to offer, yet still leaves many viewers feeling exalted. It is a film about apocalyptic depression and is set in an extremely isolated, privileged world — clearly the world of the so-called 1% — yet somehow it imparts a feeling of liberation to viewers who have little in common with its characters. It is about the end of the world, yet people leave the film feeling as if their world has opened up. Perhaps they are liberated from the prospect of hope itself. Perhaps, given how beautiful this film ultimately is, viewers realize that beauty is enough and they feel exhilarated by letting go of hope, just as the film's protagonist Justine does. Steven Shaviro addresses the idea of hopelessness as a form of release in world where global capitalism has deprived us of any vision for a future in his essay on *Melancholia*:

The allure of disaster movies, in an age of capitalist realism, is that they seem to offer us a way out — indeed, the only conceivable way out. Over the past few decades, endless rounds of privatization and austerity, not to mention widespread environmental degradation, have already deprived us of a future. The world of our hopes and dreams has in fact already ended: our day-to-day existence just needs to catch

up with this fact. And so our only chance for release from the continuing soft disaster of our lives is for this disaster to become truly universal. If the world ends, then at least we will be freed from the rapacity of financial institutions, and from our ever-increasing burdens of debt. The cinematic spectacle of disaster is in itself intensely gratifying, as well: we see destroyed, before our very eyes, that “immense collection of commodities” after which we have always striven, upon which we have focused all our desires, and which has always ended up disappointing us. (1)

Indeed, perhaps it is letting go of the whole idea of happiness as defined by a world where happiness is defined by economics and convention that gives us that sense of exhilaration when we watch Justine wipe the smile of her face and embrace the end of planet Earth. Through Justine and von Trier’s beautifully envisioned end of the world, we can let go of all the things that are supposed to bring us joy, but ultimately only bring us disappointment, more debt, and the impossibility of transcending their trappings.

To be sure, there are those who find the film profoundly depressing and see it as yet another exercise in Lars von Trier’s distinctive brand of sadistic cinematic provocation, but in this case those people are a distinct minority. Many people who have seen the film feel just the opposite and have described feeling a kind of exaltation and release from this apocalyptic piece of cinema. Even some critics who have a reputation for disliking the films of Lars von Trier have found *Melancholia* to provide a nearly transcendental experience. They respond to this film about the claustrophobic prison of depression and the ultimate end of the world by feeling a tremendous sense of relief and even renewal at the end of things. *Artforum* critic Amy Taubin writes, “It is the first movie by the director that I haven’t loathed . . . The anxiety of waiting for the end, and the pity one feels for the characters facing the extinction of all life, creates a classical catharsis. One has to marvel when this inexorably grim vision turns release into pure joy.”(2) In *The Village Voice*, J. Hoberman argues that *Melancholia* is a “spectacle impossible to turn away from . . . Von Trier has made a movie about the end of world-- when I left the theater and exited out into Cannes, I felt light, rejuvenated and unconscionably happy.” (3)

CINEMATIC BAD BOY OR RADICAL FEMINIST?

Hoberman’s response is exactly the kind of contradiction that *Melancholia* barter in from beginning to end. How is it that that a film about depression and the end of the world could allow someone could feel “unconscionably happy”? It is even more strange that so many people react with such a state of elation to a film made by Lars von Trier — that inveterate Bad Boy of cinema, the auteur everyone loves to hate.

Von Trier’s films for the most part have focused on female characters suffering incredible social duress. He has taken the women we find in films from such masters of melodrama as Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder and pushed them to the brink of social horror. Von Trier has been accused of being a misogynist and subjecting his female characters on screen — not to mention the actresses who play them — to his

artistic and narrative tyranny. We've seen his characters subjected to rape, public humiliation, and violence of all variety. Whether presenting his subjects in the *verité* mode endorsed by the Dogme 95 group he co-founded or estranging them in the guise of the musical (*Dancer in the Dark*, 2000) or minimalist avant-garde theater (*Dogville*, 2003), von Trier seems to delight in abusing his characters and his audience alike.

However, as much as the female characters suffer in von Trier's films — and they do suffer — it's a mistake to regard their trials and tribulations simply as a source of sadistic pleasure for the filmmaker. He is working in a very heightened and extreme form of melodrama, where the suffering of women in a man's world is taken to the Nth degree. Despite the director's reputation, von Trier's films can be read as radically feminist to the point that they're "post-feminist" rather than misogynistic. They dare to show things that a politically correct feminist cinema refuses to acknowledge. While they may seem needlessly provocative on their surface, degrading women in the service of cheap thrills, at their core they are emotionally sincere and much more complex than their melodramatic plots might lead us to believe.

Much of that emotional impact is derived from Von Trier's creative interpretations of his Dogme 95 cinematic Vow of Chastity (4) which prescribes the use of handheld cameras, available light, and diegetic sound, among other things. These cinematic devices make for a very "immediate" type of filmmaking, instilling von Trier's art with a sense of realist urgency and honesty through a manipulation of the medium that works because it doesn't feel like manipulation. In a film like *Breaking the Waves* (1996), handheld cameras move right into the faces of the characters giving extreme proximity to both their exterior and interior lives. Yet being a man of contradictions who produces a cinema of contradictions, von Trier makes a point of always breaking his own rules.

In *Breaking the Waves*, the immersive realism with which the experiences of protagonist Bess (Emily Watson) are documented is regularly interrupted by static "music videos" set in idyllic painterly and overtly artificial landscapes and scored to classic rock by bands like Mott the Hoople and Jethro Tull. Other von Trier films, from his early success *Europa* (1991) through *Dancer in the Dark* and the controversial *Antichrist* (2009), demonstrate similar attempts to break the spell of von Trier's own rigorous rules to provide a new immediate kind of cinematic realism. This tension between the "natural" use of camera, lighting and sound and his use of overtly artificial techniques reveals the social and emotional contradictions at play in his characters. Just as von Trier's characters are victimized and subjugated by a variety of social forces that provoke them to behave "against nature," so, too, do his films yield to the pressure of a real world whose multiple artificial social constructions give the lie to that sense realism. In his resistance to being contained by the rules of a predictive cinema, von Trier operates in his own kind of slingshot orbit within his films, refusing to be categorized and even turning his own rules in on themselves.

This play between the real and the artificial is part of the schizophrenic quality of von Trier's films, which we must remember are inherently artificial constructions themselves simply by being film. Film itself is an illusion of reality. The schizophrenic quality of von

Trier's work derives from this tension between the real and the artificial, but it also reflects his ambivalence about beauty, that his films can be both sublimely beautiful and claustrophobically ugly. From early films like *Europa* through *Antichrist*, his work has showcased visually and aurally stunning moments. Yet the sharp contrast these moments of the cinematic sublime make with the ugliness of his characters' situations raises questions about his films' redemptive power. *Melancholia* revisits this dynamic, but shifts the balance in favor of beauty and redemption, even in the face of the end of the world. The gorgeous slow-motion prologue and spectacularly destructive yet liberating conclusion bookend the claustrophobia of the severely circumscribed world in which the film's plot unfolds. Yet, the interspersed shots of the planet Melancholia – a completely "imaginary" planet that is obviously created for the film -- remind us that there is another, potentially better world beyond the one in which we find ourselves. Perhaps this is the world of the imagination, the world of the interior mind, inside which the film's protagonist Justine retreats but also which is the source of art, beauty and films like *Melancholia*.

This ambiguity between the real and the unreal, the insane world of the mind and the insane world of social customs, makes *Melancholia* the perfect segue from its predecessor *Antichrist*. In this notorious — and, to my mind, severely misunderstood — film, von Trier shows the legacy of patriarchy played out in gothic horror, but in *Antichrist*, we are never quite sure where the line between sanity and insanity, reality and nightmare is drawn. In *Melancholia*, that line gets even further blurred. The lead character Justine (an amazing Kirstin Dunst) is a woman who seems like she could fall into the trappings of other von Trier female characters, yet she resists subjugation at every turn. In fact, Justine intentionally annihilates the systems that would like to contain her, and in their annihilation she breaks free from her gender and the systems that want to trap her. This liberation is represented by the planet Melancholia, which promises to put an end to every form of cultural, economic and political bondage by annihilating the Earth itself. This stray planet can be read as both literal and metaphorical, leaving us unsure where we stand as its presence begins to dominate the film. Is it a literal planet crashing into the Earth? Or does it show us, through the metaphorical imagery of magic realism, that Justine herself is a kind of cosmic disruption? After all, Justine destroys her wedding and disrupts the order of Claire and John's home, just as the planet Melancholia destroys the Earth. She is both the force that destabilizes order and the sphere around which the tightly closed isolated world of the film orbits.

Justine also destabilizes von Trier's legacy of female protagonists because of the way she resists being a victim. Justine's act of resistance in the face of suffocating social conventions and the catastrophic cosmic event that follows enable *Melancholia* to transcend the category of a "women's film" (a term Von Trier has often used in characterizing his work) and become a film of universal relevance. This is a big reason why it's hard for people to hate this movie even if they have hated von Trier's other films. Not only does Justine resist being subjugated to systems, but she is actually the one who is in most control by destroying her own wedding, ripping the rug out from under patriarchy and convention, and coming out on top in the face of disaster.

Melancholia is carefully constructed to make it easy to identify with Justine even while she is mired in depression and happily awaits the end of the world. Even though she seems to symbolize a woman trapped in a world of systems, codes and forces of containment, Justine breaks the mold for the female characters in other Lars von Trier films by exposing these systems as ridiculous and meaningless and by defying them through her destructive inaction. New York Times critic A.O. Scott underscores this point in his review of the film:

Unlike other von Trier victim-heroines — including those played by Emily Watson in *Breaking the Waves*; Nicole Kidman in *Dogville*; and Bjork in *Dancer in the Dark* — Justine is not assailed and humiliated by other people. The element of male aggression that was such a powerful force in those films, and an integral aspect of Mr. von Trier's creative personality, has been neutralized here. The men who hover around the wedding, including the clueless Michael and the officious John, are not menacing, just useless. [4]

Indeed, *Melancholia* contains none of von Trier's familiar abuses and humiliations. There is little sex, no rape, no pornography. The men in the story are rendered impotent by Justine's refusal to partake in their game. She interrupts sex with her new husband Michael who is left playing with his own sock rather than fondling his wife's voluptuous body, a body which can barely be contained in the first half of the film. Even when Justine actually engages in sexual intercourse and has sex with her co-worker and underling Tim, her body is completely engulfed by her wedding dress and her hand covers his face; it is a desexualized sexual act, in which Justine is emphatically on top. Justine also emasculates her employer Jack, the film's economic patriarch and leaves him impotently shattering a plate as an outlet for his humiliation.

Justine may fuck Tim on the golf course, but her true bliss has nothing to do with sex itself. It comes from the destruction of everything relational. When she is on top of Tim, she might as well be digging a hole in the golf course; and in a way, that is just what she does. Justine is not the one subjugated in this film as women are in earlier von Trier films. Instead, she subjugates everyone to her depressive will and her emotional resistance. She is the random planet who turns everything upside down, and the only "orgasm" we get by identifying with her is the roiling, explosive, and gorgeously destructive end of the world.

In her book *The Cinema of Lars Von Trier*, Caroline Bainbridge mentions that von Trier sees all his female characters as reflections of himself. (6) This revelation opens up yet another layer of contradiction within his work, that von Trier envisions himself female in films in which women are grossly subjugated to the abusive whims of men. Von Trier not only sees himself making "women's films," but he also says that he *is* all the women in his films. They are him. So the female protagonists in his films can be read as sexually schizophrenic, both male and female. This contradiction of sexual identification could be at the core of the tension in his films. It certainly plays itself out in the character of Justine, who along with shedding systems also sheds her gender, and in doing so invites identification across the gender divide. Both men and women respond to Justine

whereas in earlier von Trier films, the female characters were definitely grounded in their “femaleness” and prone to alienate much of the male audience.

SCHIZOPHRENIC CINEMA

While all of von Trier’s films are contradictory to some degree, *Melancholia* clearly takes his cinematic schizophrenia to new heights. The film itself has a split personality. Yet it also is destabilizing to the audience. The splits are multi-layered and woven into every scene. Planets aren’t the only things colliding in this movie. Systems collide and explode; cinematic aesthetics clash; expectations from characters are in conflict throughout, and nothing is stable. In a way, *Melancholia* is a film about the inherent instability of all things, especially those artificially imposed structures that humans put on the world.

Justine’s fate, literally being caught between two worlds (the world inside her mind and the outside world of her claustrophobic environment), reinforces *Melancholia*’s schizophrenic quality. So does the fact that the picture is divided into two parts: the first, which focuses on Justine’s wedding, is named after her; the second, which concentrates on the planet’s approach towards Earth and the responses it elicits, is named after her sister Claire. This split is reinforced at the level of style as well. The first half of the film, obvious heir to the Dogme 95 aesthetic, features frenetic hand-held camerawork that prioritizes close-ups, relying on cinematic proximity and facial expressions, rather than dialogue and narrative, to deliver the emotional content of the film’s characters. The second half, by contrast, is more visually sedate, with longer takes and less sense of movement. Because of this diptych-like structure, the difficulty of determining what is and isn’t “real” in *Melancholia* is powerfully reinforced. Could the “Claire” section of the film, with its vision of total destruction, be Justine’s fantasy, the final retreat into her mind and the world of the imaginary, or is the world indeed coming to an end?

The contradictions in the film are everywhere. Certainly, there are the obvious parallels and oppositions between the main characters Justine and Claire and the sections of the film that bear their names. But there are many more: the dual interpretation of the planet as either a literal planet or the interior world of Justine; the split between the interior and the exterior world (which mirrors the dual interpretations of the planet); the schism between order and chaos; the division between and subsequent merging of terror and beauty; and the gender split between men and women. Then there is the tension between the Romantic aesthetics the film invokes, from the Wagnerian score to the sublime spectacle of apocalypse, and the cold world of twenty-first century capitalism and advertising. Finally, there is the jarring split between English and American identity figured by the two sisters. Even origins of the two main characters are unstable. How can Justine be so overtly American when her family is British? The most important thing to note is that, regardless of the schisms, uncertainties, and instabilities within the film, at the end everything unites in destruction.

Central to the schism in this film is Justine’s relationship to her environment. She is a woman who feels trapped by conventions and therefore systemically destroys them.

Schizophrenia goes very deep into the heart of the film, a place where depression and annihilation can be exhilarating and life affirming. That such terrifying subjects can also be so exhilarating underscores the film's identity crisis. *Melancholia*, a film about a planet that is also about a woman, is schizophrenic at its very structure.

UNRAVELING THE DETAILS

One of the things that makes the layers of meaning in *Melancholia* so complex is that the smallest details both complicate and confirm its big concerns. It is a film that invites us into its environment and asks us to investigate every detail, and on close inspection it reveals "clues" that ultimately don't provide answers but just further unraveling. The film opens with an incredibly beautiful prologue that is an ode to apocalyptic romanticism, emotional stasis, and melancholic beauty. Justine's face is held in a state of inverted rapture. We can barely tell if she is moving or still. Dead birds drop from the sky. A Brueghel painting quietly comes to life as dead leaves fall across its surface and the painting begins to burn slowly in the middle. Justine's sister Claire trudges across a field of green grass as if she is climbing through quicksand. A numbered flag clues us that this is a golf course. The number first appears to be a thirteen, but is then revealed to be a nineteen. A horse collapses backwards in a scene straight out of a Romantic painting. Nothing in this Prologue is certain; the line between the real and the surreal, the certain and the uncertain is blurred. Is this life or the afterlife? Are we inside someone's head (Justine's) or actually witnessing events on Earth? The prologue ends with a very long shot — from a vantage point far away from Earth — showing the collision of two planets in a spectacular vision that is both seductively sexy and entirely apocalyptic.

After the prologue, the narrative proper commences, dividing the film, as I have already suggested, into a split personality that eventually turns on itself. The first half of the film takes us through Justine's failed wedding reception and her fall into depression. The second half takes us to the end of the world where we experience Justine's sublime evacuation and resignation and Claire's emotional unraveling. At first, it seems that the two halves of the film set up a dichotomy between the two sisters, positioning each one in her well-defined identity category: Justine as the self-destructive depressive saboteur and Claire as the reasonable mother and wife. But *Melancholia* is relentlessly committed to undoing categorization. What at first seem to be clearly defined roles for these two sisters turn out to be as empty as every other attempt by human beings to impose order on the world. In the end, the melancholic Justine is the one who rises to the occasion, while Claire disintegrates into hysteria.

Part 1 opens with a humorous scene of Justine and her new husband Michael attempting to navigate a stretch limo through a winding country road. The limo is too long and the road too twisted. While the scene plays out as a comic skit, really it is one of many tiny narratives that underscore the film's basic message. As much as we try with science, money, landscaping, and conventions, nature is not possible to navigate. It can throw a curve ball at any time, and no human invention can contain or control it. As we look down at the limo from high above — as if we are watching from the perspective of the planet Melancholia itself — we realize how ludicrous the situation is,

attempting to push an impossibly long limousine through this rugged rural terrain. It is only when Justine takes the driver's seat, laughing and joking and openly acknowledging the absurdity of the situation, that they are able to get the car through the impossible turn in the road. This little narration prefigures everything in the film that follows: Justine being the driving force of the film's narrative but also the fact that neither she nor nature, in whatever guise it takes, ultimately can be steered. This sequence sets the stage for depicting a number of systems that seem more ludicrous and meaningless as the first half of the film progresses – from limo rides, to reception schedules, to bean counting games, to balloon flying, and ultimately to the ritual of marriage itself.

Justine and Michael do eventually arrive at the wedding reception, which is located on a vast estate – an old world castle surrounded by golf greens and a formal garden reminiscent of the one in Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) as rendered by a German Romantic painter. We are immediately confronted with the absurdity of the social convention of the wedding and all it stands for as Justine's sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) clings to her schedule of events and chastises the newlyweds for being late. Irritated, Claire points to her schedule and says, "We're only there, and that was two hours ago." Already, systems are falling apart. Schedules are just empty words printed on a piece of paper. The giant sun dial on the well-manicured lawn does nothing to increase humans' mastery of time. It's just a ridiculous decoration and emblem of wealth and privilege. Seemingly recognizing the futility of trying to be "on time" in a social system that always wants to control her, Justine turns her head to the night sky, notes the planets and flees to the stables to visit her horse Abraham, further pushing time out of its contained system (clocks and schedules) by delaying her entry into the wedding reception.

Once Justine steps into the house, the whole wedding reception plays out as a mass of contradictions. It is simultaneously high humor and claustrophobic social realism. One minute we're laughing, the next crying, the next choking with claustrophobia and despair or awed with beauty. The atmosphere inside the house with the hand-held camera zooming rapidly through the fray of family and guests is frenetic, dizzying and suffocating. The house is cluttered with emblems of wealth and ritual. It is lacking in color and oppressive in its very status. In the middle of it all, is Justine – the bride, a voluptuous female spilling out of her wedding gown (an awkward container for her body), torn between beauty and despair.

What starts out as a kind of hilarious romp turns dark when Justine and Claire's mother Gaby makes a speech. The shift in Justine's character from "glowing" bride (as her father refers to her) to Melancholic Saboteur occurs after her mother Gaby stands up and states, "I don't believe in marriage . . . Til death do us part, forever and ever, Justine and Michael. I just have one thing to say. Enjoy it while it lasts. I myself hate marriages." Gaby delivers this massive downer while wearing a blue outfit with a sphere on it that mirrors the rogue planet Melancholia. Gaby herself is like a random planet crashing the wedding party. Her caustic speech causes Justine's entire demeanor to shift. After Gaby has finished speaking, Justine closes her eyes and glances downward.

The glow is drained from her skin, and the smile falls from her face. Gaby initiates Justine's fall back into depression. Given von Trier's open statement about his own problematic relationship to his mother this isn't surprising. But Gaby isn't just a bitter and cruel provocateur; she is also a truth-teller, someone willing to point out that the emperor has no clothes. In this capacity, she also provides an "eye opener" to Justine, making her question what she is doing inside that box – the wedding and all that it stands for.

WAGNER AND AESTHETIC DISONNANCE

The film opens with chords from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (a German Romantic opera about a love story turned very wrong). The chords repeat themselves over and over throughout the film. Not only does the music signal a return to Romanticism and infatuation with emotional excess, but the use of Wagner also reminds us that underlying this scene of order and privilege, with its extravagant weddings and golf courses, gardens and telescopes, there is an underlying swelling chaos. Wagner was known for breaking music out of traditional systems and inscribing a kind of "sonic" chaos on traditional forms. That chaos becomes part of the claustrophobic environment of the film as the chords recur.

The fact that the same chords repeat themselves keep us in a state of stasis while also providing the soundtrack for the possibility of moving to a place (the sea, the sky, the apocalypse) that exists beyond the confines of John's estate. Not coincidentally, the music usually plays when scenes of the outdoor landscape are shown. However, as beautiful as these scenes are visually, we must remember that for the most part we are looking at nature contained: golf courses and perfectly manicured shrubs. Needless to say, Wagner's music is also just another human invention, though a beautiful and resonant one. The highlight of Wagner's opera is the famous Liebestod or "love death," a celebration of the beauty in oblivion, so von Trier's use of music itself is another way of glorifying lives coming undone.

Clearly von Trier's role as director of *Melancholia* is not unlike Wagner's role in music. Von Trier delivers what seems on the surface to be a fairly straightforward narrative of depression and the end of the world. Yet there are so many contradictions within the film, so many layers of dissonance and instability, that the narrative turns in on itself on its "slingshot orbit," and we are left with a narrative that unravels into a thing of beauty while also being an object of utter chaos, not unlike the music of Wagner. *Melancholia* largely creates a new kind of Romanticism for our age, merging its German and English forebears with the pessimism and hopelessness generated by a 21st century global economy that is unraveling further with each passing day.

Von Trier is notorious for attacking his cinematic projects with ruthless single-mindedness and imposing strict rules on his cast and crew. But the fact that he uses *Melancholia* to celebrate the ultimate triumph of disorder puts his whole method of filmmaking into question as much as it does the narrative within the film. In essence, he has created a Wagnerian opera of grand, dissonant proportions.

GENDER

In the Prologue, Justine's lifeless body holds her wedding bouquet and floats down a river mirroring Sir John Everett Malais' famous pre-Raphaelite rendering of Ophelia (a school of painters which will be referenced again later in the film). The image is simultaneously beautiful, romantic and utterly claustrophobic and hopeless. Here is Lars von Trier's female protagonist – the bride – laid out before us as the picture of romantic melancholy. The bride is dead from the beginning of the film, and what follows is an explosion not just of the planet but of this kind of stereotype of the female itself.

Reflecting on the female-centric nature of von Trier's work, Carol Bainbridge draws a distinction between *feminist* and *feminine* in his films, noting that they "might be seen as feminine despite the fact that they cannot realistically be described as *feminist*." (7) Perhaps Bainbridge's conception of what constitutes "feminist" cinema needs to be reconsidered, and we need to move to a post-feminist conception of female representation in film to get to a new understanding of how the complications of gender can be understood and depicted. If we consider his films carefully, free of the prejudices von Trier stirs up by mobilizing our fear and disgust, they can be perceived as radically insightful explorations of female emotions and politics in a socio-political landscape that remains primarily patriarchal despite the legacy of feminism. The global economic climate may have changed over the past 40 years since feminism took hold in cultural analysis, but the patriarchal core of that system has not changed much. *Melancholia* artfully shows this schism in 21st century culture (new world global capital in an old world patriarchal system). Indeed, there is a sense in which feminism itself has become yet another closed system, a system that attempts to contain, define, and quantify the female body even as it purports to support the liberation of it. While the economy has changed and shifted in the 21st century, conceptions of feminism remain rooted in a fixed past and have not adapted to broader socio-political changes.

Lars von Trier's woman-centric films take the melodrama and move it into a post-feminist cinematic territory that concerns itself with this dilemma. What happens when a movement with the goal of liberation ends up oppressing as much as it frees? Patriarchal stereotypes of femininity are still with us, and so is the plight of Ophelia. But now, ironically, the bondage of those stereotypes is reinforced and restricted by ones defined by feminist ideology. In both feminist ideology and patriarchal order, such injurious stereotypes as "the virgin and the whore" persist. Justine's character resists both these images. Neither virgin nor whore, she becomes a blank slate for a new female body in a new economy and new century. Stuck between a patriarchal system that still has a firm hold on the political economy and misconceptions of *feminist* liberation, women today often find it harder than ever to develop and sustain a personal identity that isn't just the result of someone else's projection. For some women, the legacy of feminism has made them feel even more imprisoned than before, even if their material circumstances appear to indicate social and economic progress. Justine resists stereotypes and systems – as she empties herself from commitments to the world of ideology and things and as she strips from her wedding gown and dons her gender-neutral riding clothes. In her quiet rebellion, Justine becomes a blank slate, a new body

liberated from the conflicting views of so-called radical feminism and the continuing stranglehold of patriarchy.

Melancholia takes this line of argument to a conclusion that is simultaneously logical and apocalyptic. Justine may seem to have “everything” by 21st century standards – a creative career in advertising; a husband who loves her; access to wealth and privilege. She has the support network she needs, particularly in the form of her sister’s wealthy husband John. She has the resources to tell her boss off and lose her job without fear of going homeless or hungry. But these luxuries are only decorations on a social order that is fundamentally flawed. The socio-economic “liberation” that Justine has access to seems to do nothing to liberate her soul, so she retreats into a state of “melancholia” as an act of rebellion and escape.

Melancholia explodes the narrow-minded matrix of feminism along with all the other systems that get blown to bits in the film. Von Trier refuses to give into any system, even his own (loving to break his own rules as much as anyone else’s). In fact, the character Justine not only dismantles female roles in a matrix of order and systems, but she also annihilates all of von Trier’s earlier female protagonists as she rebukes every system that wants to contain her, including her own sexuality and gender. In the beginning of the film, Justine is a billowing image of Boticellian femininity, engulfed in a wedding gown with her breasts and body bursting onto the screen. But by the end of the movie, her hair is chopped off; she dresses in gender neutral gray riding clothes, and she heads into the woods to chop trees to greet the end of the world. She has emptied herself of the feminine.

The “woodcutting” sequence in which Justine and her nephew build a magic cave is deeply symbolic. Justine isn’t just cutting away branches, but she is hacking away at the entire network of social, economic and emotional ties that secures her world and, indeed, everyone else’s. She is building a new alternative “magic” place to prepare to greet the end of the world, the end of nature, and the end of the Romantic ideal of women. Justine is a truly post-feminist construction, someone who has moved beyond the tightly contained representations of women in feminist films and beyond the women in von Trier’s earlier films as well. There is no Bess (*Breaking the Waves*), Selma (*Dancer in the Dark*), or Grace (*Dogville*) broken, beaten and emotionally exploding on the screen. There is no self-righteous woman bearing arms against the oppressor. There is Justine, a de-gendered deity of disorder, embracing the only means of true liberation – obliteration itself.

The film opens with the merging of a number of systems (science, matrimony, economics) with Justine in the middle straddling multiple roles – wife, daughter, employee. The wedding reception shows the merging of the wedding and the workplace as Justine’s boss Jack is also her husband’s best man. This conflation of the domestic and the professional squarely locates Justine in a twenty-first century realm in which the pressures on women to perform both as wives and employees are greater than ever. Women are expected to succeed equally in both the domestic and professional spheres, but as the setting of *Melancholia* suggests (the palatial estate and excessive

wealth of Justine's brother-in-law John), the world still largely remains a man's world, closed off to women. Yet Justine fights that system with all her rebellious strength, even if it is cloaked in the guise of her inner retreat. In keeping with the categorization of the psychologized female body by a dominant male culture (categorization which continues today with the medicalization female sexuality), Justine is defined as "depressed" or "melancholic," but really she uses those categories as armor. Justine's state of melancholia transforms her into a body of quiet and impenetrable resistance.

As we are introduced to Justine as the unwilling wife, it's easy to give a standard gender reading to her position. She is straddling patriarchy on all sides – submitting to the institution of marriage and the husband; complying with her patriarchal boss Jack; and trying to reconcile with the father. But it's more than just patriarchy that Justine is up against. It is all forms of social order and control. It's the so-called rational science and economic privilege of John as much as the monstrously cut-throat capitalism of Jack. It is the dutiful Claire with her lists and agendas and her delusion of domestic stability. It is everything that is telling Justine what to do. On all sides, she is being forced into a box she doesn't want to be in.

Initially, then, the film seems to insist on a strong gender divide. On one hand you have the women: Justine – the reluctant bride; Claire – the dutiful wife and mother; Gaby – the domineering and therefore outcast matriarch. On the other, you have the men: Michael – the spineless husband; Jack – the capitalist patriarch; John – the masculine voice of science and wealth; Justine's father – the joker; and Leo – the boy/son. But as the world unravels – both the world of the wedding and the world in a more universal sense with the appearance of the planet Melancholia – gender roles break and disintegrate; roles are reversed, inverted and explode; and Justine becomes a "free agent," maybe not entirely gender free but certainly neutral and desexualized.

In the beginning of the movie, it would seem that Justine's sister Claire is the one who "has it together" as she holds onto order through her list of duties, schedules and agendas. She tends to her sister's wedding, to her husband and child's needs, and eventually to the depressed Justine. She is the "caregiver," the pillar of female domestic stability, while Justine throws manners to the wind as the careless depressed rebel who snubs her nose at everything Claire stands for. Claire insists that Justine should be "happy." After all, she has everything, right? A husband? A good job? Family with money? Everyone insists Justine should be happy. "Smile," they tell her. But Justine can't smile. Happiness is sold through advertising campaigns and high cost wedding receptions. Happiness is an illusion when it is quantified by one's placement within social systems. Justine isn't feeling the joy.

In one example of a small detail that communicates *Melancholia's* big ideas in microcosm, consider the chocolates as a symbol that underscores the divide between Justine and her sister. In one scene, as she awaits her sister's arrival, Claire carefully picks out a wrapped chocolate from a box to place neatly on Justine's pillow as a kind of bourgeois symbol of comfort and domesticity, as if placing that chocolate on Justine's pillow will set everything straight in a world destined to turn upside down. Claire's

gesture is a silly social custom (as all social customs will prove to be in this film) that attempts to provide a tidy “cure” for what ails Justine and ultimately for what is ailing Claire’s world as well.

Later in the film, once the sisters’ roles have been reversed, the box of chocolates returns. At this point, Claire is undone by the inevitability of the apocalypse, yet she is looking to Justine for affirmation that John’s rational science will prevail. Justine, feeling liberated by the impending planetary collision with Melancholia, sits back at a desk with a whole box of chocolates and carelessly unwraps them, stuffing them in her mouth one by one in a moment of delicious chaos. Claire sits across the desk from Justine both imploring her for advice or consolation and trying to convince herself that her husband John knows everything and that his knowledge and belief in science can save the world. Claire desperately clings to her false security grounded in social conventions (placing the wrapped chocolate on the pillow) even as the end of the world approaches right over the horizon (and a box of chocolates stands for nothing other than something to stuff in your mouth while you wait for the apocalypse).

We begin the film thinking that Justine is trapped by convention. Her new husband expects to fuck her. Her boss wants her to work on a tagline for an advertisement. Her sister wants her to be the happy bride. Everyone wants her to smile. The only place she has to go is inside herself, and in the first half of the film we watch her disintegration and retreat as her sister Claire attempts to hold onto order. But in the end, we realize it is actually Claire who becomes victim to her own gender and her belief in domestic ritual. When Claire invites Justine to partake in her plan to meet on the patio for wine and a song as life on Earth comes to an end, Justine calls Claire’s plan “a piece of shit.” Certainly, there is a hint of sadistic malice in Justine’s voice, but it’s also clear that Justine has reached a place where she is finally free of all “piece of shit plans” – weddings, jobs, and garden parties at the end of the world. Those plans ultimately aren’t worth a box of chocolates.

In the film’s seemingly infinite use of mirroring and parallels, Justine’s response to Claire echoes the earlier scene at the wedding reception when Justine’s mother Gaby also says that plans (represented by social conventions like weddings) are shit. Gaby’s statement, like Justine’s, could seem cruel, but Gaby’s statement also seems instrumental in pushing Justine over the edge and setting her on a course to annihilate the systems that are closing in on her (destroying her wedding/husband and losing her job/boss both in one night). Even while Justine clings to a remnant of hope of talking with her father, he vanishes, and Justine is left with nothing but the proxy men in her life – her brother-in-law John and her nephew Leo. Gaby’s voice of bitter realism, however unpleasant, can be regarded as the voice of conscience, reminding Justine (and us) of what really matters or, to be more exact, what *doesn’t*. Justine then adopts that role with Claire.

This makes Gaby (a magnificently sour and hard-edged Charlotte Rampling) worth greater scrutiny. The “mother,” in a sense, of parts of the narrative – named after her two daughters — this domineering yet emotionally negligent mother (another von Trier

contradiction) is the voice of anarchy that ends up being the voice of reason by being the voice *without* reason. In one scene, when Justine goes to her mother for consolation, Gaby says, “What do you want in this place? You have no business here, nor do I.” She means that neither Justine nor Gaby have a place amid the excessive wealth and old-school patriarchy embodied in John and Claire’s lifestyle – complying with the institution of marriage, the conventions of wedding receptions, the manicured landscapes of golf courses, etc. Gaby then goes on to tell Justine that everyone is scared, inferring that everyone dreads the underlying chaos, the inability to control things, and that’s why they use impotent systems like science, social convention and economics to gain control in a world that ultimately cannot be controlled. Gaby refuses to believe in things that don’t matter, and she has relinquished control in her own way. As we catch glimpses of Gaby performing some kind of yoga stretching on her balcony, there is more than a hint of tired New Age ex-hippy feminism turned bitter in Gaby. In a way, she is both the legacy of and resistance against feminist ideals. And it is Gaby’s refusal to play along with oppressive rituals that sends Justine’s own melancholic rebellion into motion. It makes perfect sense that Gaby’s blue outfit with its white swirling pattern mirrors the planet Melancholia itself.

In these three characters – the mother and her two daughters – von Trier gives us three female cultural types that turn in on themselves. Justine, the blooming fleshy feminine bride, becomes a desexualized empty vessel who allows us no room to see her as a suffering martyr to any degree (like previous von Trier heroines). Claire, the center of domestic stability with her checklists and rituals, becomes an unglued mess of emotional chaos. And Gaby, the disruptive and bitter wedding-ruining “feminist” mother becomes the voice of reason by stating that social conventions are crap. None of the roles of these women stay fixed. No matter how we try to pigeon-hole them, their identities slip through our fingers.

THE MEN

While the women are crucial in *Melancholia*, the way they play against the men in the film further complicates our understanding of von Trier’s female characters. His cinematic resistance to categorization requires turning both genders on their heads, blowing apart our expectations of both women and men. At first, most of the male characters seem like laughable and unsympathetic caricatures of men. Michael, Justine’s new husband, appears to be a clueless wimp. Jack, her employer, is a domineering boor. John, her brother-in-law, is an economic patriarch, trying to control his world with riches and reason. Dexter, her father, is an unreliable buffoon. Even John and Claire’s son Leo is oddly lacking in emotional depth, his affect more of a “little man” than a little boy. But closer examination complicates these characterizations, suggesting that gender is as much of a trap for men as it is for women.

The men are actually as befuddled by gender expectations as the women, but being men, they have different means of coping at their disposal: wealth, power, science. They are as aware of the ultimate chaos of things as the women are— especially when it’s identified with the feminine such as the planet Melancholia —but they seek to contain it through stereotypically male mechanisms grounded in “rational” thought. The

closer we look at the male characters (just like the closer we look at the film itself), the more they reveal. Tiny nuances of their characters make them more sympathetic and complex even if they are identified as part of the “system” simply by their gender. The men may attempt to hold onto a system of control and contain chaos with reason, money and power, but in the end, they have no control either. They try, but pathetically fail. Because they believe in their power to keep the chaos at bay, though, their failure is in some ways more poignant. The only male who has control in any capacity is Leo because he is, of course, a child and not a man. As a child, Leo, like Justine, is able to get control by relinquishing control through his child’s imagination.

John (played with incisive wit and wisdom by Kiefer Sutherland) resides at the top of the list of men. The entire film takes place at his ludicrously palatial estate, the locus of money, patriarchal privilege, science, and social custom. This is the world of order inscribed by men, and the “filthy rich” John moves through it spending freely, rolling his eyes at the whims of women and carting his telescope around as if to demonstrate that he can predict outcomes in an unpredictable world. John thinks everything can be quantified, contained and predicted through science, economics and convention. He flips through his bankroll literally counting out money. He asks Justine how much she thinks the wedding reception cost as if the dollar amount should 1) confirm her subjection to his power and 2) affirm that she should be grateful and happy for the men in her life – her husband, her boss, and particularly John. John continuously recites the numbers of holes on his golf course to reinforce the conception that the world, or at least *his* world, is neatly defined and quantified. When he asks Justine how many holes are on his golf course, Justine answers “eighteen” with a biting smile. But Justine represents the undoing of the eighteen-hole golf course. She, in fact, is the unpredictable nineteenth hole that ominously flits across the screen in the prologue and the final scenes of the film. John patronizingly assures his hysterical wife Claire that everything will be fine, that the planet Melancholia will pass the Earth by, and life – with its social customs, its eighteen hole golf courses, and its economic privilege – will continue.

But John is wrong. He realizes that his giant telescope (a blatant phallic signifier), the scientific worldview it stands for, and his economic privilege ultimately don’t mean shit in a world where there is always a “margin for error” where the orbit of a random planet can become a “slingshot” that shoots all order into oblivion. In a sense, this is what both Justine and the planet Melancholia come to represent. They are the unpredictable margin of error, the place where the random collides with reason and brings down order. No matter how hard we try to control our fears through reason, the threat of chaos never goes away. A golf course cannot contain nature; a telescope cannot stop a random planet; wealth, privilege and patriarchy can’t buy a ticket to safety. In the end, John is undone by his own obsession with predictions, order, and quantifications. Even though he knows that his instruments of reason possess a margin for error, he can’t live with the realization that they have failed him. No amount of science, wealth and power will stop the world from ending. John’s entire demeanor collapses into one of defeat, and the only way he can regain a sense of control is by committing suicide. John takes on the role of the hysterical wife by using Claire’s pills to kill himself. Claire buries his

dead body with hay next to the horses. John's dead and defeated body is a sad and deflated shell of a man, with spittle running down his chin as if he is a sleeping infant. That he dies in the stables is perhaps John's last grasp at trying to be contained in a world that is exploding.

Although John's wealth and power testify to his success in a world dominated by capitalism, it is Jack, Justine's employer, who reminds us of the everyday impact of global capital even in this isolated setting. Jack seems to think the world can be controlled by a successful advertising campaign, as if buying, selling and trading can bring a sense of order to the world. Hounding Justine to come up with a tagline for an ad in the middle of her own wedding reception, Jack turns the wedding into the workplace, merging the world of capital with the world of social custom. Indeed, his relentless obsession with the ad campaign at the wedding proves to be as ludicrously empty in meaning as the reception itself. Jack is, as Justine so aptly describes him at the end of the wedding reception: "a despicable power hungry little man." He seems like the one character who remains truly unsympathetic at all levels. But like every character in the film, Jack is also a mess of contradictions.

In the middle of his wedding speech, Jack chides Justine's new husband Michael for stealing his employee, but then he also wields his power and position by offering Justine a professional promotion. Jack's presence turns the reception into a tense hybrid between workplace dinner and nuptial celebration, leaving the audience on shaky ground, unsure where we are and what we are watching. But this is the world of 21st century capital. There is little division between the workplace and the domestic. If you are one of the "privileged" to be decently employed, then work is expected to be as much of a commitment as a marriage, especially for women. So Justine is being pressured to marry both her husband and her job, to be both a consumer good – Michael's possession/wife – and a seller of consumer goods as an advertising executive. In sum, she is expected to market the very system that is containing her.

Jack's most important role in *Melancholia* is to make this point. But his other contradictions are revealing as well. He sadistically employs his nephew Tim to extract the tagline from Justine by following her around with a photograph of an ad which appears to be a circle of barely clothed women lying on the floor of another palatial estate. To rebel against her dual role as a "consumer good" and a seller of goods and to resist being a "bottom" in a man's world, Justine mechanically fucks Tim on the golf course but refuses to give him the tagline.

When Justine finally confronts Jack for being the corrupt fraud that he is, all he can do is impotently heave a plate. And he can't even get that right: it takes him two throws to break it. Jack's position as capitalist patriarch and the economic world that it represents is destabilized and rendered impotent by Justine's rebellion against it. To further complicate things, Jack's position as "new money" capitalist is strangely at odds with the old money estate of John which somehow seems to transcend the buy, sell, and trade world of Jack. Next to John's solid economic foundation, Jack's position seems vulnerable and tenuous. There is no tidy hole for Jack to fit into on John's golf course,

and all Jack can do is wipe the humiliating sweat from his brow and speed away in his fancy car as if that will re-stake his position of authority.

Justine's husband Michael plays like a clueless man attracted to Justine mostly as an object of consumption (not unlike the women in Jack's advertisement photo). Michael seems more interested in Justine's billowing breasts than any qualities she may possess inside her. Michael looks at Justine's body spilling out of its ridiculously awkward and cumbersome wedding gown, and his dumbfounded pride of his new possession shows in his eyes which are empty and glazed with the allure of Justine's image as bride. When he communicates with Justine, Michael shows little capacity to understand her in any depth beyond owning her. When he attempts to have sex with her, the scenes are awkward parodies of virility where tidily folding his clothes and keeping them in order (always the order!) seems more important than actually showing some passion for his new wife. In his wedding toast, the best Michael can offer is the statement: "I never thought I would marry someone so gorgeous," as if she were a luxury good whose value is based entirely on her surface appearance. In one of the failed sex scenes, Justine simply gets up and walks away, leaving Michael fondling the elastic on his sock as if it were his own limp organ. Justine had denied Michael his male privilege of access to her as sexual object, and all he can do is finger his own limp sock.

In one scene, Michael offers Justine a photo of an apple orchard, which, like John's golf course, is an image of nature tamed and ordered. Michael tells Justine that he bought the orchard for her as a gesture of his love. But really, it's just another measure of containment – containing the trees and containing Justine within them. Justine looks at the photograph with reservation that borders on contempt, surely seeing the trees as yet more bars being constructed on the prison of social custom. When Michael alludes to having children, Justine answers, "We'll talk about that when the time comes," understanding that motherhood will be just another layer of the gender trap that's closing in on her – job, marriage, and then motherhood. Michael tells Justine he wants Justine to hold onto the photo forever, as if that will enable him to hold onto her forever. But Justine unceremoniously crumples the photo and drops it on the floor just as she later does with the advertisement photo that Jack gives her. She refuses to be contained by either job or matrimony. She will be a product of neither and disposes of the images of both as the trash they truly are. In other words, Justine doesn't give a shit, and that is her ultimate act of rebellion.

Even the hilariously queer Wedding Planner (played with high camp by Udo Kier) is yet another man who petulantly tries to maintain control through his tightly orchestrated event that includes everything from launching balloons into the night sky to a ridiculous bean counting contest, all of which Justine undoes. In one of the humorous tropes in the film, Udo Kier always covers his face when he sees Justine, saying, "I will not look at her. She ruined my wedding." Justine is like a blinding astral body from which he must protect himself. Indeed, Justine serves the same role in the first half of the story (the cosmic destructive force that causes the Wedding Planner's whole affair to fall apart and annihilates the wedding and everything it stands for) that the planet Melancholia serves in the second half of the film (the cosmic force that destroys the entire planet and

all the systems of order and control that men, including the Wedding Planner, have imposed on it).

In one of the final scenes in the first half of the film, Justine sits atop a stack of banquet chairs, dangling her feet amid the ruins of her wedding (or, as the planner would have it, "his wedding"). They are the typical rental chairs used for any banquet event (professional or nuptial), and their haphazard stacks which seem ready to topple over at any moment represent the failure of the Wedding Planner to perform his job and the faulty architecture of systems like wedding receptions. The Wedding Planner proves as impotent as the rest of the men. In the wake of the destroyed wedding, he announces the number of beans in the bean counting contest to Claire "because people will want to know." At this point, Claire is forced to recognize that all her efforts to maintain order are worthless, and she dismisses the contest results as "incredibly trivial." In the end, all systems are incredibly trivial. Time can't be contained by agendas; beans don't count; balloons fall to the ground and burn, and Justine sits atop the stacked chairs dangling her shoes like she's sitting on a giant unstable throne overlooking the chaos she has unleashed.

Throughout the wedding reception, Justine attempts to connect with another man in her life, her father Dexter (convincingly portrayed by John Hurt). Dexter is a joker and a drunk. He's the embodiment of jovial chaos, the jester, the clown. He already has relinquished all control and pretense of order, and along with that, has abdicated from his role as father. He flirts with women at the wedding ("The Betties") like a typical post-60s boomer male and negligent father. The best he has to offer Justine is to tell her that she looks "glowing," a truism, since she eventually will radiate so powerfully that she will blow up the whole wedding. Other than that, he is the flake Gaby outs him as, and all his counter-cultural residue proves to be is a joke.

Though Justine thinks she needs her father, really she needs to be free from him as much as from the rest of the men, so it's just as well that he dumps her. In a way, Justine is the "daughter of chaos" – of the bitter aging feminist Gaby and the joker Dexter, both of whom seem like they carry the tawdry residue of 1960s "free spirit" baggage with them. Justine and Claire are the end result of what happened to women after the fall of the 1960s counter-cultural movement which included the feminist movement. While Claire rebels against their anarchistic antics by embracing the haute bourgeoisie (John and the domestic and economic stability he seems to offer), Justine eventually assumes the role of the destructive body who rebels against the chaos her parents passed down to her by becoming the embodiment of chaos and destruction itself.

As much as the men in the film try to maintain control, their efforts fail and they relinquish themselves to the world of chaos that both Justine and the planet Melancholia represent. Bean counting and taglines are trivial and meaningless. Science can't avert the apocalypse. Even golf courses can't be quantified. John's eighteen-hole golf course has been disrupted by random cosmic forces (Justine), and his scientific predictions don't amount to a jar of beans when Melancholia comes crashing into the Earth. The

only thing that is known is that everything is unknown. In the end, the world falls apart in spite of the men's efforts to contain, quantify and control it.

Interestingly, the boy Leo is the one who is most able to manage the world around him by relinquishing himself to a kind of belief in magic and the unpredictable. It is Leo's "makeshift" device – a stick with a circle of wire attached to it – that ends up being the most effective tool for measuring the course of the planet Melancholia as it heads toward Earth. It is Leo's handmade instrument made from simple materials (a stick and some wire) that detects that reason has failed and that the "slingshot orbit" of the planet is turning the world upside down. When we see the planet through John's high-priced telescope, it is contained within the lens, and its immediacy and "realness" are filtered through John's expensive instrument. When we see the planet through Leo's device created by his child's imagination, the astronomical size of Melancholia and the reality of its catastrophic power are unmistakable. Through Leo's eyes, the planet bulges past the margins of containment, and there is no filtering through high-tech, high-priced instruments like John's telescope. Leo constantly refers to Justine as "Aunt Steelbreaker," a very odd phrase, but which in the end makes sense. Leo somehow understands that even in her lowest point of "melancholia," Justine is the strong one. Indeed, in the end, Justine does become the "steelbreaker" that Leo thinks she is as she takes Leo's hand and his imagination, and she leads him to the end of the world.

In the end, Justine reduces the bars of her cage to rubble, breaking free from the institutions of marriage, capitalism, and science, and she reaches a place of emptiness where she is open to Leo's innocence and imagination. Claire bemoans that there will be no place for Leo in the world if the world ends, but maybe freedom is the best place for Leo even if it means obliteration of the Johns, Jacks, Michaels and the world they created.

TRANSCENDING THE BOX

The first half of the film – the wedding reception and its ultimate destruction — is really about Justine's rebellion against the boxes that want to contain her. She needs to explode them and disperse their power over her. When we consider her depression in this light, it takes on a positive dimension. Her melancholia is a way of resisting the systems of control that box her in. It may seem self-destructive to her sister and brother-in-law, but the self she destroys is not really hers to begin with. It's one that the outside world is forcing on her. Instead of complying and being the Justine that others demand her to be, Justine finds a way to escape the constraint of social convention by retreating into herself.

In one critical scene, Justine goes into the library where shelves of art books are on display. The camera focuses on works by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich who founded Russian Suprematism, a movement that argued for the supremacy of pure geometric form, especially the square. Justine pulls all the books off the shelves, unceremoniously discarding the squares into a pile on the floor (not unlike the way she discards the photo of the advertisement from Jack or the apple orchard from Michael). She flings the books carelessly, and then replaces the images that had been on display

with apocalyptic figurative paintings, including Caravaggio's "David with the Head of Goliath" and Sir John Everett Millais' painting of "Ophelia" floating dead down the river (mirroring the image of Justine in the Prologue). She discards Malevich's squares and replaces them with scenes of carnage and melancholic despair.

Caravaggio was one of the pioneers of the Baroque in art, a style that emphasizes curves and folds, especially the shadowy places where the light of reason does not fall. Millais was a Pre-Raphaelite, a nineteenth-century school of artists who rejected mechanistic approaches to art and exalted in the sense of mystery and wonder they perceived in the culture of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, before modern scientific inquiry dominated culture. In other words, both Caravaggio and Millais were interested in alternatives to modern rationality. More specifically, these artists preferred lines that cannot be ruled, and that is why their art appeals to Justine. She used their work to replace the rigid rules of the "box" with the messy parts of humanity that cannot be contained by classicism, convention or science, but instead disregard restraint with their overt emotional excess.

While the entire first half of the movie is about Justine resisting boxes – the boxes of marriage, of social convention, of economic patriarchy — this one scene is crucial for understanding how she transcends them. Justine dumps the books right after a confrontation with Claire because Justine keeps wandering off from the wedding reception, further delaying its rituals and disregarding the agenda and its "marriage" to time. Claire asks Justine, "But I thought you wanted this?" In response, Justine says that she does want it even though her expression belies another truth. Justine says, "I smile, and I smile, and I smile." In that moment, however, there is no trace of a smile on her face. It's clear that Justine realizes she doesn't want any of it – the husband, the job, the party, or any of the bullshit conventions that are weighing her down as much as her cumbersome and suffocating wedding dress. She doesn't want the box, so she rips the books full of squares off the shelves and dumps them on the floor. The paintings Justine selects instead, like the Caravaggio and Millais, remain on the shelves for the duration of the film, a symbol of the cosmic disruption she has caused.

The irony is that by the end of the movie, Justine has moved beyond merely transcending the box. If she spills over the edges of her "prison" in the first part of the film, there is nothing left to spill by the end of the second half. By the end of the film, Justine is no longer a symbol of feminine excess. Her sister Claire's hysteria assumes that role. Instead, Justine becomes a testament to what happens when both the box and the chaos it seeks to contain are transcended. She is completely empty by the end of the picture.

So in yet another inversion in the film, Justine eventually comes to embody the "pure form" she seems to discard when she replaces the abstract art of Malevich with the figurative art of Caravaggio, Millais et al. She becomes the absolute form of nothingness, a shape of which Malevich would approve. By the end of the film, she has rejected everything that makes her feel boxed in, but then reclaimed it as her own in her state of sublime resignation. She is the empty vessel who can lift her hands to the sky

and channel electricity because she has cleared the pathways inside herself. The inverted rapture with which she greets the end of the world is a celebration of the realization that both boxes and the resistance to them have become equally insignificant.

Note that Justine's rapture is not one of the traditional religious sense. It is perceived as something almost mystical and magical, turned in on itself, something derived from and also disrupting the cosmos itself. Von Trier states in a 1994 interview: "I regard myself a religious person. But spiritualistic? No – I'd rather say that I find the supernatural quite titillating." (8) Certainly there is a "supernatural" quality to this film and to Justine herself as she is available to transcend and transform literal and social landscapes.

19TH HOLE

In the setting of the film (John's vast estate), nature is contained in nearly every shot. It is manicured into carefully trimmed trees. It is plowed and paved with a sprawling golf course of seemingly infinite dimensions. Horses are literally boxed inside the stables and constrained by saddle and bit when they are being ridden. This containment of nature becomes emblematic of all systems of containment and culturally imposed order, especially that of the female body and that of the natural world itself (noting that "nature" has traditionally read as feminine throughout culture – in art, painting, poetry, film and even feminism). As I have already noted, Justine rebels against these systems of control and refuses to "play the game," whether it's respecting the sanctity of the golf course or riding a horse. Justine resists the containment of herself and the containment of nature (embracing the unpredictable chaos of Melancholia), and she herself becomes a disruptive force that turns "unnatural" order on its head.

Two scenes in the prologue underscore both Justine's dilemma and her unsettling effect on the landscape. In one scene, she seems encumbered by the landscape itself. Trudging across the estate with her wedding gown entangled with roots, vegetation, and tendrils, it's like the landscape itself has a stranglehold on her, making it impossible for her to move. Justine pushes forward but makes very little progress. This image returns later in the film on the onset of Justine's "fall" into melancholia. She lies on Leo's bed in her wedding gown when Claire comes into the room and asks Justine to get up. Claire tells Justine that she's not even halfway through her wedding yet. Justine lies in a depressed motionless stupor and tells Claire, "I'm trudging through this gray, wooly, yarn. It's clinging to my legs. It's really heavy to drag along." Even though she imagines yarn in that scene, we immediately remember the Prologue image with Justine tangled in the vegetation. Somehow it's all tied together; the woven fabric of this landscape and everything it stands for socially is weighing Justine down. Later, Justine talks to Gaby about feeling that everything is closing in on her. She tells Gaby that she is unable to walk or make progress. It is like Justine is "hobbled" by her circumstances. Certainly, the hobbling of Justine refers to von Trier's *Antichrist* where hobbling is used by "the woman" as a way of trying to get control over men by mirroring the cultural hobbling of women and turning it against men. Justine is tangled and hobbled by the literal landscape (John's estate, the golf course and all it stands for); the political-economic landscape (her job, capitalism, patriarchy), and the landscape of social convention (her

wedding dress and yarn as the domestic female.) In order to free herself, she needs to transcend and transform that landscape.

In another segment of the prologue that is also echoed later in the film, Claire trudges across the sprawling grass of the estate carrying her son Leo. She walks across the infinitude of the golfing green, each step a giant effort that sinks deep into the golf course which seems like it is going to swallow her. Claire passes a flag marking one of the holes. At first glance the number seems like a thirteen, but then when the camera focuses on the flag, in a flash the number appears as nineteen. Claire is stuck at the 19th hole on an 18-hole golf course. We know later in the film that Claire is literally trudging towards the end of the world as she collapses at the 19th hole. In a sense, the world is coming to an end at the nineteenth hole. After all of John's proclamations about his eighteen-hole golf course, he's wrong. Justine has in fact cut herself free from those tangled brambles, unveiling (like a bride) the emptiness of social, economic and scientific convention. Through her act of resistance, she has disrupted John's ordered universe and through sheer force of will created her own cataclysmic event, an apocalypse revealing the emptiness of conventions and transforming John's tightly circumscribed world into a place of unpredictable chaos. She has opened the 19th hole.

The role of the golf course and Justine's relationship to it must not be underestimated. It is at the onset of Justine's melancholic episode (right after Gaby talks about weddings being bullshit and when Claire chastises Justine for "causing a scene") that Justine leaves the wedding, takes the golf cart and drives across the sprawling golf course at night. It is a beautifully surreal image. Justine puts herself in the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel with determination as her wedding gown billows around her. She drives the cart across the immense expanse of the golf course, passing sand pits and well-manicured trees. This is a symbolically laden image of defiance – a bride driving a vehicle designed to transport men of privilege across contained nature (the golf course) while Justine herself is contained in the billowing huge folds of her wedding dress.

Justine parks the cart, rips her dress while stepping onto the green (tearing the convention of marriage), lifts the stiff fabric of her gown, squats on the lawn, and pees right onto the golf course. As she pees, she turns her gaze rapturously at the stars. There is escape in her eyes, a sense of liberation. She is transcending the limits of her landscape as she pisses a hole right through John's tidy golf course. While she pees on the grass and loses herself in the stars, Justine sees a place beyond the confines of John's haute bourgeois estate, her boss, her wedding, and everything that is closing in on her. Although this scene elicited laughter in the theater, its purpose is quite serious. Leaving the wedding, taking the golf cart and peeing on the golf course represent a pivotal point in the development of Justine's character. As she stares into the stars looking for the possibility of cosmic release, Justine portrays an image of both longing and rebellion.

This image can be read as a radically feminist moment, the woman taking over the man's "field" by inscribing her body on it, but it is also a scene that shows Justine exceeding the bounds of "proper" feminism. She embraces the end of order and

disrupts men's attempts to quantify everything natural (women and nature) by peeing on a golf course in a wedding gown. This is not the traditional image of feminist rebellion. When Justine violates John's golf course, she is 1) pissing on patriarchy; 2) pissing on order and convention; and 3) disrupting the whole contained atmosphere of the film. In a way, this is the point at which Justine becomes the "19th hole" on John's eighteen-hole golf course. When taking into consideration all that it symbolizes, this scene represents a sublimely spectacular and surreally transgressive moment in the film.

Holes are, after all, holes, and though golf is the ultimate game of leisure class patriarchy, its hold on the system certainly has holes in it as Justine makes quite clear when she pisses on the golf course. This message is reinforced later when Justine has sex with her co-worker Tim on the golf course — after pointedly *not* having sex with her new husband Michael. Justine pushes Tim to the ground in a sandpit, straddles him, covers his face, and mechanically fucks him on the man's playing field, further desecrating the field of masculine privilege. This is Justine's way of getting "on top" in a cultural and economic world where she is being forced to be a bottom (as wife and an employee). Constrained by the trappings of her wedding gown (and that apple orchard) and appalled by her employer Jack's exploitation of her and the position of power that he wields over her, Justine turns the tables on the men who want to possess and control her and humps Tim in a sandpit while wearing her wedding dress. In other words, Justine pisses and fucks her way through patriarchy until she disrupts its order and creates the 19th hole.

Certainly, these are not the images of womanly triumph that one would expect in politically-correct feminist cinema. But they resonate all the more powerfully for being so transgressive, not only of male order, but also of the party-line feminist resistance to it. Nothing communicates von Trier's post-feminist message more clearly or cogently than Justine's relationship to the golf course. Justine does become the 19th hole and disrupts the natural "unnatural" order of things, but ultimately her disruption is just a "prologue" to the complete obliteration of order that comes at the end of the film.

BEYOND THE HORIZON

As I mentioned previously, every single outdoor scene shot on the grounds of John's vast estate, beautiful as it is, is somehow contained by the sprawling golfing green and the well-manicured gardens. To be sure, while the interior shots are suffocating and closed, when we move into the outside world things do seem to open up. Certainly, those Wagnerian chords that inevitably strike up when the camera moves outdoors help provide the illusion of expanse. But closer inspection makes clear that the true expansive beauty exists not on the grounds of John's estate, but on the horizon *beyond* the golfing green. True natural freedom resides in the glimpses of sea or the magnificent and seemingly infinite night sky.

The sea trembles in the distance, a reminder of that which is uncontainable. The sky becomes an immense Romantic vision of the infinite universe just beyond the horizon. And the horizon is always visible, peering out over the edge of the well-manicured gardens and the golf course. It is Justine's rebellion against the golfing green and the

system of containment and quantification it represents, of success measured in how many “holes” one conquers, that is the disruptive force in the film as much as the planet Melancholia itself. When the planet actually arrives and plows through the Earth, we do not see it obliterating famous landmarks like the Pyramids of Egypt or the Eiffel Tower as is typical of disaster film. We don’t see Wall Street collapse or the Golden Gate Bridge fall into the ocean. When Melancholia hits Earth, the planet collides with John’s estate, plows through the place where the golfing green meets the horizon, and all we see being destroyed is the golf course and everything it stands for.

When Justine realizes that the planet Melancholia is indeed on a collision course with Earth, she feels liberated. In one beautifully surreal scene, she strips herself bare and basks in the glow of the planet Melancholia, soaking in the beauty of the End of Things. The scene is shot like a Pre-Raphaelite painting, saturated in blues and greens. Justine strips and lays naked on the rocks, her body glowing in the light of the planet. But it is not John’s nature of topiary and golfing greens that Justine occupies in this scene. Justine is lying on the outside margins of the landscape, the part of nature that has not been demarcated by golf courses or egg-trimmed bushes. In the sky, her planet awaits her. On Earth, she has staked a piece of ground outside of order. In an interview with Kirsten Dunst, she says she thinks the planet Melancholia is something hopeful for Justine, like “her mother Earth coming to get her.” (9) This aligns perfectly with the fact that Justine’s mother Gaby wears an outfit that prefigures the planet’s color and shape while also defying feminism’s position of female liberation as a return to Earth. Justine’s “return to the mother” and liberation comes in the obliteration of Earth.

At one point, Justine tells Claire that “Earth is evil” as she stuffs her mouth with the aforementioned box of chocolates. Indeed, the Earth as perceived through the very narrow and isolated window that *Melancholia* shows us has surely been corrupted by humans with its wedding receptions, advertising jobs, and golf courses. It is not Justine’s planet. Her planet is the big beautiful blue sphere that will destroy social order and everything it stands for.

It’s no secret that nature has traditionally been identified with femininity. Romantic poets and painters have idealized the female body by equating it with nature, as in the image of Justine on the rocks. On the other hand, traditional feminists see the female return to nature as a kind of liberation from masculine order. These two perceptions are at odds with each other. One – the Romantic painters and poets – is a vision of women largely crafted by men and containing the female body within an idea. The other – the feminist reclamation of nature as part of the natural female body – disregards the female role in “unnatural” society, much of which is inescapable. In yet another contradictory loop in the film’s orbit, von Trier takes both of these visions of nature – the Romantic ideal and the feminist rebellion – and explodes them while making a truly Romantic movie.

This contradiction between female ideals helps us make sense of the dominating visual reference in *Melancholia* to the film *Last Year at Marienbad*, an avant-garde sexually transgressive film written by Alain Robbe-Grillet and directed by Alain Resnais. The very first glimpse we get of John’s estate (both in the prologue and upon Justine’s

arrival) is of the manicured grounds' which mirror the grounds in *Last Year at Marienbad*, a film that takes place on a Baroque estate with a formal garden eerily reminiscent of the one that fronts John's estate. Significantly, the story of *Last Year at Marienbad* centers on a suppressed trauma to the female body, a rape where the woman is seduced by her rapist. Certainly rape is no strange territory to von Trier, but in *Melancholia*, he presents a different kind of rape. In *Melancholia* von Trier provides a setting that foregrounds the "rape" of nature that occurs physically (with such things as golf courses and manicured trees) but also culturally (with the rituals of marriage) and economically (with capitalist patriarchs like Jack). In a way, von Trier goes to the origin of rape (the masculine need to dominate and control nature of all variety) and then explodes it.

CULT OF MELANCHOLY, APOCALYPTIC ROMANTICISM, AND THE RATIONALITY OF THE IRRATIONAL

The film's many visual references to famous works of art, from the paintings Justine rearranges in the library to *Last Year At Marienbad* suggest that Lars von Trier wants *Melancholia* to serve as a commentary on the history of representing both women and nature or, to be more precise, the history of representing women as nature and nature as a woman. But his interests go beyond this mode of implicit critique. As the film's title makes clear, he also wants to engage the melancholic tradition, a way of thinking about mental states that preceded modern medicine but should not have been displaced by it.

That Pre-Raphaelite shot of Justine naked and glowing on the rocks is a good place to begin thinking about this connection. This scene and much of the sentiment of the film harkens back to German and English Romanticism and the Cult of Melancholy, a movement which found beauty in melancholic purposelessness and the imminent mortality of all things. This movement is associated with such diverse artists as William Blake, John Donne, Albrecht Dürer and John Keats. The scene with Justine is awe inspiring because it is simultaneously burgeoning with beauty and deflated by an abandon to nothingness. As Justine relinquishes herself to the state of melancholia, absorbing the planet that will annihilate all things, her image paints a picture of freedom in despair, or bliss in succumbing to melancholy.

English Romantic poet John Keats writes in his "Ode to Melancholy" (1819):

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
 Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
 And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
 Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
 Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
 Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
 And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes

Certainly these lines could have been written about Justine with her “deep peerless eyes” that we see in the very opening frame of the film and that continue to look out at us, the stars, and the horizon throughout the film. Or the lines could have been written about the planet Melancholia itself which falls like a “weeping cloud” and changes the entire Earth’s atmosphere. Von Trier’s painterly cinematography makes the end of world and emotional despair feel so laden with beauty that it is hard to turn our eyes from it. It is hard not to feel exalted by the beautiful freedom that relinquishing ourselves to nothingness offers.

A precursor to the Romantic Cult of Melancholy and certainly another artistic influence on von Trier’s film was the work of the Renaissance German artist Albrecht Dürer. In Albrecht Dürer’s famous etching “Melencolia I,” an angel sits disgruntled amidst the trappings of measurements and science – a scale, an hourglass, numeric systems, and tools. She is a heavenly body at odds with the world of time and scientific inquiry. Her resistance to these tools that are weighing her down can be seen in her eyes. In Dürer’s etching as in the film, the expanse of freedom exists beyond the horizon in the form of the sea and a glowing planet. Dürer’s etching easily could be a representation of Justine, a kind of inverted angel who mirrors Dürer’s print in the scene when she has finally destroyed the wedding and sits on the towers of chairs with her feet dangling amidst the ruins of order and social custom. It should also be noted that besides “Melencolia I” Dürer created an entire Apocalypse series of woodcuts that are artistic objects of beauty and horror. On one level, von Trier’s *Melancholia* is about getting back to the pure beauty of aesthetics and emotions, eschewing rational and restrained cinema, even if embracing that beauty also means embracing the apocalypse. The irony is that the irrational is what becomes most rational in *Melancholia*.

LUMINOUS DARK

“Look. It’s a planet that’s been hiding behind the sun, and now it passes by us. It’s called a flyby.”
--Leo, *Melancholia*

Leo shows Justine the planet Melancholia when Justine is at her lowest of low, when she is reduced to a primal state of despair, drained of all color and life except for the dregs of the tendrils of depression that are weighing her down. Claire coaxes her out of bed with Justine’s favorite dinner meatloaf, thinking that a traditional meal will help pull Justine out of the mire of melancholia. But traditions don’t hold up. Justine says the food “tastes like ashes” and retreats to her bed and her despair.

This is when Leo brings his laptop computer to Justine’s bed (in one of the very few scenes that show 21st century technology) and shows her an image of the planet Melancholia. Claire chastises Leo, “It’s not something to frighten Aunt Steelbreaker with now.” But Justine says to Claire, “If you think I’m afraid of a planet, then you’re too stupid,” defying Claire’s attempt to categorize Justine’s state of despair or the source that inspires it. Except for the brief period of time in the beginning of the film when Justine was “glowing” (as her father referred to her) and prior to Gaby’s speech about

the sham of marriage, Justine's entire demeanor has slowly drained of color throughout the narrative. With Gaby's speech and Justine's realization of how trapped she is, she eventually becomes as ashen as the meatloaf tastes in her mouth. But when Leo shows Justine the planet Melancholia, something in Justine begins to shift. Light begins to seep back into her body, and it is her sister Claire who takes on the burden of despair.

The scene with Leo immediately cuts to the next morning when Justine and Claire are in the garden picking berries. The look of the film has changed as the light in the atmosphere has shifted with the arrival of the planet. Justine lifts her head to the sky and drinks in the light, perceiving an atmospheric shift in the cosmos as well as in her interior universe. A quiet breeze rustles through the plants. A random bird skits across the sky. Then, without reason or scientific explanation, snowflakes begin to fall inexplicably from the sky. Justine relishes this sublime moment of cosmic chaos, an event that marks a break from rational predictions, free from the clutter of science (John) and the clutter of economics (Jack). With the falling snow, Justine's face and entire being seem to open up and sigh with relief. Claire, on the other hand, attempts to take joy in the moment, but the expression on her face belies her underlying anxieties about the disruption of order. Justine opens her arms, embraces the chaos and literally begins to glow. Her skin, her hair, everything about her radiates. She understands that things are changing, that the end of order is coming, that all systems are destined to fail, and she becomes a luminous, glowing planet of resolve. With this scene, Justine begins the shift from primal despair to luminous resignation.

One night shortly after this scene, Claire and Justine both wake to the glow of Melancholia, and Claire follows Justine across the grounds of the estate where she watches her sister bask naked in the light of the planet Melancholia. Claire watches Justine through the bushes, her robe pulled tight around her body, her face pulled tight in confusion and dread. But her sister is a picture of light and abandon. The physical transformation of Justine is clearly visible as she accepts her own mortality and relinquishes herself to the end of things. She radiates with light from the planet, and she and the planet become one. Justine has given herself over to a new "marriage." She is now wedded to the random forces of the cosmos – the forces that disrupt landscape and order – and her transformation is literally luminous. But it's not just a matter of light; her luminosity is also a lightness of weight. Justine is no longer tangled in the underbrush and the yarn. She has let go, and by letting go she is able to become "light" even in the darkness of the impending apocalypse.

Just like the Romantic poets and painters, Justine finds the sublime in oblivion and turns sadness into a tremendously beautiful thing. On a basic level, the film's beauty comes from recognizing that we have no control over things we cannot change. The men – the husbands, scientists, capitalists and bosses – who want to have control are impotent in the face of cosmic forces. Justine accepts that she must ultimately relinquish herself to the uncontrollable in a world that wants to control her but ultimately doesn't matter. It isn't necessarily a spiritual awakening. There is no great zen moment. The state of melancholia serves as a kind of drug for Justine that sees her through to the end. She is liberated by accepting that even the idea of liberation is ultimately false, and like in the

art and poetry of the Romantics, there is tremendous beauty in Justine's resignation and acceptance.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Much of *Melancholia*'s effectiveness is derived from the convergence of terror with the sublime, a dichotomy heightened by the reverse transformation between Claire and Justine when Claire becomes the embodiment of terror and dread, and Justine becomes the manifestation of sublime resignation. The pivot points in this transformation occur when Justine is riding her horse Abraham near the bridge that will lead them off the estate. On the morning after the apocalyptic wedding reception, Claire wakes Justine to take Abraham for a ride. Justine is reluctant but goes along. In a beautiful overhead shot, the two women ride through the trees in the fog, the golf course eerily and surreally sprawling behind the trees. When they get to the bridge to exit the estate, Justine's horse Abraham refuses to cross. Justine looks up into the sky and realizes that the red star is missing from Antares, that *Melancholia* has now shifted perception of the cosmos itself. At this moment, Justine's face is infused with a sense of calm and wonder while her sister Claire circles on her horse looking anxiously up into the sky. Claire and Justine begin to switch places. Justine has transcended the box as she accepts the cosmic change (both planetary and inside herself), while Claire is clearly boxed in by her apprehension about losing her sense of order and control.

On the second trip to the bridge, Abraham again refuses to cross. In a moment that can be read as the "abused becoming the abuser" — one that mirrors with extremity and no humor the scene when Justine tops Tim on the golf course — Justine attempts to beat Abraham into submission. Perhaps this is the breaking point when Justine realizes that there is no escape and that there is only resignation. Claire shouts, "Don't beat him Justine." But Justine keeps beating the horse until she and the animal collapse to the ground. (We must remember that Abraham is also "male," and by the end of the movie he is "the last man standing." All the other men have left or died, yet Abraham (the male in natural form) refuses to leave the estate even when Claire releases him.) At this moment, Justine casts her eyes to the sky and sees the planet *Melancholia* hovering above the trees, a blue sphere both beautiful and terrifying. There is a visible change in Justine's expression as the planet literally appears in the sky, no longer blocked by stars or just an image projected on the computer screen. As *Melancholia* becomes the dominating force in her environment, Justine realizes that there is no crossing the bridge, that the only way out is the end which *Melancholia* will bring. Justine's face becomes a picture of resigned yet curious acceptance as she tells Claire matter-of-factly, "There it is. There's your flyby." Claire looks up at the planet in complete terror. For Claire, there is no bliss at the sight of the beautiful sphere looming in the sky, only fear and dread.

That single moment encapsulates so much. Justine's face looks almost elated in her acceptance of the significance of the planet, and she gives herself over completely to annihilation as a form of liberation. In the meanwhile, Claire circles on her horse, her body hunched and taught with anxiety as she looks with dread at the rogue planet in the sky. The terror, beauty and emotion of the film all converges in that one moment. We

know there is no escaping the collision with the blue sphere. Predictions and quantifications have failed. There is no crossing the bridge. So we either have to accept the end like Justine or fight it like Claire.

The reverse transformation between Justine and Claire is both terrifying and sublime. While Justine's transformation into emptiness and resignation feels liberating, Claire becomes completely undone and mired in the weight of things. Justine relinquishes herself to chaos, while Claire hangs onto order with every inch of her being as her world falls apart. The artificial construction of Claire's domestic stability crashes in on her as the planet *Melancholia* heads toward Earth. Charlotte Gainsborough's performance shows us a woman in absolute terror, a woman unglued, unraveled, and desperate beyond measure as she carries her son through a rogue hailstorm, collapsing at the 19th hole of the golf course, the symbol of cosmic disruption and Justine's inner revolt. Justine, on the other hand, becomes completely self-possessed and no longer held captive by outside forces (e.g. economics, patriarchy, social customs, etc.). Justine sits on the wall waiting for the end of the world as if she is waiting for a breath of fresh air to finally arrive in her claustrophobic world. In the reverse transformation, Justine is the strong and stable one, and she leads the audience as well as Claire and Leo to the end of the world.

The switch between Justine and Claire is another instance of *Melancholia*'s oscillation between stability and instability. Just when you think things are stable (e.g. a golf course has eighteen holes), they are rendered instable. Indeed, the film's very instability is part of what makes it appealing. We are not being forced to take positions, but to just experience the film as an event itself. We don't know where to stand, so we have to relinquish ourselves to the film in the same way that Justine relinquishes herself to the planet *Melancholia*. We experience a kind of release through deflation of expectations and are able to see the mystical and magical even in something as seemingly tragic and horrific as the apocalypse. We can see the strength inside the depressive (Justine), and the weakness inside those who seem solidly rooted in order (Claire).

This pivotal moment near the bridge when Justine and Claire trade places harkens back to yet another cultural reference – the William Butler Yeats poem “Easter 1916” in which he writes about the Irish uprising against the ruling English class, and his own personal transformation, in which he moved from distancing himself from the revolutionaries to becoming part of the revolt. Yeats writes how it “All changed, changed utterly:/A terrible beauty is born.” Indeed, “a terrible beauty is born” and seems to rise with the planet *Melancholia* in von Trier's film especially as Justine embraces her quiet revolt against everything that rules her. The Yeats poem seems to be quietly written into Justine's transformation and revolt on so many levels, from the “women of ignorant good will” to tumbling clouds, horses, birds and dreams of death. Perhaps the film itself is a revolt against the ruling class as represented by John's estate, and the only way to be free of it is by exploding the whole thing with a “terrible beauty.”

Everything about *Melancholia* – the planet, the movie, the emotions it elicits – can be considered a terrible beauty. The end of the world as we see it is a terrible beauty, but

also the transcendence of Justine from object of possession and repression (bride/employee) to a nearly catatonic primal depressive to a kind of peaceful empty void is also a thing of terrible beauty. It is this void and emptiness that eventually lures the audience into the grand apocalyptic spectacle and gives us room to appreciate the sense of freedom it offers.

LIBERATION THROUGH ISOLATION AND OBLITERATION

In yet another contradiction within *Melancholia*, part of what makes the movie feel so open is the fact that it is so closed and isolated. We are inside the isolated state of the depressed mind, but we are also located within the claustrophobic and isolated setting of John's estate. This is a movie about the end of the world, yet the only world that we see is this tiny little slice of the haute bourgeoisie living in complete isolation. The end is coming. A planet is going to collide with Earth. Yet, there are no television broadcasts, no frantic footage of the global impact, barely any indication that an outside world exists. As I mentioned earlier, other than one scene with a cell phone and a couple with computers, there is barely a hint of 21st century technology. There is no world except this tiny privileged slice consisting of this one family.

Even when Claire and Justine attempt to cross over the boundaries of their existence – the bridge – Abraham the horse refuses to cross, the golf cart gets stuck, and cars don't start: there is no way out. We are stuck inside the closed-circuit world of capital, depression, social convention, and despair. It is geographically, economically and emotionally isolated, yet people find this close-circuited world exalting, not for what it is but for being able to transcend it. In a way the film's extreme isolation serves as a kind of tabula rasa for our own personal responses. The ultimate emptiness of the conventions at play and the emotional emptiness of Justine open up a place to fill with our own responses. In addition, it is exhilarating knowing that the whole place is going to explode, that the end is our way out. We are liberated through the annihilation of this close circuited world.

In von Trier's brilliant cinematic manipulation, the instability of the film's characters and situations and the extreme isolation of its setting invite us in rather than shut us out. Von Trier intensifies our relationship to the film by fluctuating between moments of empty stasis and frenetic claustrophobia. The filmmaking style is as unsettling as everything else in the movie and paradoxically keeps us connected by constantly disconnecting us. At one moment, the film pushes us directly into the characters' faces and emotions, but in the next the camera pulls back and allows us to empty ourselves into the wide expanse of golf course, night sky, and the sea beyond. The first half of the film is a roller coaster ride of claustrophobic social convention, while in the second half we can feel time slowing down as the end of the world approaches.

In both these halves of the film, one thing remains constant – the camera's proximity to the characters' faces and their emotional responses even if the characters (e.g. Justine) seem empty of emotion. The finest nuances in a face – a flash of a smile, a downcast glance, a piece of cake crumb on a lip, or drop of sweat on a brow – can reveal so much more of a character's interior state than lines of dialogue. Their feelings are revealed

because the camera insists that we get exceptionally close to the characters' faces. The faces often fill and burst off the screen, so we can see that moment of self-doubt in Jack's eyes when Justine calls him a "power hungry little man," and we can witness Justine's retreat into her own head as she poses for the camera with a cake crumb hanging off her bottom lip. The proximity of the camera also never lets us forget the gender of the characters – Justine's bulging breasts, Claire's twitching discomfort, Michael's clueless adoration, John's arrogant sense of security — so when they become undone, we witness it from the inside out by being forced to watch their exteriors so closely.

Von Trier also manipulates time to lure us into the film and make it seem more personally experiential while also adding to its sense of isolation. Both parts of the film feel like they exist in "real time." First there is the frenetic claustrophobic wedding reception, an all-night affair. With Claire's schedule of events, the party is ridiculously long, and we are pushed through each absurd ritual (the bean counting contest, the toasts, the cake cutting, the dancing) along with Justine. As the reception goes on and on and we understand our own relationship to Claire's schedule, we want Justine to destroy the wedding reception simply so it can reach its interminable end.

The wedding reception mirrors the all-night spectacle of watching the planet Melancholia rise in the second half of the film. Both scenes are drawn out in what seems like real time. While Claire makes a big fuss about adhering to the wedding reception agenda, John makes an equally big fuss about everyone, including his son Leo, staying up all night to watch Melancholia rise. John has his own ridiculous agenda for his "Melancholia Reception." However, just as Justine turns her back to her own wedding, she refuses to partake in John's ritual and sleeps through it. Justine doesn't need to watch Melancholia rise. She has experienced its ascent inside herself.

The rising of the planet leads us to the other side of time in the film – the time when we wait for the impending end of things. As Justine empties herself further and further and as Claire claws onto any threads she can find to fend off the impending end, waiting becomes its own kind of sublime experience, and the audience has to relinquish itself to time as much as to the instability of the film. Oddly even while everything in the film is being turned upside down, time seems to stand still. The film catches us and captivates us in its time trap as much as it holds us in the grip of its isolated setting. As it weaves in and out of its "slingshot orbit," the film plays back and forth between leading us to expect some kind of divine inverted rapture (Justine) at its climax or a terrifying nihilistic horror (Claire). The film wobbles through both emotions on its unsteady feet (just like Justine wobbles early in the film). The film's steady "real time" pacing slows the film down while also opening it up and allowing us room to get inside of it. We don't want the film to end, yet at the same time we can't wait for it to end,

The end does come, and the fact that the movie can be read on multiple levels provides a very complex emotional scenario for the apocalypse. We experience the terror and finality of the literal end of the world by the collision of the planet Melancholia with Earth in a moment of penultimate disaster. We are also led through an emotional evacuation

through the cosmic force of the character Justine. This interior evacuation makes the literal end of the world even more sublime in the totality of its destruction. Finally, after spending over two hours on John's estate and watching Justine undo all the systems of order that this close-circuited world represents, we are able to exalt in the end of the dominant economic and social order.

When Justine perceives the vulnerability of her nephew Leo and understands he is having a hard time facing the impending end of things, she takes charge, tells him that they will build a "magic cave" in which they can escape the cataclysmic event. In her state of inverted rapture (emptied of artificial systems, social obligations and meaningless quantifications), Justine accepts that there is an element of magic and the unpredictable in the world. Leo's innocence, his ability to see "beyond the eighteen holes" of John's golf course and believe in the "magic caves," gives Justine a connection to him, and she is able to use the freedom of imagination to build a "magic cave" -- a teepee carved from tree branches -- to help lead Leo to the end of the world.

The final scene is one of profound contradictions and beautiful release. Justine leads Claire and Leo into the magic cave, and then she places the last branch on the cave, sealing them inside her world. Fixed inside her own "slingshot orbit," Justine has turned the world upside down, emptied herself of structure, systems and containment, and now, ironically, she has built a structure to lead Claire, Leo and the audience to the cataclysmic yet beautiful end. The irony is that she has used the strength she has derived from emptying herself to build a container which she knows won't contain anything. Justine has spent the entire film freeing herself from containerization, yet in the end she builds a container.

But Justine's container does serve a purpose. It is through her emptiness that she can tap into a Leo's innocence and become the "Steelbreaker" he believes her to be. Justine's magic cave contains Leo as he holds her hand, closes his eyes and lets the power of his innocent imagination lead him to the end. In the meanwhile, Claire has not let go. She clings to the world around her – the golf course, John's estate, her role as mother, as wife, as woman – and she becomes an emotional hurricane while Justine is the calm in the eye of the storm. Justine is the embodiment of pure empty form that she discarded earlier in the library while Claire has become the picture of apocalyptic doom. Justine has transcended her gender by emptying herself and taking on the purity of form that she once rejected, and she has made that form her own.

However, this is not to say that the moment in the magic cave is completely empty of feeling or terror. Certainly it is terrifying. But following von Trier's cinema of contradiction, what is most terrifying is that which we are unable to see. Leo closes his eyes and retreats inside the magic cave while his mother Claire falls to hysterics looking over her shoulder at the approaching planet of doom. Justine, on the other hand, sits with her back to the horizon, refusing to watch the apocalyptic spectacle. Yet, as Von Trier's camera closes in on Justine's face, we do see the play of contradictions inside Justine: a slight tremble of the lip, a momentary flash of terror in her eyes followed by a wash of inverted rapture. When Justine places that last branch on the magic cave, she

has completed her “slingshot orbit” and holds us captive inside her head. Even though Claire and Leo are present, we ultimately experience the end of the world through Justine. Through her, we find relief in destruction as Melancholia collides with Earth and Justine’s isolated world. The golf course explodes; the teepee is obliterated, and we are delivered to a state of nothingness as the screen goes dark. There are no more notes from Wagner, just the roiling undertone of the end of the world, an emotional and physical evacuation.

In the end, *Melancholia* destroys everything – preconceptions of gender, the legacy of women in von Trier’s films, order, patriarchy, economics, rationality, social customs, and the planet itself. Justine and her wedding with the planet Melancholia annihilate the world of expectations, and we are free to let go because nothing makes sense. We live in a world of chaos from which only chaos can free us. When Justine says, “There is nothing to mourn. The Earth is shit,” she could just as well mean, “Life as men have created it is shit.” And when Justine is liberated from it, we are liberated from it too.

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