Melancholia (2011)

Marius Henderson

dir. Lars von Trier; prod. Meta Louise Foldager, Louise Vesth; screenplay Lars von Trier; photography Manuel Alberto Claro; sound design Kristian Eidnes Andersen. 35mm, color, 135 mins. Zentropa Entertainments et al., distrib. Nordisk Film.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Key aspects of melodramatic convention have prominently inflected many of Lars von Trier's films, including the centrality of moral conflicts and the extensive (perhaps exploitative) depiction of the sacrificial suffering of »virtuous« female protagonists. The melodramatic mode is often employed in his films in conjunction with other aesthetic styles and modes, with, for example, the Dogme 95-style realism in *Breaking the Waves* (1996), the musical form in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), or elements of Brechtian epic theater in *Dogville* (2003). Similarly, von Trier's *Melancholia* has been classified as a film in which »domestic melodrama meets metaphysical disaster movie« (Sinnerbrink 117) that scurries »from intimate melodrama to cosmological drama and back again« (Shaviro 7).

The film begins with an eight-minute sequence of sixteen disjunctive shots, mostly filmed in slow motion and appearing like painterly images or tableaux vivants. The opening sequence is largely proleptic, and it contains at times rather surreal images of the protagonists in states of depressed melancholia as well as fearful terror, interspersed with depictions of a collision between planet Earth and the title-giving rogue planet, Melancholia, which will lead to the destruction of all life on Earth. This sequence is musically accompanied by the prelude to Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* and contains further visual references, both explicit and implicit, to canonized artifacts of European art. The film then centers on the last moments in the life of its protagonists, the sisters Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg). Claire and her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland), host a wedding party for Justine and her groom, Michael (Alexander Skarsgård), at their lavish estate and castle, which marks

them and their guests as members of an affluent, predominantly white European and North American upper class. However, the wedding celebration does not go as planned, due to Justine's severe depression, which results in anhedonia, her obstruction of the planned wedding protocol, and the eruption of old family conflicts. Meanwhile, planet Melancholia approaches Earth. Whereas Claire reacts to the approach of Melancholia with increasing panic, Justine seems to look upon the impending apocalypse with calm, and even identifies with the intruding planet.

The haptic visual texture of the film can be pictured as an embodiment of depression and its paradoxical commingling of (inner) turmoil, frenzy, and stillness. Justine and her identification with Melancholia congeal into an aestheticized metaphorical correlate of a major depression, or of depression as a political-ontological position of, in Dominic Fox's terms, »militant dysphoria« or »politicized unpleasure« (5; Shaviro 20). It might therefore be unsurprising that several critics and viewers with experience of severe depressive episodes have stressed the aptness of the film's rendition of depression (Kaufman; Shaviro). This applies not only to its content and Dunst's performance as Justine, for which she received the Cannes Best Actress Award, but also to the film's form. The opening sequence, with its disjunctive, slow motion tableaux, captures a leaden weightiness, sometimes verging on catalepsy; whereas the hectic handheld camera, used throughout the rest of the film, amounts to a dynamic, spatialization of scurrying distress. Both (e)motional states are symptomatic of depression, and the film renders them in a way that »depathologizes depression« (Shaviro 20). Moreover, the handheld camera, which cannot be associated with the perspective of a specific entity or a particular diegetic function, seems to elude conscious and rational protocols, and thus sensorially incarnates the experience of uncontrollable volatility so typical of depression, in a non-judgmental way (Shaviro 15-17). In addition, as Steven Shaviro explicates, Justine's depression »needs no external motivation or justification. It is just what it is: an unconditioned and nonreflexive state of pure feeling« (19). This emanation of Justine's depression as »pure feeling« is not only indicative of a kind of melodramatic »depressive realism« (Berlant 80; Lukes 196-97), but can also be interpreted in more explicitly political terms as a reaction to what Mark Fisher has termed »capitalist realism«—that is, the hegemonic belief that there is ostensibly no alternative to capitalism and that, therefore, referencing a phrase of Jameson's, »it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism« (Jameson 76; see also Fisher 2).

In *Melancholia*, Justine's depression, which accompanies the literal end of the (terrestrial) world, leads her to an outright rejection of capitalist realism, which pervades her life and becomes particularly pertinent during her wedding party. She works for an advertising agency and her boss is also her groom's »best man,« who promotes her to the position of »art director« during the wedding party and primes a young employee to follow her during the party so as to squeeze out a tagline for their latest ad campaign. This shows how, under the conditions of capitalist realism, even a supposedly »intimate« and »personal« event, such as a wedding, is pervaded by the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism's call for endless productivity and value creation. However, due to her depressive state, Justine thwarts the expectations by resigning from her job, thus refusing the imperative toward ceaseless productivity and the compulsion to be happy (Ahmed) found in the heteropatriarchal logic engrained in capitalist realism (Cvetkovich 166-69). Justine declines to have sex with her groom on their wedding

night, and instead sexually »consumes« the young employee of her former boss, albeit without providing the much longed for tagline.

This interspersing of the personal and the political is typical for melodrama. Yet, in *Melancholia*, the personal is not only political but decidedly political-economic. And, in a further step, the personal-political conflicts and scenarios of crisis, which suffuse the film, branch out and reach a cosmological dimension. Clearly, the overarching scenario of crisis in the film is neither Justine's depression nor the conflicts with her family and employer: but the impending collision of Earth with Melancholia.

A major function of melodrama has always been to mitigate crisis, and especially crises caused by moralistically charged antagonisms between positionalities construed as either »virtuous« or »evil.« In *Melancholia*, however, the most threatening antagonistic force—that is, the titular planet—exceeds the all-too-human categories of morality, as Melancholia, this great inorganic mass, destroys the Earth not out of evil intention but without any intention at all, due to purely contingent physical circumstances. The sheer indifference and affectlessness of Melancholia contests and ultimately upends the paradigms of traditional melodrama, which remain attached to human categories of morality and affectability. By letting Melancholia act as a hidden, nonhuman protagonist, the film grants space to a perspective that has been called for by proponents of speculative realism and similar critical theoretical approaches (Daniel; Peterson)—that is, the perspective of a nonhuman »world-without-us« (Thacker 8-9), of indifferent, inorganic materiality, in addition to its engagement with depressive realism and capitalist realism.

All the while, *Melancholia*'s treatment of these different forms of realism is mediated by the melodramatic mode, through conflictual familial constellations and affectively laden crises. Contrary to melodramatic convention, however, there is no cathartic conflict resolution. *Melancholia*'s persistent dwelling in irresolution and »suspended animation« (Fox 4) is condensed in the ways music is used in the film, which is, ironically, a typical melodramatic asset. The only piece of nondiegetic music in the film is Wagner's prelude to the opera *Tristan and Isolde*, which not only accompanies the opening sequence but is also routinely heard throughout the film. It contains the famous and likewise enigmatic »Tristan chord,« which supposedly builds up tension and longing, yet finds no release in a resolving cadence. The repetitive appearance of this operatic prelude and its Tristan chord upholds said suspended animation in *Melancholia*. Neither the reference to Wagner nor the many other intertextual references to canonized works of so-called European »high culture«— such as paintings by Bruegel, Bosch, Caravaggio, and Millais—can provide redemptive solace. Neither can this task be fulfilled by cinema, self-reflexively invoked in the »magic cave,« a brittle tent-like structure under which Justine, Claire, and Claire's son, Leo, sit and wait at the very end of the film, holding hands, until they and all life on Earth are eradicated by the collision with Melancholia. After the screen turns black, and after a brief moment of silence, the credits begin to roll and Wagner's music again begins to play, seemingly extending the unresolved tension and suspended animation even into post-apocalyptic time and space.

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