

Finding Meaning in Melancholia

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the myths, binary oppositions, feminist characteristics, and overall meaning of the 2011 motion picture, *Melancholia*. The visually captivating film, written and directed by controversial director Lars von Trier, is rife with imagery and language that is perfect for critical interpretation. Roland Barthe's semiotics can be applied to the analyzation of nearly every scene in the movie, and this paper will touch on several examples (Storey 2015 p.124). We will explore ways in which the movie supports Claude Levi-Strauss's theory that myths are the structure we use to create meaning and dividing those myths into 'binary oppositions' helps us to make sense of the world (Storey 2015 p.120). The two main characters, Claire and Justine, are sisters who are navigating a landscape of mental illness and tight-knit family relationships against a backdrop where the literal end of the world looms. The way these women are portrayed, and how they live with and respond to certain death are at times illustrating empowered feminist ideals but are also describing the oppression of Marxist feminism and Laura Mulvey's male gaze, and castrating stare (Storey, 2015 p.109). This essay will examine each instance, while mostly separating the polarizing director (who has a reputation for being misogynistic) from his creation and seeking to find satisfying meaning from the film as a piece of art with insights to share.

In 2011, Lars von Trier released the movie *Melancholia* at Cannes. The Danish director is known for producing films with dark, thought provoking, and disturbing subject matter. A common theme in von Trier films, it is important to note that to be disturbed does not imply comfort, but it does mean that you were moved.

Melancholia, while hardly light viewing, is the director's most universally palatable movie. It's undeniable beauty and intimate character study of two sisters, a husband, and a little boy during the final days of Earth's existence, leave the audience with the feeling that they have just endured an *experience*, and one that stays with you for days. The movie is divided into two parts; one for Justine, a beautiful young copywriter who is struggling with clinical depression on her wedding day (Justine's undoing). The other for Justine's sister Claire; a wife, mother, and caregiver to Justine during the week or so before rogue planet Melancholia swallows the Earth (Claire's undoing). The pair themselves are a study of binary oppositions (Storey, 2015 p.120). Justine is a polished image of bridal perfection; a blonde cupcake of an exterior distracting from the chaos within. Her dark-haired sister is all worry, weighed down by her responsibilities; homely, serious, and fretful. Justine is empty and Claire is full. Justine is dealing with mental illness, yet in a way her self-sabotage is her freedom; she is utterly unencumbered. Claire in contrast is chained to her worry, her concern for others, and her desire to maintain order.

For nearly eight minutes, the movie opens by flipping through scenes that essentially summarize the story. Played out in ultra slow-motion to the emotional and meandering beauty

of Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (imdb 2018), it starts with Justine staring ahead while birds fall dead all around her. Then an enormous sundial sits in the middle of the sprawling estate that Justine's sister Claire and her family live on. Roland Barthes' expanded take on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of semiology (Storey, 2015 p. 124) comes to life. The scene lasts long enough that we can consider the "falsely obvious" (ibid) primary signifier; the stone that makes up the clock, the signified and sign; a sundial, keeper and measurer of time. Then the secondary signifier; sundial, keeper of time and again the signified; this time going deeper into the *concept* of time. It is looming, it is ending, and soon it will be meaningless. Next, we see the Pieter Bruegel painting "Hunters in the Snow" (Dargis, 2011) is shown with ashes falling, fluffy and black, before the edges of the painting curl in and wither away in flames. An interstellar scene shows Earth with the red glow of Melancholia winking in the distance. Claire trudges across the estate, slowly fleeing, her feet sinking eerily into the earth as she clutches her son. Justine's horse, in full riding gear, falls backwards onto the lawn. A majestic beast, a symbol of privilege and status, is nothing compared to the natural order of Melancholia's supremacy. Just as everyday life loses its meaning in the frozen landscape of depression. Like the powerful beast crumpling under Melancholia, so does Claire under her depression. She has a beautiful husband, keen on saving her from her illness, but she can't stay engaged in the relationship. She ruins the wedding, humiliates her boss, loses her job, and rapes a work colleague instead of consummating her marriage. Afterwards, in act two when Claire tries to coax her out of her catatonia with her favorite meal of homemade meatloaf, Justine takes a

bite and begins sobbing, “it tastes like ashes,”. Everything has lost its meaning, and she also alludes to the future state of everything.

The score swells and ebbs. Each scene smacks of meaning. In the scene that stands out the most to me as a representation of secondary signs, Justine, her nephew Leo, and her sister Claire are standing on the lawn in their wedding attire. It is a reflection of the final scene.



(Foldager, Von Trier 2011)

Justine in her wedding dress stands on the left side of the frame, Melancholia above her, a halo of mysterious blue light falling towards her. Her depression is personified in this planet, a beautiful and grandiose ending to a lifetime of suffering the effects of waiting for it. Young Leo stands between the women. He represents purity and innocence, the redeeming quality of life and humanity. Earth's satellite, the moon, is half-lit above him. The dark side of the moon towards Melancholia, the light toward his mother. Near the end of the film in a moment of

clarity, Justine dashes her sister's attempts to make sense of the impending disaster by saying, "The Earth is evil. Nobody will miss it...because I know things. And when I say we are alone, we are alone. Life only exists on Earth, and not for long." (Foldager, von Trier 2011). However, when Leo realizes Melancholia isn't passing by, and he confesses to his treasured 'Auntie Steelbreaker' that he's worried the planet will hit after all, Justine softens to the child. In a gesture of selfless kindness that she did not allow for his mother, she assures him that it's ok, because they have the 'magic cave' they have always planned on building. Together they gather sticks and build a teepee frame in which Justine, Claire, and Leo sit together to face Melancholia's arrival.



Final scene in Melancholia (Foldager, VonTrier 2011)

Finally, in this we have Claire. She stands on the right of the frame and the sun shines above her. It's a dependable, warm light, but not quite as bright as that of Melancholia. In the film Claire is depicted as 'normal', Justine's opposite. She struggles to make her sister happy but easily grows irritated with her outbursts or inability to function predictably. Her husband John is exceptionally wealthy, and she is eager to share that with Justine, but Justine is barely aware of it. During the first act Claire is frustrated and struggling to maintain control of Justine's predisposition towards melancholy. During the second act, Claire coaxes Justine out of a near-catatonic state after she arrives at her house-presumably post-mental breakdown-with absolute love and patience. But the closer Melancholia gets to earth, the stronger Justine becomes. She finds clarity in the swan song. It's now Claire who becomes unraveled, going through the motions of everyday life while quietly panicking. Meanwhile Justine gardens, rides her horse, pauses to bathe nude in the light of Melancholia. Justine is quiet and doesn't challenge her sister, but she never offers any relief or comfort to the mother who is clearly struggling with the loss of any hope for a future for her son and the rest of humanity. This is what I interpret the significance of the two celestial bodies over the different sisters to be. Justine is a complicated, intuitive force. Her struggle with depression has created a detached sense of knowingness. Her suffering has trained her for this. Her light is cool, and her presence is substantial. Claire, like the familiar light or our star, shrinks a bit in the face of Melancholia's arrival. She coos lovingly at her family, she follows them around, pleading with them to be

happy, and all of that worry has left her ill prepared for the fate upon her. She suffers in the way that I think most of us can identify with, by the hands of fear.

In analyzing this film, it's hard not to take the writer and director von Trier into account. He has openly admitted that Justine is autobiographical. von Trier told Nils Thorsen in his book *The Genius: Lars von Trier's life, Films, and Phobias*, "My analyst told me that melancholiacs will usually be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, because they can say, 'What did I tell you?'...But also because they have nothing to lose. And that was the germ of melancholia." (Thorsen, as cited in Corliss, 2011). Knowing this is going on outside the text gives the viewer an appreciation for why Justine is portrayed as somehow gifted as a result of her depression. Similarly, in a scene where Claire tried to help her near-catatonic sister into a bath, Justine is so stricken that she can barely muster the strength to lift her foot. Claire speaks to her in a loving tone, all support and free of judgement. When Justine collapses into sobs, defeated by the attempt to bathe, Claire reassures her that all is well; they have now practiced for what will surely be a successful bath the next day. This is a stark difference from the sister who was exasperated with Justine's antics during the wedding scene. In a Salon interview, Charlotte Gainsbourg, the actress who plays Claire said, "when Lars' wife saw the film, she said that the scene that touched her the most was the scene in the bathroom, when I'm trying to pick Kirsten up and give her a bath. Because she saw herself and Lars in that moment," (O'Hehir 2011).

Von Trier even imitated his own art when, just as Justine sabotaged her own wedding day, he got himself banned from Cannes for using anti-Semitic language at a press conference, overshadowing *Melancholia*'s premier. He was musing about discovering that his biological father was German. He grew up thinking he was Jewish. He goes on to say he was somewhat pleased that he was German and then foolishly concludes with "ok, I am a Nazi" (Gordon, 2012). So, if so much of the director is embedded in this film, can it be a feminist film if he has a history of doing and saying things that alienate women? Reports exist that he hired a "misogyny consultant" for the 2009 film, *Antichrist*, and the report from Chris Heath's *GQ* profile that he referred to Kirsten Dunst's (Justine) nude scene as "the beaver shot" (Zoladz, 2011). While all of this information is utterly cringe-worthy, ultimately Von Trier is telling a story about humanity. Once the art is produced from the artist it becomes something different to every viewer. Crass creator or not, these characters are complex and empowered.

The women face the end alone with the child. The men in this film fall away throughout the narrative. Justine's husband, pretty and naïve, is shed like a skin she has outgrown after the first night of marriage. Justine's boss Jack, who has attended just to get a tagline out of her, is an example of Marxist feminism (Storey, 2011 p. 140). Justine isn't being celebrated on her wedding day, or even allowed to take a break from work. Her boss promotes her to Art Director during his wedding toast to her and in the same breath assigns her the task of naming the newest campaign. She is not a person to him, but a source of income. He is using capitalism as

the “ultimate oppression” (ibid). He assigns his nephew, Justine’s new colleague, to follow her around all night until she ‘gives birth’ to the tagline.

Laura Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ and ‘castrating stare’ (Storey, 2011) theories are validated in this exchange as well. Justine is an object to Jack, her husband Michael, and her father. Her physical beauty is referenced verbally multiple times. Their ‘male gaze’ renders them blind to the depth of her character and illness. She returns with a ‘castrating stare’ by transcending objectification. When pressured by her boss once again for the tagline Justine responds coldly over a bowl of onion soup: “‘Nothing’....”Nothing is too much for you Jack. I hate you and your firm so deeply, I couldn’t find the words for it. You are a despicable, power hungry little man.” She floats through the night, consistently disassembling the image of one to be desired. Her new husband tries to initiate intimacy, but distracted and overwhelmed, she leaves him alone to go explore the golf course. In the sand trap, the colleague who has been assigned to follow and get the tagline out of her appears, pen and paper in hand, and she disempowers him (returns the castrating stare) by shoving him to the ground and wordlessly raping him while still in her wedding dress. She covers his face with her hand, silencing him. In this act she is also silencing the men in her life who are only seeing and seeking what they want out of her.

As the wedding guests leave in the pre-dawn hours, her new and soon-to-be-former husband is also leaving with his parents. He tells her “this could have been a lot different” and she agrees, then responds in the matter of fact tone she uses for the second half of the first act, “But

Michael, what did you expect?”. She has destroyed her relationships, but she has also taken control of situations in which she was being objectified. The next morning, she rides her horse with her sister. She is transformed in her riding gear-no longer a cupcake. She notices that the mysterious red star they misidentified as Antares in Scorpio the night before is no longer there. She has transcended into soothsayer instead of bride. Throughout the entirety of the second act Justine is no longer anything close to the myth of ‘that to be desired’ as she *becomes* her depression; exhausted and catatonic but then clear and enlightened.

John, Claire’s rational American husband and an amateur astronomer, lasts the longest. He assures everyone throughout the approach of Melancholia that it will miss Earth and harmlessly fly by in a spectacular show for everyone. When he realizes its strange slingshot orbit is bringing the planet straight towards impact, he steals Claire’s medication and commits suicide in the barn. Claire finds him and lies to Justine about his whereabouts, saying he went out to the village. The women are left to navigate their final hours with the child alone.

In the end, there is no escape for Justine, Claire, or Earth. They faced the magnificent end hand in hand with Leo, and it was the most beautiful part of the story. They struggled in their journey, but they endured until the very end, and their last acts were of love. Robert Ebert says “Here is a character who says I see it coming, I will not turn away, I will observe it as long as my mind and eyes still function” (Ebert, 2011).

The ultimate binary opposition is life and death, and we avoid thinking too much about it in popular culture. Everyone dies, male or female. At the end of the world, it's children and adults alike. There is real beauty in art that brings you to that moment and makes you appreciate it. Melancholia reminds us that death can be transcendental, just as deserving of meditation as life.

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