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THE APOCALYPSE ACCORDING TO LARS VON TRIER

Abstract: This paper focuses on Lars Von Trier's latest film in a double relation, with his previous filmography and with disaster film genre, investigating how *Melancholia* stands apart from both series of film, both Trier's and the apocalyptic genre.

Key words. Apocalyptic, romantic film, three-act structure, Dogme 95, High Romanticism, disaster movie, end of the world.

Redefining genres

For those who know Trier's filmography and style, *Melancholia* could be a surprise to a certain point: the Danish director tackles a genre that is specific to the American filmography, namely the disaster movies. Trier who is also famous for manifesto Dogme '95, was known for the way he deconstructs and openly rejects some important principles of the Hollywood filmmaking style. After viewing the film, it becomes clear that Lars von Trier has succeeded in redefining another well-established genre, as he has previously done with the classic film noir (*The Element of Crime*), the romantic melodrama (*Breaking the Waves*), the musical (*Dancer in the Dark*), the horror (*Antichrist*), an effort similar in depth and range with Stanley Kubrick's filmography. In *Melancholia* he openly criticizes some sacrosanct striking clichés, visible in the contemporary representations of the Apocalypse. The confrontation between Trier's cinematic style and the subject matter (the total annihilation of the world in the encounter with the planet of *Melancholia*) has generated spectacular and puzzling effects, which

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deliver important elements for the critic to discuss.

For the ordinary viewers, stormed by apocalyptic blockbusters, often hilarious big-budget productions, *Melancholia* comes as a relief and a delight, a provocative and fresh perspective upon a central theme in our contemporary media culture: the possibility of a total extinction of our world, human race, planet, due to various factors, from floods, earthquakes, lethal viruses to huge asteroids. Although Trier envisions in his film the total end of the world, he does not follow any of the recurrent, well-known patterns, usually present in an apocalyptic movie: there are no panoramic instances of how humanity is coping with the disaster in different parts of the world, but the location remains the same, a remote Swedish castle where Justine, Claire and her family are shown in their last moments; although the film opens with a carefully constructed "Prelude" where the symbolic images of the end are present, the actual collision with the mysterious planet remains under question: we do not know whether it will happen or not until the very end of the film; the last shots of the film cast no doubt about the end of humanity, about the end of Earth as a habitat for intelligent life, without any survival of the human race in other environments (most disaster movies end with humanity in search for a new beginning) and without any hollywoodian character as the saviour of the world.

Certainly, *Melancholia* distinguishes itself from all the films made by Lars von Trier, both in subject matter and its aesthetic treatment, being his first apocalyptic film

and also a synthesis of earlier trends and styles, bearing resemblances with his 1996 international breakthrough, *Breaking the Waves*, especially during its first part (*Justine*). Here Trier employs his Dogma-style technique of hand-held camera, quick leaps to extreme close-ups, due to a familiar environment and enclosed space. With a few memorable exceptions, the first part of the film is located in the large chambers of the Swedish castle.

Trier's Romantic Tragedies and Melodramas

Of all the Trier's films, *Breaking the Waves* relates in a special way to *Melancholia*, not only for some formal recurrent elements (both films start with a wedding filmed in a realistic-documentary style, with symbolic connotations; both films are divided into chapters, accompanied by striking romantic landscapes and symbolic images; a similar emphasis on dramaturgical structure, different from other films by Trier), but also for the programmatic Romantic approach, admitted by the director himself on both occasions (*Breaking the Waves* was situated by Trier in „the sentimental department“, which is also true for *Melancholia*). In the case of the latter, Trier points out its Romantic features, its reliance on romance and pathos, which brings us very close to the imaginary of High Romanticism: the dramatism of the images with the cosmic collision of the planets; the main location for almost all the scenes in the movie is the remote, isolated castle, surrounded by the vast field and the sea; the antagonism between Justine and the world, between

Justine and her sister Clare, the contrast between the first and the second part of the film; the Romantic features of Justine and her „longing for shipwrecks and sudden death“; her solipsistic vision about the end of the world, on which the „Prelude“ is based and which triggers the very end of the world; and last but not least melancholy as a specific romantic mood.

The starting point and the process of creation behind *Breaking the Waves* relates as well to High romanticism: Trier affirms that his idea in creating the central character, Bess, sprang from a childhood story about Guldhjerte (Goldheart) who embodied in his mind the „ultimate extremity of the martyr's role“ (Björkman, 2003: 164). The location for the film also bears some High Romanticism atmosphere: most of the film is shot on the Isle of Skye, a place of cultural pilgrimage for British romantic painters and writers at the beginning of XIX century.

In both films, Trier places the wedding as the perfect context where the struggle of the feminine leading character with the society, family, friends, system, becomes more striking than ever and it is also a Romantic confrontation (the protagonist's authentic drama versus the shallowness of conventions, of society). Both Bess and Justine embody a special relationship with the Providence (universe, God etc) in which they seem to possess the demiurgical power to determine events according to their will. Justine and Bess are both pursuing a romantic ideal, in quest for authenticity, in total rejection of social conventions

and they both fight their way out of reality, sharing a common tendency towards escapism (Bess through sacrifice, self-infliction and eventually death and Justine longing for the ultimate end).

Both films elude irony and humor, even though there are some very humorous scenes (in *Melancholia* in the first part). Trier supplies this lack of irony and lack of distance from the unfolding drama with the help of his well known camera techniques and adopts in both cases a documentary style (clear-cut shots of a mobile camera). The number of exceptions increases progressively in the second part of *Melancholia*, where we notice panoramic shots, a unforgettable bird's eye travelling (where Justine and Clare are followed while they ride towards the forest). In one of his recent interviews about *Melancholia*, Trier affirms that his intention was to „make a romantic film“ about the end of the world, about melancholy and depression (the music – *Prelude to Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner-is also romantic) and his concern was not only that he succeeded too well, but also that *Melancholia* „is perilously close to the aesthetic of American mainstream films.“

Apocalyptic Films and Dogme Style

Apocalyptic movies are by definition a Hollywoodian genre. By choosing to represent the end of the world, Trier deliberately situates his film in an American context of commercial productions and this is of course another provocative gesture and an opportunity for a radical break with the clichés reiterated by these movies.



Trier sets himself the most difficult task: on the one hand he aspires to represent the total apocalypse, the end of life on earth, the end of Earth and the end of intelligent life in the whole universe; on the other hand he sticks to his old filming principles, very well known from the Dogme '95 Manifesto: to make a disaster film with a hand-held camera is almost a contradiction in itself. He surpasses this hindrance in various ways.

He has chosen the perfect suitable location for a Romantic-apocalyptic film, the remote castle in Sweden which is perceived from two different point of view according to each of the two parts of the film: in the first act (Justine) most of the scenes take place indoors, allowing the camera to approach very closely each character, giving the impression of claustrophobia: it is Justine's point of view who suffocates and seeks to escape from the crowd outside, under the strange blue sky. In the second part (Claire), the castle is both the refuge and the meeting point for only four main characters (Justine, Claire, John and their child), four different perspectives through which the shadow of the Apocalypse is perceived, an intimate and domestic micro-universe as point of view for the colossal clash between the

two planets in the Universe. So the focal point is located in a small-scale subjective sphere of particular individuals (never shifts to the recurrent image of the crowd running away from chaos and unleashed forces of disaster), in this case Claire.

Due to the subject matter, Trier could have not avoided breaking two important Dogme rules: he openly embraces dramaturgy and assumes a great degree of predictability in his film, when we all know from Dogme 95 Manifesto that: „Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance” (Bjorkman, 1999: 159). The second broken rule is Trier's conscious „deadly embrace of sensation”, unavoidable in a depiction of the total annihilation. But what Trier has done since Dogme Manifesto is setting specific rules for specific films (Simmons, 2007: 8), which has redefined genres, although „genre films were not acceptable” (Björkman, 1999, 161).

Three-Act Structure, Narrative Technique and Key Symbols in *Melancholia*

Looking at the Prelude dreamlike-slow-motion paintings presented in a „flash-forward” manner (also called spoilers) a series of questions arise: do they



really unveil the actual unfolding of the film, making it highly predictable? ; what sort of predictability is this?; In what ways do they enhance the dramatism of the story?. Lars von Trier has undescored in some recent interviews the predictability of any catastrophe movie. The interest of the viewer is not whether the catastrophe actually happened, but how it would occur. Anne Billson from *The Guardian* has even suggested that the Overture functions as the spoiler for the coming cinematic attractions of the film, which is a rather simplistic interpretation. In spite of the fact that the last image in the "Overture" shows the collision of the planets in a fascinating „dance of death" accompanied by Wagner's "Prelude", the viewer experiences the same doubt and suspense as the characters until Claire's revelation that the Melancholia is approaching Earth and it will inevitably collide with it. There is of course a certain predictability in Trier's film, which is not related to the common disaster movie, but it rather goes deeper, towards the irreversible of the classic Greek tragedies, where catastrophe is already present in the very first instances of the plot and in the character's outlook.

The functions of the opening shots are slightly different and more complex. The most important has been suggested by Trier himself in the official interview and is part of the Romantic poetics employed in the film: through these images we have an insight in Justine's catastrophic and premonitory visions, which will cast a shadow on every further element of

the film, enhancing the dramatic aspect of every common gesture, allowing us to see the world through Justine eyes in the first part. In a similar Romantic tradition, Trier's intention was to suggest that Justine is not only imagining and longing for the End, but also able to make it happen due to her special solipsistic power of the mind to mold reality (as Bess does in *Breaking the Waves* in a direct dialogue with God).

The images of the planets colliding at the beginning of the film do not coincide with the final images of the cataclysm, filmed on a fixed camera, that looks as if it were abandoned in the middle of the field. This is a symbolic difference between what Justine has imagined (the collision as a „dance of death") and what actually happens (a pure cataclysm). Justine's visions of the end can be seen as a form of escapism from the depressing reality: she exits the depths of depression only when the planet is beginning to get closer to Earth, developing a peculiar relationship with the blue planet Melancholia. The most striking image symbolizing this indefinite longing for the remote star is when Justine bathes naked in the blue eerie light (an image taken directly from the romantic poetry), under a sky guarded by two moons (a surrealist painting resembling Magritte).

The appearances of Melancholia, first as a star when Justine is about to enter the castle on her wedding night and then as a strange new planet noticed by Justine and Claire at the end of the first part functions not only as a motif but also as a signal for the major events in the story



(frames Justine's story in the first part and becomes the principle of dramatism and conflict in the second part). Justine's depression could be interpreted as another form of anticipation of the suffering and pain that the final disaster would bring.

It is also the metaphorical manner through which Trier chooses to narrate the end, avoiding the direct approach, the Hollywoodian clichés and demonstrates that the end of the world could be best represented in a subjective manner, how is perceived by well-defined characters. In this way Trier gains a new fresh look on a worn-out subject, forcing us to perceive an abstract concept (the total annihilation of the world) through a very subjective view (Justine's and then Claire's). The mysterious planet triggers all Justine's visions of escape in the first part, where she seeks refuge from the enclosed space of the castle, especially when she takes a first glance through the telescope and the camera is immersing in the spectacular clash of the stars.

In the second part, „Melancholia” torments Claire with doubt and casts uncertainty upon the protected domestic microuniverse who suddenly seems vulnerable for Justine's sister and also for the viewer (the bird's eye tracking shot following Claire and Justine from above).

Tranquility is progressively shattered as Claire finds out more about the planet. In both parts we witness how Trier increases disorder and how chaos prevails in the end. Claire's fears dominate the second part, her doubts being transmitted to John. When his rationalistic and scientific perspective crumbles under evidence, he commits suicide. In the second important discussion between Justine and Claire near the end of the film and of the world, Trier expresses his disagreement with current apocalyptic visions so widespread in the disaster movies (the apocalypse as spectacle of images): Claire wants to welcome the end with a glass of wine on the terrace, but Justine sarcastically replies: „How about some music? Beethoven, The Ninth Symphony?”. In the presence of the End, there is no room for such trivial demands.

Dramaturgy and three-act structure which have become a staple of Hollywood movies and screenplay theories are reshaped and redefined by Trier according to his filmmaking style and also according to the subject matter. In other words, the three-act structure is confirmed once again and proves very functional for a narration representing the end of the world. Although the film is divided into two parts, each one reinforce the three-act structure in its specific way. This is not a compromise made by Trier with the mainstream American movies, but another proof for his source of inspiration in constructing the plots: the ancient Greek tragedy. The three-act structure reverberates through all the levels of the narration in the film. Justine's drama

in the first part unfolds according to the three acts: her story starts with the inciting incident (the limousine nearly stuck in a winding road; their late arrival at the castle); the plot point number one (for Justine's story) occurs when both her parents deliver their speeches, shattering the whole wedding atmosphere, revealing a hint of tragedy and the emptiness of Justine's life; this triggers the whole building of tension in the second act with a midpoint of indecision when Justine refuses to cut the cake and the wedding is hold in suspension; the second act finishes with the second plot point consumed between the discussion with her mother (her advice to let everything go), the image of the cosmos seen through the telescope and Justine's rejection of Michael when she flees again.

The character's quest in the second part (Claire) regarding the mysterious planet Melancholia and the fate of the world can also be broken down into three acts. The dramaturgical tension that divides them is triggered by each character's perspective towards the planet and the near end: Justine regards with absolute irony and detachment John's desperate efforts to convince Claire that the planet poses no threat for life on Earth. The first plot point is when Claire decides to find out more about the planet and its trajectory online. Although she finds out about the „dance of death“, her questions remain as the electricity power breaks down. The midpoint places all three characters (John, Claire, Justine) in total indecision towards the planet, suddenly revealed in a breathtaking grandiose

appearance, when Claire exclaims („It looks friendly“) and Justine is even more enchanted when contemplating such a seductive and spectacular death (the blue planet appears to be very similar with Earth, only ten times bigger). Justine is also convinced that nobody will miss the Earth, an evil planet who deserves to be literally swallowed by Melancholia. The second plot point is when Claire, finds out about the miscalculation and discovers that John has committed suicide. This is a memorable scene when Claire although in possession of the terrible truth, struggles to maintain her calmness (her child Leo enhances the dramatism and succeeds in moving Justine from her distanced mood). The whole structure of the film can be divided in three acts, where the third act unifies all the dramas into one single most dramatic Finale: The End of the World (the third act has a lightning briefness, restricted to the last minutes of the film). Although a manifesto against the cinema of sensations, against the transformation of the Apocalypse into a spectacle, in the last shots of the film Trier cannot resist temptation and records the total destruction of the earth, but the dominant images are the close-ups with the characters faces. Trier considers this to be a happy-ending. One of the reasons is that the ending restores the meaning of every aspect of the world. In Lars von Trier's words: „If the world ended and all the suffering and longing disappeared in a flash, I m likely to press that button myself“ (Interview with Niels Thorsen, *Longing for the And of All*).

After he saw *Melancholia*, Thomas Vinterberg has asked Lars von Trier a very unsettling question: „How do you make a film after this?“.

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