

Melancholia

Lars von Trier





PITCH

A BEAUTIFUL MOVIE ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It was like waking from a dream: my producer showed me a suggestion for a poster. "What is that?" I ask. "It's a film you've made!" she replies. "I hope not," I stammer. Trailers are shown ... stills ... it looks like shit. I'm shaken.

Don't get me wrong ... I've worked on the film for two years. With great pleasure. But perhaps I've deceived myself. Let myself be tempted. Not that anyone has done anything wrong ... on the contrary, everybody has worked loyally and with talent toward the goal defined by me alone. But when my producer presents me with the cold facts, a shiver runs down my spine.

This is cream on cream. A woman's film! I feel ready to reject the film like a wrongly transplanted organ.

But what was it I wanted? With a state of mind as my starting point, I desired to dive headlong into the abyss of German

romanticism. Wagner in spades. That much I know. But is that not just another way of expressing defeat? Defeat to the lowest of cinematic common denominators? Romance is abused in all sorts of endlessly dull ways in mainstream products.

And then, I must admit, I have had happy love relationships with romantic cinema ... to name the obvious: Visconti!

German romance that leaves you breathless. But in Visconti, there was always something to elevate matters beyond the trivial ... elevate it to masterpieces!

I am confused now and feel guilty. What have I done?

Is it 'exit Trier?' I cling to the hope that there may be a bone splinter amid all the cream that may, after all, crack a fragile tooth ... I close my eyes and hope!

Lars von Trier, Copenhagen, April 13, 2011.



INTERVIEW

LONGING FOR THE END OF ALL

By Nils Thorsen

JOURNALIST NILS THORSEN, AUTHOR OF LAST YEAR'S 'THE GENIUS – LARS VON TRIER'S LIFE, FILMS AND PHOBIAS', HAS SPOKEN WITH THE DIRECTOR IN MARCH, WHILE LARS VON TRIER WAS PUTTING THE LAST TOUCHES ON 'MELANCHOLIA'.

Let us get it over with right away. The end of Lars von Trier's film 'Melancholia'. Everybody dies. Not just the guests at the grand wedding held in the first part of the film at an ever-so-romantic castle surrounded by a golf course. And not just all life on Earth. For in the world evoked by the Danish film maker this time, we are absolutely alone in the universe. So what ends in our planet's cosmic embrace with the ten times bigger planet, Melancholia, is life as such and our recollection of it.

No ending could be more final. And, as Trier remarks with a black humour germane to him:

»In a way, the film does have a happy ending.«

It is no coincidence that we begin at the end with a sunny day in spring, when everything seems to start all over again in lush green, and I visit the director in his mix of an office and a living room on the outskirts of the Film Town in Avedøre near Copenhagen.

Indeed the ending was what was in place from the outset when he started to work on the idea of 'Melancholia', just as he immediately knew that the audience needed to know it from the first images of the film.

»It was the same thing with 'Titanic',« he says as he assumes his favourite interview pose, lying on the faded green cushions on his exuberant couch, arms flung over his head. »When they board the ship, you just know: aw, something with an iceberg will probably turn up. And it is my thesis that most films are like that, really.«

»In a James Bond movie we expect the hero to survive. It can get exciting nonetheless. And some things may be thrilling precisely because we know what's going to happen, but not how they will happen. In 'Melancholia' it's interesting to see how the characters we follow react as the planet approaches Earth.«



THE GERM OF 'MELANCHOLIA'

We follow two sisters till the bitter end. Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst. A melancholic by the grace of God, she has a hard time finding her place in the world and assuming all its empty rituals, but feels more at home when the world draws near its end. And then her sensible big sister Claire, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg, who thrives in the world and consequently finds it hard to say goodbye to it.

»I think that Justine is very much me. She is based a lot on my person and my experiences with doomsday prophecies and depression. Whereas Claire is meant to be a ... normal person,« laughs Lars von Trier, who has been haunted by anxieties all through his life and believed that the Third World War was breaking out every time he heard an airplane as a boy.

The first time I called on Lars von Trier in connection with our book, he was looking for an idea for his next film. He sought inspiration at museums, listened to music and mentioned snippets of thoughts in bits and bobs, images and plot segments which I now find have reached the screen. But the film was not the main objective. The main objective was his emotional well-being.

The work consisted of scheduled walks and office hours with the aim of gradually pulling himself out of the depression that struck him some years earlier. For Lars von Trier is a melancholiac incarnate. He drags himself through the times when he is not making films and could actually just enjoy life, but is at his best when the shit hits the fan and everything depends on him. Film crews and investors, actors, lines and plots. Not to mention the cinematic language itself, which at best must be supplied with a

few neologisms along the way while he is looking for some sore toes of culture, politics or ethics that he can step on, as he will do. »My analyst told me that melancholiacs will usually be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, partly because they can say: 'What did I tell you?'« he laughs. »But also because they have nothing to lose.« And that was the germ of 'Melancholia'. From then on, things were speeding up. Less than a year later, the script was written, the actors found and the crew in the process of shooting.

ON THE EDGE OF PLASTIC

Throughout most of the year when I interviewed the director, his mood gradually improved as the work progressed. And as he is lying there on the couch in his black hooded sweatshirt and his grey beard, he seems even more cheerful.

»I had more fun making this film, and I've been far more present. But then again, I was going through a bad time during 'Antichrist',« he says.

In 'Melancholia' he grapples with melancholia itself. More than cataclysms. But even though his take-off is his own depression, the idea developed during a conversation and a letter exchange with actress Penélope Cruz who wanted to make a film with him. She spoke of her fascination with the play 'The Maids' by the French dramatist Jean Genet, in which two maids kill their mistress.

»But I don't do anything that's not born by me, I said. So I tried to write something for her. The film is actually based on the two maids whom I turned into sisters in the film. Penélope can ride. So I used that, too.«



The title was inspired by his own depression. Later, presumably in a TV documentary, he saw that Saturn is the planet for melancholia, and, searching the internet, he suddenly came across a web page about cosmic collisions.

As in 'Antichrist', 'Melancholia' opens with an overture – a series of sequences and stills which, to the overture of 'Tristan and Isolde', partly shows Justine's own visions of the wonderful end of the world, partly the most dramatic grand-scale images of the cosmic collision.

»I've always liked the idea of the overture. That you strike some themes. And, typically, we would have made an image of special effects of something we found would happen at such a collision, even though the plot itself just hints at the disaster in close ups. I thought it would be fun to take the images out of the context and begin with them instead, « he says and adds with a smile: »That gets rid of the aesthetic side in one full blow«.

WHAT SORT OF AESTHETICS DID YOU WANT IN THE FILM?

»I'd like a clash between what is romantic and grand and stylized and then some form of reality. The camera is handheld, for the most part. But the problem was that we had a magnificent castle in Sweden, and when you add a wedding with all the guests in gala and tux, it can hardly avoid becoming ... beautiful, « he smiles.

AND THAT WAS NOT YOUR INTENTION?

»Well, it's hard to smuggle in a bit of ugliness. So I think the film is slightly on the edge of plastic. Here and there. Would you please write that?«

THE EMPTY RITUALS OF REALITY

After the initial doomsday ballet, the film falls in two parts. The first part is called 'Justine' and deals with the melancholic sister and her wedding. The other bears the title 'Claire' and covers the countdown to the end. As the director puts it:

»If everything has to go to hell, it needs to start off well.«

The melancholy Justine is determined to become normal, he explains. So now she wants to get married.

»She wants to end all the silliness and anxiety and doubt. That's why she wants a real wedding. And everything goes well until she cannot meet her own demands. There is a recurring line: 'Are you happy?' She has to be. Otherwise, the wedding is silly. You must be happy now! And they all try to bring her ashore, but she doesn't really want to be part of it.«

IN THE FILM SHE SEEMS UNABLE TO ENGAGE IN THE SITUATION. ISN'T SHE SERIOUS ABOUT IT?

»She's not serious about the wedding. In the start she is toying with it all in an off-hand manner, because she feels so on top of things that she can poke fun at it. But slowly, melancholia descends like a curtain between her and all the things she has set in motion. And when she gets to the wedding night, she simply can't cope.« She seems to be somewhere else than the others – where is she, mentally?

»If you ask me, she is longing for shipwrecks and sudden death, as Tom Kristensen wrote. And she gets it, too. In a way, she succeeds in pulling this planet from behind the sun and she surrenders to it.«

WHEN YOU'RE LONGING FOR SHIPWRECKS AND SUDDEN DEATH, IT MUST BE BECAUSE IT SEEMS MORE REAL THAN THIS PHONY WORLD?

»I think that's true. She really suffers from doubts. And when she is at the wedding which she has imposed upon herself, she is seized by that doubt.«

DOUBT ABOUT WHAT?

»If it's all worth it. A wedding, after all, is a ritual. But is there something beyond the ritual at all? There isn't. Not to her.«

»It's a great shame that we melancholiacs don't value rituals. I'm having a tough time at parties myself. Now we'll all have fun, fun, fun. Perhaps because melancholiacs set the stakes higher than at just a few beers and some music. And there's more of a party if we have coloured festoons. It seems so phony. Rituals are, you know. But if rituals are worth nothing, that goes for everything, you know.«

THAT, I SUPPOSE, IS THE VIEW OF THE MELANCHOLIAC – THAT EVERYTHING'S HOLLOW?

»If there's some value beyond the rituals, that's fine. The ritual is like a film. There has to be something in the film. And then the film's plot is the ritual that leads us to what's inside. And if there's something inside and beyond, I can relate to the ritual. But if the rituals are empty, that is: if it's no longer fun to get Christmas presents or see the joy of the kids, then the whole ritual about dragging a tree inside the living room becomes empty.«

SO, IN A WAY THAT'S THE ETERNAL QUESTION OF THE MELANCHOLIAC: IS IT ALL HOLLOW?

»Is the emperor wearing any clothes at all? Is there a content? And there isn't. And that's what Justine sees every time she looks at that fucking wedding. He isn't wearing anything. She has submitted to a ritual without a meaning.«

AND THE OTHERS DON'T FEEL THAT?

»The others don't mind, they just go around and feel that the ritual is nice.«

LONGING FOR REALITY

The melancholic Justine isn't just longing. She is longing for pathos and drama, Lars von Trier explains.

»She is longing for something of true value. And true values entail suffering. That's the way we think. All in all, we tend to view melancholia as more true. We prefer music and art to contain a touch of melancholia. So melancholia in itself is a value. Unhappy and unrequited love is more romantic than happy love. For we don't think that's completely real, do we?«

BUT WHY DOES THE MELANCHOLIC LONG FOR SHIPWRECKS AND SUDDEN DEATH?

»Just because it's true. Longing is true. It may be that there's no truth at all to long for, but the longing itself is true. Just like pain is true. We feel it inside. It's part of reality.«





HOW DO YOU PERSONALLY FEEL ABOUT THE THOUGHT THAT THE WORLD MIGHT COME TO AN END?

»If it could happen in an instant, the idea appeals to me. As Justine says: Life is evil, right? And life is a wicked idea. God may have had fun at creation, but he didn't really think things through,« the director laughs.

»So if the world ended and all the suffering and longing disappeared in a flash, I'm likely to press the button myself. If nobody would be in pain. Then people might say: how nasty, what about all the lives that wouldn't be lived? But I can't help seeing it all as a mean streak.«

WHAT IS THERE MOST OF IN LIFE – MISERY OR JOY?

»Misery, dammit! Clearly. You may argue: Orgasm. Yes, that's fine enough. But, orgasms, Ferraris and other pleasures. Yes, but with death and suffering at the other end of the scale, these weigh more, I think. And there's much more suffering and pain than pleasure. And when you enjoy a spring day, that too is a kind of melancholy.« The wedding is Justine's last attempt to fight her way back into life instead of longing herself out of it.

»That's why she wants to get married,« says Lars von Trier.

»She thinks: now I'm forcing my way through the rituals and some truth may issue from it. When you're being cured of a depression, you're forced to instigate some rituals as well. Take a five minute walk, for instance. And by going through the motions, the rituals will accumulate some meaning as well.«

ACCORDING TO THE MOTTO: FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT?

»That's what she's trying to do. However, her longings are too

great. Her hankering for truth is too colossal. I think that goes for melancholiacs in general. We have high demands on truth.«

IS LONGING THE MOST PROMINENT FEATURE OF MELANCHOLIA?

»I think the words rhyme well. A melancholic longing must be as emotional as it can get. It evokes the image of wolves howling at the moon.«

WHAT DO THE WOLVES HOWL, 'COME AND GET ME?'

»Yes, for I must belong somewhere,« he laughs. »It's also why Justine is howling at that planet: come and get me. And I'll be damned if it doesn't. And it devours her. And it was very poignant that it should not just be a collision between two planets, but that Melancholia should devour the Earth.«

IS THAT HER LONGING: TO BE DEVOURED?

»Yes,« he laughs.

»So it is a happy end, after all.«

ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE

Lars von Trier gets up, goes to his computer on the desk and starts searching the internet.

»In the film, the sisters talk about being alone. And I believe I came upon that by listening to this number with Nephew, 'Allein, Alene',« he says from his desk.

»And then I found it interesting if we actually are alone in space. In fact, it's completely irrelevant. But it makes a big difference to



me. One thing is that the Earth is cleared of all life, but if there are some cells somewhere, there's something to build upon. If there's no other life anywhere, well, that's the end of that.«

SO IT'S NOT A PROPER SHIPWRECK AND SUDDEN DEATH IF EVERYTHING DOESN'T GO?

»No, it has to be everything«, he smiles. »And I think it's a scary and cold thought. When you see pictures from outer space, you shiver and feel that we're awfully alone. And when you imagine yourself floating around in space, in a way you are alone.«

There's an exclamation from behind the screen.

»Oh! They have a video with planets. I've never seen that,« he says. Then there is music. First a series of organ chords, then the rhythm, simple and mechanic. Some singing follows. And then the chorus: *Allein, allein.*

»You can hardly imagine that there isn't life any other place. But Justine knows it,« says the director as he resumes his place on the couch. »And it could be interesting if someone came through that door and said: Listen: They've discovered that there is no life anywhere else. Whoops!«

In the second part of the film, the wedding is over and the planet is approaching Earth. And now it's suddenly the big sister, Claire, who falls apart while Justine collects herself more and more. Claire's husband, played by Kiefer Sutherland, is one of Lars von Trier's stock characters: the rational man who studies things and believes he can explain it all. This time it's why the planet will not hit Earth. He reassures his wife all through the film. And then suddenly, he stops. And then she is ... *allein, allein*«, he smiles.

»But then the sisters aren't all that different from one another.

They share the same crazy mother who's given up on all the bullshit and turned completely bitter. She longs for nothing. So Claire has all the time had to be a mother to her little sister, and when you have to take care of others, you must be strong.«

WHY DOES CLAIRE FALL APART AS THE PLANET APPROACHES?

»She has something to lose. For instance, a child. She is not longing for anything. She appreciates what she is in. Whereas Justine has nothing to lose. She's a melancholiac, and we are ever longing, you know. And when you're longing, you can't lose anything. You have nothing.«

SO YOU ARE EXPOSED WHEN YOU APPRECIATE WHAT YOU HAVE?

»Yes! And we melancholiacs skip lightly over all that. Perhaps it's a way of surviving. Then you don't have to mourn the things you lose,« he says and adds with a little laugh:

»But on the whole, they are pretty unpleasant to one another. My characters are, you know. They all let each other down.«

I PERCEIVE THE SISTERS' RELATIONSHIP AS VERY LOVING.

»Yes, in the end, for instance. I think they get together there. That is also what hints at a happy end. That the two opposites melt together. They have different reaction patterns, of course. But they have been two, and they become one.«

THE LAST FILM IN THE WORLD

Before the shooting started, Penélope Cruz cancelled because of other engagements and Kirsten Dunst got the lead instead. And



the collaboration, says Lars von Trier, was a pleasant surprise. »I think she's one hell of an actress. She is much more nuanced than I thought and she has the advantage of having had a depression of her own. All sensible people have,« he says. »She helped me a lot. First and foremost she had taken photos of herself in that situation so I could see how she looked. How she was present and smiling, but with a completely blank stare. She really pulls that off rather well.« If you ask Trier what he thinks of the film, it is more difficult to get an answer. »When I see it, I feel good about it. But I've seen it so many times that I can't see it anymore,« he says and hesitates for a moment or two. »Charlotte Gainsbourg said something that pleased me very much. It was: It's a weird film, « he laughs. »That was lovely, because I was worried that 'weird' was somehow lacking a bit.«

WHAT'S YOUR DOUBT IN THIS CASE?

»Well, I am afraid that it has turned out too 'nice'. I like the romance in it. Pathos. But that's alarmingly close to nice. I mean, exactly when are you indulging in romance with Wagner, and when is it just ... turning trivial? «

IT'S ALLOWED TO BE INDECENTLY NICE, I SUPPOSE?

»Yes! If there's an idea about it. I had a wonderfully unpolished feeling with 'Antichrist'. I don't with 'Melancholia'. All the time, I meant it to be polished in some way. And I hope people will find something beyond the polish, if they really look for it. It's just harder to get down to than with 'Antichrist', because the surface is so polished.«

IN 'ANTICHRIST' YOU COULDN'T HELP FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?

»That's what I mean. You can skate across the polished surface in this film. The style is polished, but underneath the smooth surface, there's content. And to get to that, you need to look beyond the polish.« »But the worst thing to happen was when they said at Nordisk Film: There are some beautiful images,« he laughs. »That destroyed me. For if I make a film that they like at Nordisk Film, I'll stop tomorrow!«

DOESN'T IT HELP TO DESTROY THE WHOLE WORLD?

»I hope so. The approaching planet does provide some fundamental suspense, at least. The suspense can hardly be greater than when we know that a planet ten times the size of Earth is drawing closer and that it will crash into us. I suppose that keeps the audience from leaving halfway through.« »And Thomas Vinterberg said something very sensible when he had seen it,« he says and continues through the laughter: »Which was: how do you make a film after this?«

THE NYMPHOMANIAC

In Lars von Trier's case, the answer is simple. You get up in the morning, go for your walks, go to work and search the world for new flashes of interest to be unfolded in images that may even add to the cinematic vocabulary. It has the considerable side effect that the director can keep his melancholy somehow at bay.

That is why his films come at short intervals these days, and a new idea is already taking shape in his mind, as far as I understand. Even though the unveiling comes jerk wise. At first when he reveals that he has started to read books; Thomas Mann's 'Buddenbrooks', Fjodor Dostoyevsky's 'The Idiot' and 'The Brothers Karamazov'. »And it is an interesting point why the hell films have to be so stupid! « He erupts. »Why do all lines have to be about something? A plot. When books have a red thread, they only brush it momentarily!« he says and lets his index finger touch the table for a while, before it again pops up. »And then again in a flash much later.« »Whereas a film is completely tied to the plot. Even a Tarkovsky film has nowhere near the same depth as a novel. It could be fun to take some of the novel's qualities – even that they talk nineteen to the dozen, which is what I like in Dostoyevsky - and include that.«

HOW WOULD THAT APPEAR IN A FILM?

»Well, even this room holds a thousand stories you could include. There is a lot of material which doesn't issue from an image. For instance, the story of the origin of this chair. How has it been used previously and why is it exactly this chair here and not another chair which perhaps ought to have been here.« You mean, a depth in the story which is usually perceived as diversions in a film? »Yes. Why does the bottle look like that?« He nods to a bottle of water on the table. »Why do we drink that water? Is it cheaper? Or the bar code on it. How did that originate?« It is doubtful whether bar codes will be part of Trier's next film.

Sex seems a safer bet. At any rate, he suddenly says: »I've given Peter Aalbæk a choice between two titles: 'Shit in the Bedsore' and 'The Nymphomaniac'. And he seems to think that a film with the title 'The Nymphomaniac' might be easier to market, he laughs.

IS IT SOMETHING YOU INTEND TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT?

»I'm researching on nymphomania. And Marquis de Sade. I've found that 40 per cent of all nymphomaniacs are also cutters, in the sense that they cut themselves. But then again, it's politically incorrect to speak of nymphomania, because the concept in itself is seen to indicate that we cannot relate to female sexuality. As I understand, many of them cannot obtain satisfaction, so they use sex like cutting because it is something within their control. I suppose they carry around a fear or pain that they conceal beneath that.« He looks ahead for a while without speaking. »But it's no fun if they're just humping away all the time«, He ponders. »Then it'll just be a porn flick.« He does not seem all alone in the universe, the director, as he lies there on his big couch and turns the details of a new film over in his head, but I wonder whether it is really the next film from Lars von Trier that he is outlining to me.

ARE WE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE?, I ASK INSTEAD.

»We are«, he says. »But no one wants to realize it. They keep wanting to push limits and fly wherever, « he laughs. »Forget it! Look inward.«



FILMOGRAPHY

LARS VON TRIER

DIRECTOR & SCRIPTWRITER

ANTICHRIST (2009)

Cannes Film Festival (official selection)

DIREKTØREN FOR DET HELE (THE BOSS OF IT ALL, 2006)

Golden Shell nomination - San Sebastián International Film Festival

MANDERLAY (2005)

Cannes Film Festival (official selection),
Toronto International Film Festival (official selection)

DE FEM BENSPÆND (THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS, 2003)

Toronto International Film Festival (official selection)
Sundance Film Festival (official selection)

DOGVILLE (2003)

Cannes Film Festival (official selection)
Toronto International Film Festival (official selection)

DANCER IN THE DARK (2000)

Palme d'Or - Cannes Film Festival

IDIOTERNE (THE IDIOTS, 1998)

Cannes Film Festival (official selection)

RIGET II (THE KINGDOM II, TV, 1997)

Venice Film Festival (official selection)

BREAKING THE WAVES (1996)

Grand Prix - Cannes Film Festival
Toronto International Film Festival (official selection)

RIGET I (THE KINGDOM, TV, 1994)

Best Director - Karlovy Vary International Film Festival

EUROPA (1991)

Jury Prize - Cannes Film Festival

MEDEA (TV, 1988)

EPIDEMIC (1987)

Cannes Film Festival (official selection)

FORBRYDELSENS ELEMENT (ELEMENT OF CRIME, 1984)

Grand Prix - Cannes Film Festival

BEFRIELESBILLEDER (PICTURES OF LIBERATION IMAGES OF RELIEF, 1982)

Berlin International Film Festival (official selection)

VIEW ALL THE FILMOGRAPHIES ON: WWW.MELANCHOLIATHEMOVIE.COM

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CREDITS

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ZENTROPA

Zentropa was founded in 1992 as a result of the co-operation between director Lars von Trier and producer Peter Aalbæk Jensen on the feature film “Europa” (“Zentropa”). They share an equal ownership of 25% of the company. Yet another 25 % is owned by employees and others closely associated with the company. The last 50 % was bought by Nordisk Film as of February 2008.

The company differs from the major competitors in the market by having established a decentralised autonomous organisation structure which creates space for new ideas and alternative methods of productions. This company culture has drawn some of the best directors to Zentropa and shaped groundbreaking projects such as the ‘Dogma concept’ – an idea adopted by several directors all over the world.

Zentropa has produced more than 100 international and Scandinavian quality features, co-productions, and low budget films. Zentropa is now the largest film production company in

Scandinavia. A position it has maintained since 1994.

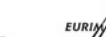
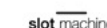
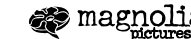
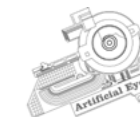
During the years Zentropa has expanded beyond the limits of Scandinavian territory, successfully establishing several production units in Europe. Moreover the company co-works with many other European production companies and is always interested in new collaborations.

The increasing activities of Zentropa also include music videos, documentaries, television entertainment, and development of multimedia projects. Facilities for post production, sound design, in house rental of production equipment and international sales make Zentropa self providing in every aspect of filmmaking.

Films produced by Zentropa enjoy critical acclaim worldwide and have been rewarded with the most prestigious prizes the festival circuit has to offer, among these The Golden Palms, The Silver Bear and most recently an Oscar.

visit us at www.zentropa.dk

MELANCHOLIA IS BROUGHT TO CANNES BY





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