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The Exhaustion of Latency: Thoughts on Lars Von Trier's 'Melancholia'

John Steppling · Wednesday, February 1st, 2012

In 19th century portraiture there was a fascination in photography (and to a lesser degree in painting) with backgrounds littered with relics and décor that were suggestive of the 'Orient,' the colonized world, the 'other.' These trappings served several purposes. They reinforced the mastery of white Europe, but they also, less consciously, fetishized distance, and the distant. It was one of the beginnings of commodifying the exotic, even as it established its parameters. One might trace these background trappings as they morphed into picture postcards, and other tourist souvenirs.

In recent cinema there is a tacit recognition on the part of filmmakers that part of what post modernism is about is the recognition that the ironic has exhausted the subject. This really began around the time film was invented. It has run straight through the 20th century and into our current century. The bourgeois subject in those 19th century photographs was teetering on the edge of public immersion in the spectacle.



The latency that Durer portrayed in his famous *Melencolia* engraving (1514) posited signs of a hidden knowledge, or mysteries, that the concentrating angel was trying to decode. The angel was paralyzed with this effort. This was an allegory about the emancipatory dimension promised by rational thought. That model has lived on for several hundred years. That latency was to later be channeled into marketing. And in marketing exhaust itself.

Lars Von Trier's recent film *Melancholia* runs up against this exhaustion, but sadly the filmmaker seems not to know it. There are a number of comparisons to be made with the Von Trier; firstly Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*. The formal dinner party in the Buñuel is used to point to the margins those rich guests seem unable to know or understand. Their prison is their own class, and its blindness to the world outside. Antonioni's *Red Desert* is another film that has a related cinematic DNA. But again, as Antonioni was at least nominally a Marxist,

his heroine, amid the factories, seems to bring the viewer's attention to her search for context. The exhaustion I speak of, has led narrative into a genre cul de sac (or cul de sac of genre). Everything is genre. You can't escape it. The problem with Von Trier's film is that it's a science fiction movie pretending to be without a genre context.



There is a shot of Kirstin Dunst, naked, staring up at the approaching planet. It is an homage to Welles' shot of Rita Hayworth in *The Lady From Shanghai*. Why is it such a pale imitation? One answer is that Welles knew the film he was making. A crime movie.



The guests in the Buñuel are critiqued. The guests in *Melancholia* are critiqued, but in the way the police are "critiqued" in TV cop shows. The result of Von Trier's lack of understanding of the historical moment he exists in, results in the utter emptiness of the planet's moment of collision. What happens? Well, the earth explodes sort of. That's it. The metaphoric and allegorical import along with it. I was reminded of Danny Boyle's sci fi film *Sunshine*, in which the director's vision extended no further than imagining the galaxy as a screening room for dailies. All that could be found of life left at the far reaches of space was to shoot it out of focus. Then sit in the dark and screen it. The same insufficiency plagues Von Trier. A cast of "prestige" actors, the better to make sure this WASN'T mistaken for a fucked up installment of *Star Trek*, are left to complain, in their tuxedos, and gowns, while the story wanders the film much as Dunst does the mansion.

So from Durer to Von Trier, we have gone from the religious to the political to pure commerce. The reality of narrative in cinema today is that unless there is a stripping away of bourgeois melodrama, as one can see in a variety of recent film (Escalante's *Los Bastardos*, Audiard's *A Prophet*, Lynne Ramsay's recent *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, or in the Australian cinema of *Animal Kingdom*, *Little Fish*, and *Noise*) the recognition of primal crime has revealed the core fascination this culture has for that narrative form. The criminal, a Lacanian criminal if you will, driven by primordial rivalry and aggression. It is our postmodern Sophoclean moment. The split that kept Hegel so frustrated, between art and life, is now realized as the very nature of consciousness as we suffer it.



The empty formalism of Von Trier seems a watery apology in the presence of Escalante's undocumented workers, or Audiard's Algerian petty thief. Or the recovering junkie in *Little Fish*. Or the disturbed child of a bourgeois couple in Lynne Ramsay's flawed, but perhaps profound *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. For Kevin is alive in his crimes, and he resonates as Raskolnikov did for the 19th century.

Justine and Claire, the neurotic privileged sisters of *Melancholia* only live in simulacra of reality – a world of paternalistic derangement, but one they (and the filmmaker) are unable to break free from. Von Trier's film seems most to be about impotence, if it's not about autism. I had a similar reaction to McQueen's overwrought melodrama, *Shame*. Again, it is a bourgeois expression of angst. Again, the formalism is empty. Again, the protagonist is clueless as to his own privilege and the world of suffering he inhabits. There is something comforting in the Von Trier film, since, you know, there really ISN'T a planet about to hit earth. So, we can all return to our private stables and personal wine cellar and our BMWs. The help is invisible in *Melancholia*. The workers, the groundskeepers. They are never seen. It's a bit like Sophie Coppola's gloss on the Court of Versailles. Those darned mobs are ruining my parties. When they appear, we never see their faces, only the back of their heads.

The planet *Melancholia* arrives as empty metaphor. The moon over Rita Hayworth passes through a night of mystical desire, as the boat sails toward the American shadowland, Mexico. The spectre of colonial thinking is almost impossible to avoid, regardless of what film you make. Its absence is a presence, and it speaks directly to that Lacanian portal into the symbolic. The most direct way out of the imaginary is through criminality. The sons have become the father; they inherit his crime. German Romantics saw a tragic version of this; of responsibility and guilt. However our identity links up with the formation of our super ego, however one charts our primary narrative fiction, the post modern aesthetic is a reduction of elements in narrative, and that somehow the lack we feel in the 'other,' that fundamental psychic trauma, renders us immigrants or criminals or both. It is the most basic of artistic failures in this historical epoch. Lacan observed in his essay on Hamlet, that ghosts appear "when someone's departure from this life has not been accompanied by the rites that it calls for." Hamlet's father is dead, but he returns. He returns as the repressed, and more significantly as part of a system of signifiers; "the hole in the real that results from loss sets the signifier in motion." Myth and allegory provide us with the structures by which we navigate our desire and our rage. The allegorical, however, only resonates when we know our own complicity in the crime.

McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (book not the film) is a meditation on this complicity. Audiard's *A Prophet* is the same. Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* is the same (based on the Melville novella *Billy Budd*, perhaps the quintessential example). At the heart of it, the murdered sleep of Macbeth returns. Films that examine privilege must cleave closely to the irrational in this, our, system of progressive rationalization. Ang Lee's *Ice Storm* comes to mind. Privilege lives too intimately with the very economics of filmmaking, so that a willful blindness occurs. In some sense, in some related way, probably all films are about filmmaking. All narratives are about crime. The unconscious today is a film strip – if Beller is correct – and it screens that which pleads for mercy, preemptively, for we all know for what we will be arrested. The

religious symbols in the Durer engraving, or in the background of those 19th century portraits, are now scattered across super market tabloids. That latent meaning that resided within structures of ritual and allegory, now only serves as distraction – purposely trivial, harmless. The refuge of “prestige” projects is that they announce their seriousness through various signifiers (classical music, in this case Wagner...which, as I think on it, is almost self parody) and through these devices, they escape historical and social context. *Melancholia* happens nowhere. Or anywhere, or everywhere. But its without context (as Kevin says, in the Ramsay film, “I AM the context!”). The forgetting of history as it is written in artistic forms, in the ruins of past cultural product, is to practice from a foundation of false naïveté, and to undermine the allegorical.



The Enlightenment has run its course and film, as the predominant art form of our culture, embodies all the contradictions of late capital, social domination, and the spectacle, and is therefore a medium that fails if it forgets its allegorical beginnings along the seashore, an amusement park novelty. Adorno said even in Shoenberg, the distant echo of the café fiddler could be heard. Von Trier is pretending he can't hear the waves, or smell the salt water taffy, and maybe he really can't.

Images, from top: Melancholia (Von Trier), Melancholia (Durer), Melancholia (Von Trier), The Lady from Shanghai, Los Bastardos, We Need to Talk About Kevin.

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