REVIEW

BETWEEN HOPE AND MELANCHOLY: A METAMODERN EXAMINATION OF LAR VON TRIER'S *MELANCHOLIA*

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Written and directed by Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier, *Melancholia* (2011) focuses on the strained relationship between two sisters, Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), coming to terms with a world-ending cataclysm. In many ways, *Melancholia* can be considered a metamodernist film. Described by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen as a 'structure of feeling', metamodernism situates itself ontologically *between* the (post) modernism. As they explain, "[i]t oscillates *between* a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (2010, p.5-6). This review will explore the ways *Melancholia* reflects a metamodern sensibility through an examination of its use of form, feeling, and function.

Formally, *Melancholia* initially appears distinctly postmodern. For example, composed of two self-contained episodes (Part One: Justine and Part Two: Claire), the film perpetuates plurality. Similarly otherworldly moments such as shots of faraway galaxies and sensual planet-bathing – at times – fragments the coherence of the two otherwise grounded narratives. In addition, the film reflects a postmodern style through its use of pastiche. The film's prologue including and recreating famous works of art such as Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Hunters* (1565) and John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851-1852). According to Kim Skotte, through it look and feel, *Melancholia* creates rifts (2011). However, these rifts do not prevent the film from achieving an overarching sense of unity and totality. The director's clever use of music from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859), which is played repeatedly throughout the film, maintains the film's ominous tone by reminding the audience of the impending calamity. Conversely, the film creates a sense of totality through its setting and subject matter. For example, the film is entirely set within and around the unnamed family's estate. As such, the film's world is fixed and every attempt made by the characters to move beyond it results in failure. Finally, the film's subject matter – which is ultimately a reflection on the inevitability of death – is a totalising one. This is because it is an event every human being will eventually have to experience.

In terms of feeling, *Melancholia* oscillates *between* purity and ambiguity, naïveté and knowingness, apathy and empathy. For example, during the opening scenes, Justine who is clad in white perpetuates purity. Described by others as gorgeous and glowing, Justine personifies innocence and virtue. However, precipitated by her ever-intensifying depression, her character becomes progressively ambiguous as seen through her increasingly self-destructive behaviour. This dynamic is replicated with naïveté and knowingness through the film's characters. Claire is presented as naïve because despite her uneasiness with unfolding events, she is convinced by her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland), that everything will be okay. Justine, on the other hand, is presented as knowing. She tells her sister as much. As she explains, she knows things, knows we are alone, knows life only exists on earth, and knows it will be extinguished. The other main characters – all family members – demonstrate

a metamodernist oscitation between empathy and apathy. John dies by suicide and Claire forsakes her family, surrendering to her own despair and desperation. While these two give in to apathy, Justine and Leo (Cameron Spurr) continue to show compassion for one another despite their depression and youth. This ability to rise above despair through empathy is a particularly poignant theme in the film.

Finally, *Melancholia* oscillates functionally between irony and enthusiasm, melancholy and hope. In philosophical terms, each character is eventually exposed to what Friedrich Nietzsche called "the horror and absurdity of existence" (1993, p.40). What is interesting about *Melancholia* is we get to see how different characters react to their impending destruction. While John succumbs to his fears and commits suicide, the rest of the family starts looking for some redeeming illusion (Nietzsche 1993) to help them come to terms with their inevitable fate. Here, Claire relies on her already formed traditions. For example, she proposes the family meets on the terrace to share a glass of wine. Justine is quick to point out the absurdity of the idea, suggesting they meet on the toilet instead. Ultimately, Justine does embrace the prospect of such a redeeming illusion. However, she refuses to indulge her sister's wishes, instead she earnestly suggests to Leo they build a magic cave for protection. Composed of thin sticks, the cave offers no physical protection. However, for Justine and Leo who – in spite of themselves – choose to believe in it, the cave offers a modicum of spiritual and psychological comfort. As the film's title suggests, *Melancholia* is a depressing film. However, its implications are not. It shows people are able to find enthusiasm and meaning in their lives regardless of the inevitability of death.

This review has shown how *Melancholia* can be considered an example of a metamodernist film as it perpetuates a sensibility that oscillates ontologically *between* plurality and unity, fragmentation and totality through its use of form; ambiguity and purity, naïveté and knowingness, apathy and empathy through its use of feeling; and irony and enthusiasm, melancholy and hope through its use of function.

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