
Landscape of the Apocalypse: Human Nature in Lars von Trier's Melancholia

by SAM VOTER

This article looks to understand the relationship between landscape and character development in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. It explains how von Trier manipulates the landscape to create specific psychological and emotional effects through different film making techniques and argues that this use of landscape develops the film's two central characters, Justine and Claire, in the backdrop of an impending apocalypse. This article contends that, through her relationship to landscape, Justine is established as a fatalist who holds no connection to the material world and rather seeks nature as a spiritual outlet. It continues in arguing that Claire's relationship to landscape establishes her attachment to the material world and value system orientated around societal constructs. It points out that by establishing these two characters as opposing sides of human nature, von Trier generates discourse through an accessible medium that promotes self-reflection and allows for the critical examination of one's values.

Keywords: Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*, landscape, human nature, materialism, apocalypse

The impressive landscape that dominates Lars von Trier's 2011 film, *Melancholia*, is both mesmerizing and terrifying. This film is broken into two parts: part one follows the story of a woman, Justine, during her wedding ceremony which she eventually abandons given her declining mental health, while part two focuses on Justine's affluent sister, Claire, in the days before *Melancholia*, a rogue planet hurling itself towards Earth, destroys life as we know it. The cosmic scale of this film is daunting, as if some untamable force with the power to wipe out humanity at any moment hangs over our heads. In this sense, *Melancholia* does what our imaginations dare not to in playing out the total annihilation of human life. While it forces us to reckon with the terrifying idea of "the end," the cosmic scale of von Trier's apocalypse also welcomes a cleansing of humanity and the transcendence of life, gripped by the beauty of destruction. Von Trier plays with both thoughts in order to present an apocalyptic scenario that is familiar and foreign to us, but also to examine the fundamental values of human nature and societal constructs.

Justine and Claire epitomize these thoughts towards the apocalypse and the value systems that are established. Lars von Trier draws a distinction between Justine and Claire (in terms of values and philosophies) through his manipulation of landscape. Given its intimate connection to the characters and the plot, space and the cosmos will be considered a part of the film's landscape. How the two central characters in *Melancholia* interact with the film's landscape reflect

their value systems, establishing Justine as a fatalist who embraces the cleansing of the apocalypse and values spiritual connections with nature that transcends death, rather than adhering to the material, human constructs of society which Claire finds more comfort.

Scholars have written extensively on *Melancholia* since its release, touching on a wide number of subjects. Christopher Peterson in his article: "The Magic Cave of Allegory: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*" discusses the prominent allegorical nature of the film as representative of the "incapacitating effects of psychological depression" through a psychoanalytic lens.¹ On the other hand, David Lakin looks to examine in his paper "Indulging in Romance with Wagner: Tristan in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011)" how music is used to establish a romantic setting in an apocalypse.² Though a justifiable interpretation, this paper will instead focus on how von Trier manipulates landscape throughout the film. I recognize that he does so by using other elements of cinema in tandem, so these other elements will be mentioned and explained, if need be, however my primary focus will be on landscape.

Societal Constructs and Soundtrack

The film almost immediately establishes Claire and Justine as different regarding their philosophical values. In an early scene, Justine and her fiancé, Michael, arrive two hours late to their lavish wedding at Claire's estate. Getting out of their limousine they are immediately greeted by Claire and her husband, John, who

are upset over the two being so late. Claire confronts Justine about the consequences of her late arrival on the wedding's itinerary, while Justine responds with an uninterested gaze (12:16-12:38). This gaze is in stark contrast to Claire's stern demeanor, indicating that Justine cares little about the consequences of her actions and thus the wedding. Claire's concern indicates the opposite, and the landscape of the scene reflects this. Later in this scene, Claire has to tug the arm of Justine to get her to walk inside and join the ceremony. As Justine is walking, she stops, turns back, and stares at the evening stars above her. Everyone else stops with her for a moment, but Claire must once again pull her attention away and towards the wedding (12:38-13:10).

Justine clearly favors the landscape outdoors and in the sky; she essentially must be dragged from the stars and into mansion. She sees no purpose for societal constructs such as rituals and finds no comfort in them. Claire, however, cares deeply about this ceremony and that it unfolds smoothly. She finds no comfort under the stars as she hastily tries to get Justine inside. Justine's lack of concern establishes the foundation of how her character will develop throughout the film as she finds comfort in nature, away from fabricated human concepts like ceremony and tradition. Claire's fixation on the wedding establishes the basis of just the opposite, that she values a material life and the human constructs that Justine rejects. The shaky handheld camera used throughout the film adds to the confusion of these clashing value systems, further differentiating the two.

Justine looks to establish a spiritual connection with nature that gives her relief from the human world. While eating dinner later in the wedding, Justine is given a promotion to become art director of her boss's advertising company, and she is given the task of coming up with a tagline for their next project. Later into the dinner, Justine's mother gives an impassioned speech on how she disapproves of marriage. As a result, Claire sees Justine becoming increasingly upset and pulls her to another room where she is scolded for making a scene. Upon returning, Justine is visually uncomfortable having all the attention on her and decides to get up and exit the mansion through the front doors where she enters a golf cart and rides to the golf course. She passes a telescope pointed towards the sky and then arrives at a putting green where she urinates. While urinating, Justine stares into the cosmos above her as the non-diegetic music begins (17:17-25:10).

In the first half of this scene, Justine is surrounded by human concepts which she finds distressing: the promotion coupled with the pressure to make a tagline

represent the forces of capitalism reigning over her, the wedding as a restricting form of tradition, and the ego of Claire which cannot sympathize with her sister's mental illness. These pressures reach a tipping point for Justine, and she must find relief in nature. Knowing the world will end, she recognizes that human constructs are meaningless and rejects them as a result. Upon reaching the golf course, Justine is surrounded by the landscape of nature and the cosmos. As she gazes into the stars, it is as if a great weight has been lifted from her shoulders, and that weight is societal constructs.

When Justine looks to the sky in this scene, Melancholia's beautiful, non-diegetic soundtrack, composed by Mikkel Maltha, floods our ears. Many scholars have touched on von Trier's use of music, and in particular Danielle Kollig argues that, among other things, the soundtrack contributes to a "filmic excess" that is characteristic of Melancholia. The grandiose scale of the film's landscape contributes to this excess, and together with the soundtrack creates a "numbing effect on the audience, which in turn is potentially led to perceive the apocalypse as a sublime event that is passively consumed and even enjoyed."³ I agree with this interpretation, but it can be expanded upon to reflect Justine's attitude towards life. Justine knows that an apocalypse is imminent. The telescope that she passes in the golf cart is used exclusively to observe Melancholia, thus we can assume that when she looks towards the sky, she is thinking of the planet and her doom. Therefore, the soundtrack is a subconscious representation of Justine's psyche as she ponders the apocalypse, representative of the same excess that numbs the audience to such. With this numbing effect, Justine enjoys the apocalypse just as the audience does. She recognizes the world is going to end, leading her to detach from material possessions and social constructs in favor of a transcendental connection with nature.

Mood and Eroticism Through Landscape

Perhaps the most telling scene regarding character interaction with the landscape occurs midway through the second part of the film. In this scene, Claire is outside at night watching the planet Melancholia when Justine enters the space. The Moon and Melancholia are framed together in the sky. Without noticing Claire, Justine walks into the backyard (in the direction of Melancholia) and into the surrounding forest. Claire follows, only to discover Justine lying nude next to a stream, basking in the light that radiates from Melancholia. A shot of Melancholia is then followed by a close-up shot of Justine's face as

she gazes back at the planet. The scene ends with a close-up of Claire's concerned face (1:25:00-1:27:43).

At this point in the film, Claire worries deeply about a collision of Melancholia and Earth, and her fixation is seen while she stares at the planet before Justine arrives. A wide-angle shot of Claire is presented as she stands on the back porch, showing the huge landscape in front of her as well as the Moon to her left and Melancholia to her right. Melancholia being on the right gives it intrinsic weight, therefore we can assume that is where her gaze is going. Following this shot is a close-up side profile of Claire, indicating her closed off demeanor that is not welcoming of the planet as Justine is. This is in direct contrast to later in the scene when we see a close-up, full face shot of Justine staring at Melancholia. Though the film has yet to say, we know that Justine's clairvoyant abilities tell her of the collision. Nude beside a stream, she is exposing herself to the planet and fully embracing the coming apocalypse.

This is the first scene in the film where we see Justine fully embrace the coming planet. She is at peace, starring the end of the world in the face. Rosin O'Kelly writes in her article: "the Eroticism of Landscape in Contemporary Contemplative Cinema" about Justine's erotic connection towards nature and the film's landscape. She argues that "Justine is constantly looking for a bodily and sensory contact with nature." Her erotic connection "isolates her from surrounding people" with whom she has great difficulty connecting and empathizing.⁴ I agree that her desire for a bodily connection is apparent throughout the film, and that she does so in order to escape society and connect with nature, however, O'Kelly fails to draw attention to the juxtaposition of Claire entering the space and her relationship to the landscape. The close-up in the final shot draws attention to her concern towards both Justine's actions and the planet looming overhead. This concern arises from her fear of losing the material, human-made world that she prefers. Claire cannot grapple with even the possibility of an apocalypse, and her entering this space reveals how distant she is from Justine and her values. Furthermore, Justine's fatalistic attitude towards life is established as she has accepted and is welcoming the end of life. Her spiritual connection to nature as shown in this scene indicates her detachment from the material world. With her connection to nature, she transcends death, welcoming it with open arms. In her article O'Kelly argues that eroticism and ego are at odds with each other, and that the former will replace the latter. Being a social construct, Justine rejects the ego as she forms her connection

with nature, thus contributing to the fact that her relationship to the landscape reflects her personal values.

As established, Claire has a less welcoming relationship with the film's landscape compared to Justine, and this reflects her different value systems. In part two of the film, Claire has become aware of Melancholia and is gripped by paranoia about the impending apocalypse. Susanne Schmetkamp argues that, in Melancholia, "moods are expressions of such perspectives,"⁵ therefore, the mood of Claire's interactions with the environment reflect her values of materialism. As Claire (who we see as a silhouette) looks off into the distance from the upper floor of her mansion, the windowpanes create a grid-like pattern in front of her. Slowly, the distance comes into focus, and a cold, gray-blue, desolate landscape scattered with sharp, rocky islands looks back at Claire. Melancholia is seen lurking in the top right of the frame. The camera cuts to a close-up profile shot of Claire's face as she looks down into the yard to find her husband John and son Leo posing for a picture with the planet. The camera then shows Justine sitting at the end of the lawn looking out into the ocean, cuts back to Claire, and ends with a shot of Melancholia (1:23:29-1:24:12).

This scene establishes a cold, somber mood from the beginning when Claire's silhouette is framed within the grids of the windowpanes. These grids entrap Claire, signifying that her mind is fixated on the uncertain future of life. The color of the landscape that looks back at her is a hostile and provides no warmth or security. Given Schmetkamp's argument on mood and perspective, the depressing mood created by the landscape is an expression of Claire's perspective towards life and her values. With her attention on Melancholia given the framing of the windows and the closing shot of the scene, Claire fears and apocalypse and losing everything she loves.

Justine and Claire's position is juxtaposed in this scene, further differentiating them regarding philosophies and explaining their relationship to the environment. Claire is inside, in an upper level of her mansion, looking down on the landscape and her family. Within the walls of the mansion and elevated far from the ground, she is spatially separated from the environment; She tries to distance herself from the landscape by taking shelter indoors, surrounded by the material world. Claire's closed-off and somber relationship to the environment reflects her desire for the human world and fear of losing it. In contrast, Justine is outside on the lawn experiencing the landscape firsthand. She does not value human constructs and welcomes the inevitable apocalypse. Justine is humbled by the dominating landscape in front of her, rendering her insignificant and eliminating the ego. In the environment, she continues to find peace in the landscape that detaches her from the society.

Perspectives on the Final Seconds

No discussion on the philosophical differences between Justine and Claire would be complete without the examining the final scene in the film. Justine, Claire, and Claire's son, Leo, are sitting on the golf course under a recently made wooden stick structure that Justine and Leo refer to as the "magic cave" in the moments before *Melancholia* finally collides with earth. Throughout the scene, the camera cuts between close ups of each character to capture their emotional response to inevitable death. The scene, and film, close with a long shot of *Melancholia* crashing into earth behind the three of them sitting on the golf course. The contents of the film preceding the apocalypse provide valuable information on each character's hypothetical reaction to an apocalypse and what that says about their values, however, the ending solidifies what we have learned about Claire and Justine. The close ups of Claire show her distressed state. Her mental state deteriorates from no emotion, to tears, and to hysteria as *Melancholia* strikes; she is not ready to let go of her world and material possessions. In comparison, Justine remains calm. She does not fight death, but welcomes it peacefully, thus confirming what we have previously learned about her.

In Vesna Dinic's article; "Narrating the Invisible-Affective Spaces of Lars von Trier," she argues that the music in this scene, which continues past the fade-out at the end of the film, creates a "practical manifestation, as the effective memory of space proves to be capable of replacing its physical absence."⁶ Dinic writes about this effect on the audience, but I argue it can also apply to Justine and transcendence of life past death. Throughout the film, Justine looks to nature not only for relief, but for a spiritual, erotic connection. The continuation of music at the end of the film not only substitutes physical absence for memory amongst viewers, but it also shows how Justine's connection to nature transcends death, explaining her detachment from the material world that no longer exists. It must be noted that Justine shows sympathy towards Claire before the collision. Despite Justine's detachment from society, she can still understand that Claire, though drastically different from her, holds a set of values that give her life meaning. The final scene of *Melancholia* is crucial in confirming Claire and Justine's different philosophies.

Conclusion

Lars von Trier ventures into uncharted territory with *Melancholia*. Life as we know it ceases to exist before our eyes, but much good comes out of this representa-

tion. Claire and Justine represent opposite ends of the same spectrum. A caring mother with attachment to the material world, tradition, and other human concepts is juxtaposed to a fatalist sister who values a spiritual connection to nature that has no physical manifestation.

Creating these two characters through their relationship to landscape gives the film meaning and makes that meaning accessible to the audience. Justine is abstract; her philosophies are difficult to comprehend, but she provides us with the ingredients to escape societal constructs and lead a life past death. Claire represents the average human with attachments to human things. This is accessible, showing the audience pieces of themselves that can be critically examined. Highlighting characteristic of general human thought towards life create a path for critical examination of oneself, and Justine provides the raw material for change after such reexamination. On the surface, *Melancholia* is an eerie sci-fi movie about the end of life, but beyond that it is a critical examination of human nature that paves a path for self-reflection.

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