



Points of Light

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Rumors of our civilization's collapse have been somewhat exaggerated. When the National Society of Film Critics announced its awards for the year 2011, the top two films—Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, in first place, and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, in second—were separated by a single vote. It is fitting that they should vie so closely: they are opposite and in some ways equal attempts to show the essential nature of reality and the best way to live in it—openly flouting the *au courant* truism that art is fit chiefly to interrogate, unsettle, and subvert. Both films debuted at Cannes. If there had been any separation between their release dates, it would seem certain that one was made as a rebuttal to the other, for while the symmetry of the two films is striking, there is a deep philosophical quarrel between them. Von Trier and Malick can't both be right: *Melancholia* argues that reality, including life, is best understood in the light of death; *The Tree of Life* argues that reality, including death, is best understood in the light of life. These propositions are familiar enough; more surprising and important are the force and grandeur with which the two films substantiate them.

Before the plot of *Melancholia* begins, there is an impressionistic prologue in which, among other things, birds fall dead from the sky and a gigantic blue-and-white planet collides with the Earth, swallowing it up. The prologue is set to Wagner's *Liebested* (or "love-death") and it sounds a note of foreboding that rings throughout what follows. The action is set in the present day, on a great country estate overlooking the ocean, location uncertain—it seems to be anywhere and nowhere. The sky is almost always dark or overcast.

The first half of the movie takes place over the course of a long, lavish wedding reception, and is titled "Justine," after the bride (played by Kirsten Dunst). Justine is beautiful and successful, and she has just married a handsome, successful, dotting man named Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). The stone-and-ivy mansion belongs to Justine's sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her proud but eminently reasonable husband John (Kiefer Sutherland). The party is flawlessly arranged and the setting is tastefully opulent; the whole affair is swathed in a rich golden light. This is, von Trier seems to say, as good as life gets. And yet, Justine is ill at ease. She apparently

has a history of depression, and on her way into the great house she glances anxiously up at the stars. It's an adumbration of things to come.

Despite the bounty of her situation and the pleading of the level-headed Claire, Justine becomes increasingly tormented and erratic over the course of the evening, falling asleep, locking herself in the bathroom, evading her new husband. Though he does not seem to share or even much understand her inclination to melancholy, Michael bears her behavior with supreme patience—perhaps too much. She seems to feel genuine affection for him; but some deep, destructive misery overwhelms this. When she refuses to consummate her marriage—opting instead for spiteful sex on the ground with a feckless young wedding guest whom she's just met—Michael finally leaves in defeat. It seems that the choreographed bliss of a perfect wedding is too warm and heavy a garment for Justine to wear with equanimity. She is obliquely aware of some truth that exposes such bliss as unconscionable falsehood.

The second half of the film is titled "Claire," and is set once again on her and John's estate, and placed over some indeterminate number of days rather than a single evening. Justine arrives at the home, now wracked with depression so severe that she is barely sentient. Claire plays the dutiful, worried sister, doing what she can to rouse Justine from her state, but to no avail. It soon becomes apparent

that Claire herself is also tormented. There is, we discover, a heretofore unknown planet called (rather winkingly) Melancholia, which is hurtling toward Earth. John, the archetype of a cheerfully confident modern rationalist, assures Claire that all the scientists' projections show that Melancholia will just pass by closely. He and their elementary-school-aged son Leo (Cameron Spurr) spend the few days leading up to the near-miss fooling around with telescopes and anticipating the show. Claire, however, is haunted by the specter of apocalypse. She has taken to reading on the Internet alternate predictions that the planet, after it flies by Earth, will swing back around, pulled in by gravity, and collide with it—a scenario labeled in the diagram as a "dance of death." Doom seems literally to hang on the horizon.

The night before the planet's closest approach, Claire, unseen, follows Justine into the woods. There she watches her sister, naked and prone on the bank of a creek in the forest, bathed in the sharp, alabaster light of Melancholia. Justine languidly caresses her naked body; it seems clear that this is precisely the consummation that she could not achieve with her eager, good husband. She has given herself over to the vision of death. It is the most beautiful nude scene I've ever seen in a movie, and also one of the least alluring. The softness and warmth have been blanchéd from Justine's lovely body. What remains

looks like porcelain: lovely to behold, cold to touch. It's the turning point of the film—a conversion experience. Justine had previously squirmed under the cold light of truth, but she has now allowed it to penetrate her. In so doing she has passed into a sort of adulthood, and for the rest of the film, she is impassive and strong, no longer crippled by vague mordant premonitions, staring coolly into the darkness.

The next night, *Melancholia* does exactly what the scientists said it would: it passes very near to Earth, but does not touch it. The family assembles on the patio and watches it pass. The spectacle is breathtakingly beautiful, and even literally takes their breath away—John explains that the planet is sucking away some of their atmosphere, only momentarily—but it soon recedes, and Claire is relieved. Death has passed them by, and John raises a toast to life. Justine, however, seems to know something that the others do not. She alone is prepared for what happens next. The following day, we see John peeking again through his telescope, scribbling on a pad—and a sudden change in his expression tells us his earlier predictions were wrong. The doomsayers Claire had read were right: *Melancholia*, evidently tugged by Earth's gravity, has swung back around. Destruction is assured. Without a word—for what words do technocratic triumphalists have in the face of death?—John slips

away and swallows a fatal dose of pills, alone.

Earth's atmosphere begins to go haywire: birds stop chirping, strange hail falls, and arcs of electricity spark up from telephone poles. Claire realizes what is happening, and desperately, hysterically, grabs onto her son and tries to flee with him to a nearby village. But the cars won't start, and she ends up trudging through the hail, struggling for breath, her son's gangly, boyish legs hanging down to her shins. The air of futility is horrifying and deflating. Justine sits, demonically cool and contemptuous, watching her sister flail. "The earth is evil," she tells her; "nobody will miss it." In the end, Justine becomes von Trier's anti-heroine, uniquely able to cope with the harsh reality. Claire is weak and undone; but Justine calmly helps her nephew to build what she tells him is a "magic cave" that can protect him from any danger. Under her direction, the three family members gather in the "cave"—a teepee made of branches, with no cover—where they sit and join hands. Claire sobs and shakes, but Justine and Leo sit calmly while *Melancholia* looms closer and closer, finally swallowing all of life in a white roar.

The *Tree of Life*, like *Melancholia*, opens with an evocation of death, this time a reference to the Book of Job. God has allowed Job's ten children to be killed, and Job asks why a good and just God would sanction

this. God answers with a question, which Malick uses for the film's epigraph: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" This is not so much an answer, of course, as an invitation to ruminate on the nature of existence and our place within it. Malick's film attempts to take up this invitation, and to help its viewers to do likewise.

The Tree of Life explores facts of human suffering and death in the context of the miracle and majesty of reality. Its most central theme, as the title suggests, is the crowning achievement of existence: life. After the epigraph, the screen goes black, and then is lit from the center by a shimmering, undulating figure of light, somewhere between a flame and a ghost. Over this picture we hear the sounds of seagulls and waves on sand, and the voice of Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn) speaking to God: "Brother... Mother... it was they who led me to your door..." These words are a dispatch from the end of Jack's journey to redemption, and the rest of the movie is a retracing of the steps he followed, through suffering and evil and everything else, to God's door.

This way is, fittingly, a complex and elliptical one. Such large stories are never perfectly linear, unless they are falsified. The successive scenes do hang together, but they do so in a way that is not entirely obvious upon one's first or second

or even third viewing. The viewer must trust Malick that all of this is going somewhere, but at the same time must work to make sense of the journey as it progresses. The very next scene recalls the childhood of Jack's seraphic mother (Jessica Chastain), who is never named in the film. She is seen viewing the natural world with wonder, and recalling the instruction of "the nuns" that there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. Grace, she says, "doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked." But nature "only wants to please itself," and "finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things." One has to choose which way to follow. She, for her part, pledges to be faithful to the way of grace, and her pledge is immediately tested—we suddenly see her in middle age, being informed by telegram that her youngest son, R. L. (played as a child by Laramie Eppler), has died at the age of nineteen. She is now in the position of Job: unfailingly good, cruelly afflicted, and questioning God's justice.

Scenes of the grieving Mrs. O'Brien are interspersed with those of Jack's own middle age. He is a rich and successful architect, married to a beautiful woman, and utterly without hope or joy. His environs are starkly modern and antiseptic—a sterility that contrasts sharply with the film's starbursts and explosions of life. They

are filled with sleek steel and glass, but Jack sees through the glass only darkly; he is painfully blind to the beauty arrayed outside his massive windows. He is distracted and enervated, unable even to look his wife in the eye. He is haunted by the loss of his beloved brother, and all that it implies about the human condition. Over a scene of his grieving mother, Jack asks, in voiceover, “how did she bear it?” The implied subtext is Jack’s own question: “How should I?”

Jack’s consideration of the question begins, like God’s reply to Job, on a cosmic scale. For the next half hour, Malick guides his viewer through a mostly wordless exploration of the roots of life. There are lush depictions of the Big Bang, volcanic eruptions, the cellular origins of life, early sea creatures, dinosaurs, an asteroid, and an ice age. Then jumping seamlessly forward into the twentieth century, there is a series of impressionistic vignettes that present the courtship of Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, the gestation and birth of Jack and his two younger brothers, a mother’s tenderness, the wonder of childhood exploration, the arcing spray of a garden hose in the sun, light sparkling through tree leaves, the thrill of boyhood horseplay, and the first exposure to death and disease. Simple description will not do; these scenes must be seen, and also heard—they are magnificently scored, with works by Berlioz, Smetana, Górecki, and others. In all of this, the camera seems

to have come loose from any earthly moorings—it glides over landscapes, spins to capture rays of light and follows romping boys in tall grass.

But if life is truly the central fact of reality, then the film must also be able to illuminate our ordinary days and nights. Nearly an hour in, Jack’s thoughts return to the story of his childhood in the Waco, Texas of the 1950s. The twelve-year-old Jack (Hunter McCracken) is the central figure of this portion. The camera follows him and his two brothers through the rough-and-tumble of boyhood: swimming, riding bikes, discovering girls, breaking windows for the thrill of it, attending school and church. Malick has an extraordinary knack for provoking and capturing unforced, lifelike behavior from his child actors. The three boys loaf and wrestle and laugh like real boys do.

Malick’s eye for what Mrs. O’Brien calls “grace” does not blind him to the ugliness of life, or the pervasiveness of “nature”—of course it requires a depiction of both. Much of the drama of the family story comes from the fraught relationship between Jack and his affectionate but stern father, Mr. O’Brien (Brad Pitt). He had once dreamed of being a great musician, but gave it up in favor of a more practical engineering career. His disappointment with himself comes out in severity toward his boys. Early in the movie, after learning of R.L.’s death, Mr. O’Brien laments, “I made him feel shame. My shame.”

Jack and Mr. O'Brien are complicated figures, but both tilt toward the way of nature. They are hungry. They wrestle and claw to get what they want. Jack and his father frequently butt heads, as Mr. O'Brien attempts to impose his will on his equally willful son—who asks God, at one point, to kill his father. By contrast, Mrs. O'Brien and R. L. are exemplars of artless grace and unconditional love. Mr. O'Brien warns his sons, "Your mother is naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you." And it is hard to deny that R. L. and his mother are almost too righteous—forgiving, gentle, submissive—to seem fully real; they appear at times to be soft, wispy foils for the troubled but robust humanity of Jack and Mr. O'Brien. Malick, it seems, is not quite convinced by the nuns' stark dichotomy of nature and grace, hinting at a more complex, complementary relationship. Indeed, the long stretches of the three-hour film devoted to gorgeous footage of natural processes, from the cosmic to the microscopic, suggest that there is more grace in "nature" than the thesis allows.

Jack's recollection of his childhood culminates after Mr. O'Brien is laid off, and the family is forced to move. The boys mourn like they're being expelled from Eden. For Jack, that makes sense: he no longer belongs there—the pure wonder of childhood has become adulterated by grown-up sin. Jack has no illusions about who he

is. He whispers in a voiceover, "Father, mother, always you wrestle inside me. Always you will." Mr. O'Brien, shaken by the trauma of losing job and home, confesses to Jack that he has been too hard on him, but explains that he only meant to make his boys strong. Jack answers, "I'm as bad as you are. I'm more like you than her." The two men—and Jack seems like a man now—embrace with real tenderness and regret. The whole scene is a masterpiece. Both actors express genuine vulnerability, while carefully preserving the hard masculine shell that is their armor. They are no longer at odds, but cobelligerents, reluctantly, helplessly, waging war on the world. As Jack says, channeling the Apostle Paul, "I do what I hate." As the family drives away from their home, Mrs. O'Brien gives one last word of instruction, again in voiceover: "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by."

But Jack's trajectory is predictable, and known, and we jump back to the present, thirty or so years later. We can easily imagine the professional victories that have been won, and the quantity of life that has flashed by in the interim. Jack is a hard, successful man, whose core is consumed by spiritual hunger. Happily, his reflections have not been without fruit. We see him one moment riding up a glass-encased elevator shaft, but in the next, he is in an arid, rocky desert, deciding, with some hesitation, to step through a freestanding

wooden door frame, and follow the twelve-year-old version of himself over a rocky hill. Images of death and resurrection flash before us, and then Jack emerges onto a paradisaical beach. The horizon is wide and luminous. The score turns exultant.

Jack, still dressed for the boardroom, drops to his knees in the wet sand, surrounded by his young brothers, his parents, children from his old neighborhood, his young self, and many others. Seagulls sing overhead, and the waves lap the sand—the same sounds that played behind the movie’s opening scene. It is the arrival we’ve been waiting for. As the sun sets over the water, the various characters walk languidly, embracing, smiling, gazing at each other. It’s meant to be a crescendo of reconciliation. Mrs. O’Brien caresses R.L.’s young face, and then peacefully releases him from her care. One senses that this is meant to be reality viewed through the eyes of grace. After the beach scene, Jack finds himself again in the city, but his eyes, it seems, have been opened. The sun and sky are painted on the glassy surfaces of skyscrapers, and Jack looks around in wonderment. He can finally see that all the world is, ultimately, shining.

The tone and the source of light in *The Tree of Life* are vital to Malick’s philosophical vision. He is a rhapsode of the Emersonian order—plainly enchanted with the stuff of existence. His world is one

of illuminations. Rich, clear light suffuses leaves, grass, fabric, hair, water, even skin. The lovely, if sometimes flickering, radiance of earthly life echoes a deeper, more enduring light. As Mrs. O’Brien says, love smiles through all things. We simply need eyes naked and patient enough to see them as they are. The journey of the movie, from Jack’s conjuring of the Big Bang onwards, is an effort not to impose a novel vision, but to shake the scales from his eyes. In *Melancholia*, by contrast, things in themselves don’t shine. Life has nothing to say for itself. Illumination always comes from without, whether it is cast by the comforting artifice of human technology, the very occasional glimmer of sunlight, or by the sharp white light of heavenly death. Only one of these sources of light has the power to reveal the truth. For von Trier, to bathe in the stark, blanching light of death is simply to become reconciled with reality; death is the one star that illuminates everything.

These differing sources of light tell us something about how Malick and von Trier see the world—but at the same time, ethics is never far away, especially for Malick. In *The Tree of Life*, the bare-toothed ethic of unmitigated “nature” is both a cause and a result of blindness. Jack fought and grasped because he couldn’t see reality as the loving, luminous gift that it is, and his belligerent posture further clouded his sight. For Malick, living well makes you see rightly, and

seeing rightly makes you live well. For von Trier, ethics and epistemology are related in a less powerful way. In *Melancholia*, the warm, hospitable light of the first half of the movie is exposed as a comforting illusion, barely painting over the underlying reality of our condition. Doing away with this light is a matter of getting straight about truth and falsehood. And indeed, when this illusory paint begins to flake in the second half, only the death-illuminated Justine is calm and self-possessed enough to smooth over the last moments of her young nephew's life. This is a matter of ethics, of course, but the connection is less integral for von Trier than it is for Malick; Justine's nihilistic enlightenment also inspires her to relish in ghastly contempt at her stricken sister's panic. It is an ambiguous ethic.

Another way to put the difference is to say that Malick demands much more work from his viewers. In fact, the ambition of these two movies is only superficially symmetrical. Malick is calling on his viewers to search for something deep and hidden in our daily lives. A successful search would both call for and produce a radically new way of being in the world. He wants *us* to ask and discover what truly lies behind the phenomenon of life. Von Trier is not really trying to open his viewers' eyes to some hidden reality. He is merely making manifest a cold reality that we all at times seem to recognize, with the added assertion that death really is

the end for each of us. From this he draws some rather banal conclusions about the clarifying power, at least within the context of the film, of a pessimistic worldview. This is not to say that *Melancholia* is not a powerful film; it is. It manifests with great if exaggerated urgency the bleakness of a worldview that gains increasing traction in our day. The first time I saw it, I was awestruck. I left my seat in a quiet lull, floating through the bright lobby and dark parking lot with my eyes on the ground.

But upon repeated viewings, von Trier's vision begins to seem a bit too tidy. It relies for its power on the brute shock of our physical annihilation. The punch is well-thrown, but it loses some impact upon subsequent viewings. Malick's vision, by contrast, becomes more powerful with each viewing, as the viewer comes to see more and more the structure that he intimates but doesn't presume to spell out or prove. Malick invites where von Trier asserts. Both have crafted compelling works of art, encouraging for what they tell us about the state of our culture. It seems that even in a moment of dwindling seriousness in the public sphere, we are still able to make, and appreciate, art that explores what Hegel thought it should: "the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit."

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