

Melancholia

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

The oftentimes celebrated, sometimes scorned Danish writer-director Lars von Trier has been churning out grim tales of human frailty and moral depravity for almost 20 years. From the ethereal beauty of *Breaking the Waves* and the minimalist wisdom of *Dogville* to the sadomasochistic howls of *Antichrist*, he never seems happier than when daring audiences to figure out his message and whether the message is worth delivering.

Melancholia is a disturbing tale of personal pain juxtaposed with an eerie end-of-the-world story. The film is divided into two parts. The first focuses on Justine (Kirsten Dunst, a long way from *Spider-Man*), who has just married the sweet and earnest Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) and is ready to party at a ritzy castle reception hosted by her loving sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and Claire's wealthy but grumpy husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland). Von Trier fans would expect this reception to be filled with anger, resentment and enough bile to fill a champagne fountain, but even they may be unprepared for the displays of cruelty conjured up by the wedding guests, who include Justine's distant father (John Hurt), her brittle and bitter mother (Charlotte Rampling) and her inhumane employer (Stellan Skarsgård).

At times von Trier has been able to rein in his contempt for his characters, but here he exhibits little restraint. The wedding reception resembles something out of *Marat/Sade*. But since we don't believe any of these characters to be real, it's hard to care what happens to them.

But we do start to care in the film's second part, which concerns a planet that has been hiding behind our sun since the creation of the universe and is only now appearing and heading straight for Earth. Some, including the science-minded John, believe that the planet will simply pass by, providing quite a show for earthlings. But the sense of doom that permeates the story at this point suggests that a direct hit is more in order—not because that makes for a better ending, but because von Trier seems to believe that we deserve to be destroyed, and in the most violent way

possible.

The second part is as subtle and engaging as the first is overt and ugly. The two sisters' difficult relationship is revealed to be a curious blending of needs and wants. Justine awaits her fate with a stoic sense of inevitability, while Claire longs for the life she has and the even better one she hopes for. The film's second half also reveals von Trier's power with cinematic imagery, from a beautiful shot of an exhausted horse collapsing to various shots of the approaching planet looming in the distance.

Melancholia is a fascinating exercise in extremes, with cruel slaps and loving strokes no more than a few frames apart, just the way von Trier likes it.