

## FILMING THE WORLD'S END. IMAGES OF THE APOCALYPSE IN LARS VON TRIER'S *EPIDEMIC* AND *MELANCHOLIA*

**DANIELLE VERENA KOLLIG**

**UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA**

dk3q@virginia.edu

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Lars von Trier's films *Epidemic* and *Melancholia* with regard to their designs of world demise. It examines whether the apocalyptic images the two films refer to are suggested as a spectacle that is to be enjoyed, or whether world demise appears as an occurrence to unsettle. To that extent, the article inspects the films' settings, their soundtracks, as well as their mise-en-scenes' coloring. It contends that both *Epidemic* and *Melancholia* differ in their designs of world demise as the most definite form of apocalypse. Whereas *Epidemic* draws an image of the end of life on the world as an occurrence that critically reflects on the audience's implicit participation in it, *Melancholia* designs the end of the world as a sublime event that derives beauty out of its musical and visual composition and leaves the audience in a rather passive state of reception. Important in this context becomes the notion of 'audio-visual excess', which proves impossible to be applied to *Epidemic* while being a central element to *Melancholia*.

### KEYWORDS

Lars von Trier, film, Dogme 95, *Epidemic*, *Melancholia*, Wagner, excess.

### RODAR EL FIN DEL MUNDO: IMÁGENES DEL APOCALIPSIS EN *EPIDEMIA* Y *MELANCOLÍA*, DE LARS VON TRIER

### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza dos películas de Lars von Trier, *Epidemia* y *Melancolía*, atendiendo a su concepción del fin del mundo. Examina si las imágenes apocalípticas de ambas películas se presentan como un espectáculo del que se puede disfrutar o si el fin del mundo aparece como un suceso que produce inquietud. Con este propósito, el artículo examina el decorado, la banda sonora, así como el color de la escenografía de ambas películas. El estudio sostiene que *Epidemia* y *Melancolía* presentan distintas concepciones del fin del mundo como la forma más radical de apocalipsis. Mientras que *Epidemia* presenta la extinción de la vida sobre la tierra como un suceso que mueve a la reflexión crítica sobre la participación implícita del público en el proceso, *Melancolía* concibe el fin del mundo como un

acontecimiento sublime que sabe extraer belleza de su composición visual y musical, y deja al espectador sumido en una actitud de recepción más bien pasiva. En este contexto, cobra importancia el concepto de 'exceso audiovisual', que no puede aplicarse al caso de *Epidemia*, mientras que constituye un elemento central en *Melancholia*.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Lars von Trier, cine, Dogma 95, *Epidemia*, *Melancholia*, Wagner, exceso.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lars von Trier's films are as ambiguous and controversial as their creator is. Often located at the intersections of commercial and art house cinema, the Danish producer and director's films are famous for being unpredictable. Mostly, they are flirtations with a large variety of genres. What they have in common, though, is that they locate their characters in dystopian settings in which they create violent or hostile climates, or become their victims. Von Trier's films are often characterized as art house cinema. But they at times differ radically from each other with regard to their designs, their usage of sound and image.

With reference to these aspects of film, I argue that von Trier's design of the apocalypse in his films presents it either as an event contributed to through human interaction or as an enjoyable spectacle that, despite its definite and terminal effect on life nonetheless excludes the audience. The films' designs of audiovisual excess (or the lack thereof) influence the audience's receptive disposition towards the film and therefore towards the end of the world either as a potentially sublime event (in case the apparatus remains hidden as in *Melancholia*) or as an unsettling comment on mankind's potential to create apocalyptic conditions on their own (in case the apparatus is rendered explicit as in *Epidemic*).

## 2. DOGME '95 – FILMMAKING

In 1995, Lars von Trier and a group of filmmaker colleagues issued Dogme '95, a film manifesto that expressed a number of aesthetic rather than political demands. According to Dogme '95, filmmaking under its name was to renounce any technical sources like props and soundtracks that were not

already present at the shooting location<sup>1</sup>. The film's director was not to add any additional materials to the set and work, if possible, with no other light and sound than that which could be found already at the set. Von Trier's manifesto even goes as far as to state that, in case there is not enough light available by the sources already at the location, e.g. a sufficient number of street lights, "the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera" (Trier 1995; taken from the 2002 released DVD *The Kingdom*). Ultimately, however, von Trier broke with those self-imposed rules on film aesthetics. Especially with regard to music, his preference for Wagnerian operas time and again led him to use music as a non-diegetic soundtrack that had to be added to the scene separately, once it had been shot. Nonetheless, the rules and regulations for filmmaking that the manifesto contains have reappeared at least in part in any of his films and have even been presumed by a number of his works, like *Epidemic* (1987), one of the films discussed in this article. At the same time, films like *Epidemic*, despite its reference to a Spartan setting and seemingly amateurish shooting techniques, already introduced a soundtrack that largely draws on Germany's fascination with romanticism, which seems to be at odds with the film's overall design. For example, the film contains a scene in which a young, idealistic and naïve doctor Mesmer, played by von Trier himself, is let down from a helicopter and appears to literally float over the marsh, "sustained by the grand strains of *Tannhaeuser*, his feet brushing grass as he grasps a rope flying a Red Cross flag" (Badley 2010: 31). His 2011 success *Melancholia* resumes and increasingly underlines the director's fascination with Wagner as well as with German history and culture<sup>2</sup>. Both the film's prologue and conclusion feature *Tristan and Isolde's* overture. But whereas the use of Wagner's music underlines *Epidemic's* overall commentary function on the media and their production and representation of disastrous events, of which the apocalypse is probably its most extreme example, this underlining function is hard to justify in the case of *Melancholia*. Von Trier has expressed his dissatisfaction with his 2011 film: "I am confused now and feel guilty. What have I done? Is it 'exit

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<sup>1</sup> "1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in ... 2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot)" (Trier 2002).

<sup>2</sup> With reference to the intricate relationship between Wagnerian music and German nationalism, Kira Thurman emphasizes how "Germans have proudly linked their musical accomplishments to their national character for centuries. This relationship between music and German national identity [...] also influenced German political life in the twentieth century" (Thurman 2012: 608).

Trier?' I cling to the hope that there may be a bone splinter amid all the cream that may, after all, crack a fragile tooth..." (Trier 2011).

As this article outlines, *Melancholia* is indeed significantly different from Lars von Trier's other projects, regarding their filmic means, compositions, and especially with regard to their visual designs and soundtracks. Nonetheless, elements from Dogme '95 can still be found in an otherwise 'seamless' film like *Melancholia*<sup>3</sup>. A comparative analysis of *Epidemic*'s and *Melancholia*'s filming techniques illustrates the structural and technical differences between them. At the same time, however, both films share a very delicate subject matter. Both provide visions of the world's end and at the same time discuss questions of power, use and abuse of power, the gendered implications therein, and how the filmed end of the world terminates these debates and issues in each contribution. Because of their structural differences, however, *Epidemic* and *Melancholia* position their audience differently with regard to facing an event that is the most definite end to all happenings that mankind is able to imagine.

### 3. EPIDEMIC (1987)

Lars von Trier's second feature-length film after *Element of Crime* is a highly experimental film that introduces the viewer to topics such as character manipulation through politics of power, sickness and diseases as apocalyptic motifs in the context of European and especially German cultural history, and gender politics. But the film is also a comment on filmmaking itself and reflects on how filmmaking and the film industry participate in the construction of power, gendered narratives of victory and defeat, and its potentially 'infective' effects on the audiences. In other words, von Trier's *Epidemic* tells a story while simultaneously commenting on that same action, investigating which socio-cultural and political factors influence the outcome of storytelling. To accomplish these ambitions, the film, in a manner reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theater, renders explicit its distinction between plot and story<sup>4</sup>. With Kristin Thompson, I will distinguish

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Badley contends that "[s]ince Dogme, Trier's aesthetic choices, themes, and aims have followed this logic – even when displaying a brazenly un-Dogmatic artifice" (Badley 2010: 5).

<sup>4</sup> Angelos Koutsourakis discovers that both Brecht's theory of epic theater and Lars von Trier's filmmaking inspired by Dogme '95 entertains the separation between plot and commentary on the plot. Like Brecht in theater as well as in his only released film *Kuhle Wampe*, von Trier "shows a preference for a less stylized acting which incorporates filmic and extra-filmic responses" (Koutsourakis 2012: 53).

between plot and story in the sense that “plot is the actual presentation of events in the film, while story is the mental reconstruction by the spectator of these events in their ‘real’, chronological order” (Thompson 1986: 131). Lars von Trier's *Epidemic* refers to this distinction and renders it explicit. It fosters a dialogue between the mise-en-scene's characters and the audience. The screen receives a twofold meaning through this dialogue. For one, there is the material screen that serves as the projection layer for the camera's recordings. But in *Epidemic*, it is also a metaphor that comments on the plot's permeability and its ability to address the audience. Using another reference to Brecht and his reference to the actors' demonstrative and hence ‘gestic’<sup>5</sup> role performance, von Trier's actors also establish a dialogue with the viewer through the screen, in that their acting becomes similarly demonstrative. Therefore, both Brecht and von Trier “turn the actor into a demonstrator and an observer at the same time” (Koutsourakis 2012: 53) who perform actions that belong to drama (theater) and plot (film) while at the same time they comment on the sociopolitical and cultural implications their performances have.

*Epidemic's* plot introduces two filmmaker friends (played by von Trier himself and director colleague Niels Vørsel) who have written the script for a film called *The Cop and the Whore*, which they are supposed to submit to their producer Claes within five days. Just when they want to print out the script, a computer virus destroys the only existing copy. Pressed for time, the duo eventually decides to develop ideas for an entirely new script, the more so as the screenwriter reveals that he had not been that happy with it in the first place: “I'd like if we... if we... wrote something more dynamic” (Lars von Trier in *Epidemic*). A close-up on the typewriter replacing the computer for the new script reveals the new project's name: *Epidemic*. From then on, the trademark name ‘Epidemic’ will appear throughout the entire film at the screen's upper left corner, thereby underlining that the audience is not supposed to view von Trier's film about a script in the making as a completed film itself, but rather as a product that is the outcome of technical arrangements. In other words, the red trademark logo continuously reminds the audience that they are watching a screenwriter and a director at work<sup>6</sup>. Immediately following,

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<sup>5</sup> “Oughtn't the actor then to try to make the man he is representing understandable? Not so much the man as what takes place. What I mean is: if I choose to see Richard III I don't want to feel myself to be Richard III, but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility” (Brecht 2001: 27).

<sup>6</sup> Linda Badley calls the logo “[a]n indelible stain” which “marks the site of infection and indicts both the medium and the act of creation” (Badley 2010: 29).

however, a camera pan reveals rooms with thrashed furniture, spilled wine and blood on the walls, in an otherwise empty apartment. The imageries' dystopian, even apocalyptic allusions – there is blood on the walls, furniture is thrown all over the place, but there are no other signs that the apartment is still inhabited – are confirmed by a non-diegetic voice-over narrator who comments from 'outside' on the film's plot which, for the viewer, is yet to evolve. The audience is informed about an uncanny coincidence: while the filmmakers are developing a story about an epidemic's outbreak in a dystopian Europe some time in the near future, another epidemic is developing in the world the writers live in, having come to an outbreak the moment they were to introduce the new plot to their producer via a female medium under hypnosis:

A fateful coincidence can often be so sinister and fantastic in character that one is tempted to draw apparently logical but actually unfounded conclusions. During the course of five days the manuscript of *Epidemic* was created and written down in and around this apartment. That an actual epidemic was approaching during these five days, and that its awful outbreak would coincide with completion of the script was one of these coincidences.

*Epidemic's* frame plot shows von Trier and Vørsel researching for their new script. They visit the Danish national archives and talk to friends well-read in European history in order to learn about historic plagues in Europe's and especially in Germany's past. Caroline Bainbridge refers to the significance Germany has for von Trier because of its critical history: "for von Trier, Germany has functioned as a kind of microcosm for Europe, signaling the way the country functions as a metaphor for the circulation of ideological and geopolitical values" (Bainbridge 2007: 37). The history of plagues in Europe and Germany's special role in it constitutes *Epidemic's* topical basis<sup>7</sup>. The plot referring to its film-within-the-film introduces an idealistic physician named Dr. Mesmer, who "sets out on a single-handed mission to stop the plague from spreading, unwittingly spreading it as he goes" (Bainbridge 2007: 6). Dr. Mesmer, also played by Lars von Trier himself, embodies an ironic failure. In a city that has isolated itself from the outside world, for fear of a plague that is in the process of killing indiscriminately all forms of human

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<sup>7</sup> Caroline Bainbridge notes how "in *Epidemic*, the vision of a future outbreak of the plague is deeply rooted in the mythological and historical accounts of various plague periods in Europe" (Bainbridge 2004: 334 f.).

life<sup>8</sup>, Mesmer insists on leaving his allegedly secure spot in the doctors' chambers and heads for the countryside to spread what he believes is the cure to the unnamed disease. Ironically, though, he spreads the plague, as he unknowingly carries the source of outbreak in his doctor's bag: "Without his idealism ... there would not be a problem" (*Epidemic*). On his journey, he encounters mass graves, infected swamplands, and deserted places – but it is his medical bag that contains the virus, hence it is him who creates all these places in the first place. For Caroline Bainbridge, the figure of Dr. Mesmer reflects the tragedy of European and especially German failure, the failure of an idealist intellectual tradition used and abused by politics:

Dr. Mesmer's foray beyond the city walls is structured as a direct flouting of the demand of the newly instated government made up of medics, which is set up to imply that there is a real danger inherent in Mesmer's plan. Of course, by the end of the film, we realize that this is actually little more than a narrative conceit, in that the medics withhold the vital information that the disease [...] is presently confined to the city and has not yet reached the countryside (Bainbridge 2004: 359).

Mesmer misinterprets the warnings of his fellow doctors who create the myth of a plague outside of the city in future Europe, so that they can become political rulers. The plague – which, interestingly enough, will never be further named or defined, an aspect of the film which I will come back to later – exists, but it does not advance the film's action by itself. What is more important is that the plague becomes the central motif for the doctors' narrative, which is to ensure their political and economic power. As the undefined threat falls into the field of medical discourse, the doctor is recognised for his expert knowledge and, hence, gains competence and power. The plague's handling and management, then, has a pragmatic and political function for physicians – excluding young Doctor Mesmer. Similarly, there is a significant tragic element in the filmmakers' project when they compose their script around a failed idealist. The irony in the film-within is mirrored in the frame as well: when the script written by the filmmakers is presented to their producer Claes over a dinner that takes place at the manuscript's due date, this very presentation is the catalyst for an outbreak of a disease similar to that shown in the film-within-the-film<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The film-within-the film's doctors mention to Mesmer that he would not have a chance to stay alive once he leaves the city: "The air is infected, the soil, and the water".

<sup>9</sup> The film thus demonstrates the collision between plot and story, or, in other words, the immersion of the film-within-the-film's story into its very own framing, using the figure of the

With reference to Kristin Thompson's distinction between plot and narrative mentioned above, one can say that Lars von Trier's film contains two plots, which the audience, for almost the entire film's duration, must "work between the frame and the inner fantasy footage" (Badley 2010: 33). Ultimately however, in a harrowing scene featuring a hypnotized medium, the plots around the filmmakers' composition of the script as well as around Doctor Mesmer's journey forcefully collapse into one cataclysm that signifies the plague's outbreak not only in Mesmer's future Europe, but also in the filmmaker's *and* the viewers' present. Not only is this viewing experience psychically haunting, but also compels viewers to reflect upon cinema's potential to manipulate an audience and to create visions of horror in their minds before they actually appear on the screen. *Epidemic* is thus one of von Trier's earliest examples of his vision on film as being a malicious 'mind game:' "While in the framing story Lars and Niels dig data from archives, talk to historians, and discuss their progress, the story of the plague unfolds in an embedded narrative" (Simons 2008: 7). Horror is lurking behind every corner of the filmed houses and hospital wards, which become more and more prominent in their role as buildings and establishments limiting movement, while providing the illusion of a safe space. Hospitals, especially, suggest being a safe harbor from diseases. Yet, at the same time, their laboratories are full of them. Remarkably, it is during the fourth day of the scriptwriting process that the plague sheds the forecast of its actual arrival into present-day Europe: "As the days pass, a mysterious illness makes its presence felt. The two suffer headaches and stomach problems. Back in Copenhagen, Vørsel ends up in the hospital where he has a growth removed" (Stevenson 2002: 47). Again, there is a correspondence between the frame plot and the plot revolving around Doctor Mesmer which once more enables *Epidemic* to function as socio-cultural commentary on the administration of medical and political power as well as on the filmmaking business. Just as the doctors' ward in the film-within-the-film is the initial center of a yet contained disease, so is the hospital in which Niels is undergoing medical treatment and where Lars discovers yet contained traces of the plague that will eventually break out on a larger scale the next day. That, however, also implies that the very process of filmmaking is a process that does not comment from a politically immune position on socio-cultural events, but is part of the power

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hypnotized medium as a literal mediator between the two narrative layers: "The effect of the hypnosis is to bring the fictional plague into the reality of the writers' world as the female medium of the hypnotic moment contracts the plague herself and infects everyone in the room" (Bainbridge 2004: 355).



mechanisms that *Epidemic's* plot around Mesmer allegedly criticizes. Portrayed as a literally infectious film, *Epidemic* is presented as being part of the problem, not of the solution. The further the scriptwriters von Trier and Vørsel proceed in their research, the further they develop a history of plagues and pandemics in Europe from the fourteenth century up to World War II, and the further the plague that will eventually terminate all human life in their present times develops: "On the third day, the bacteria was incubated in the soil. The city could be divided into zones by degree of infection. Modern transportation helped spread the bacteria quickly. In just a few hours, the gems reached new parts of the globe" (voice-over narrator in *Epidemic*). Filmmaking is not just a report on past infectious diseases, filmmaking is also the catalyst for further, rapidly spreading diseases.

When the disease finally erupts in the filmmakers' present and infects everyone involved at the dinner party, this happens through a female medium hypnotized by her boss Hamann, a professional hypnotist also in real life, in order to "enter *Epidemic*":

He hypnotes her 'into the film' and back to the Middle Ages to experience the Black Death on the streets of 1340s London (or Paris – some uncertainty arises over which city he actually sends her back to ...). She sees corpses – one of them a child's – swarmed by rats [...] they begin to bite her as she sobs and screams (Stevenson 2002: 48).

The following scene of the hypnotized screams is the one where the film-within-the-film and the framing plot ultimately converge, therewith sealing the outbreak of the disease not only in the script but also in contemporary Europe. This scene is as startling as it is unsettling, and until today it raises the question whether Gitte Lind, who played the hypnotized medium, was indeed hypnotized and thus expressed authentic agony and terror, or whether she was just "the world's best actress" (Stevenson 2002: 51).

Bainbridge identifies *Epidemic* as being part of a film trilogy – Lars von Trier's *Europa*-trilogy – that is inherently masculine, but which designs this very masculinity as an endangered discourse: "The 'masculine' *Europa* trilogy is marked by a concern with film aesthetics, technical mastery, cinema history and the failure of masculine identity" (Bainbridge 2004: 354). Masculinity in von Trier's *Europa*-trilogy is always destructive. For the Danish director, Germany is a pivotal example for that very notion of destructive idealism. During their scriptwriting process, von Trier and Vørsel collect stories about plagues that took place in central Europe and thus also in Germany and note how plagues have been interpreted by the owners of political power, in order to banish those groups within the population they deemed unwanted.

*Epidemic* establishes historical crossroads, in that it “strive[s] towards a dystopian notion of the future, yet the versions of the future set out here demand an interrogation of the past” (Bainbridge 2007: 25). This reworking of the past catastrophes and diseases in Europe and in Germany manifests itself in the exploration of the plague not only as a medical metaphor, but also as a political one. The third day of their scriptwriting, von Trier and Vørsel travel to the German city of Cologne and visit a friend, Udo (played by the German actor Udo Kier) whose mother has just died and told him on her deathbed about his birth during a phosphor bomb attack on the city and about the apocalyptic events shortly after her escape from the hospital at the lake called ‘Aachener Weiher’: “She told me then that she saw ... she heard first a noise and then she saw a lot of people. And they were all under the water because the only thing they were instinctively doing was to go under the water, because of this phosphor” (Udo’s monologue in *Epidemic*).

When Udo, towards the end of his story, starts to cry, this not only expresses the mourning for his dead mother, but also the capitulation before a largely traumatic historical event that can easily be referred to as a pest itself and which remains the source for Germany’s historical trauma.

The ‘participating’ viewer, however, is not granted to sit back and watch a demonstration of a past ridden by plagues. Similarly, the viewer is not invited to simply consume Udo’s narrative of apocalyptic imageries. *Epidemic* challenges the viewer and continuously reminds him or her that film as a socio-cultural and political institution is also a part of the problem and not only of the solution. Consequently, the viewer of apocalyptic visions represented through film must take position and examine whether the plague presented isn’t already politically exploited, and whether he or she isn’t already influenced by a political discourse using apocalyptic imageries as metaphors. This is where Dogme 95’s aesthetics becomes effective, in that it prevents the viewer from getting involved with the plots presented on the screen. Lars von Trier’s film *Epidemic* is deliberately held in an amateurish-looking style. It fulfills the technical requirements expressed in Dogme ‘95 that no artificial lighting should be used, and that no props should be carried to the set in case they cannot already be found in its environment from the start.

Differing from Dogme ‘95’s requirements regarding the film’s soundtrack, however, is von Trier’s use of Wagnerian music. In *Epidemic* the audience hears the overture to Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser*. The use of a dense orchestral music appears in stark contrast to the actors’ often awkward appearance in front of the camera. Therefore, it does not encourage identification with the characters and the plot. Instead, Mesmer’s awkward

landing on the ground, to the sound of Wagner's opera, emphasizes the contrast to majestic music and the irony in Mesmer's futile efforts to bring salvation to the world when in fact he is contributing to its demise. But irony in von Trier's films dealing with the end of the world does not always sharpen the viewer's wits. Marta Figlerowicz identifies a reverse effect in his 2011 film *Melancholia*<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. MELANCHOLIA (2011)

Lars von Trier's films often flirt with theater either in structure, design, or both. *Epidemic* is divided into five parts, each part in the film simulating an act in a drama. Each part refers to the timespan of a day, up until the fifth day on which the disease breaks out also in the filmmakers' present. *Melancholia* consists of a prologue and two parts named after the film's two main characters, the sisters Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg).

Part one, titled *Justine*, introduces the sister on her wedding day. Her groom Michael is also a close friend of her boss Jack, who runs an advertisement agency for which Justine is supposed to design a tag line on her own wedding day. During the celebration, Justine relapses into a depressive state, leaves her husband, sleeps with her new colleague Tim and insults her boss. Consequentially, she loses both her husband and her employment on the same night. The next morning, when Claire and Justine go for a ride on their horses, Justine notices that the star Antares, which she had seen clearly the night before, has disappeared.

To the beginning of the film's second part (*Claire*), Justine's condition has worsened to a degree in which she can no longer stay on her own. Claire takes her with her to stay at the castle, much to her husband John's dismay: "She's a bad influence on you and Leo". However, Claire is not too well either. A rogue planet, ironically named Melancholia, has passed Mars and Venus and is on its way towards Earth. Against all assurances by Claire's husband John, who continuously refers to scientific calculations, Melancholia does not pass by Earth, but heads straight toward it. Faced with immediate extinction, Claire panics, but a now surprisingly calm Justine soothes her and her son Leon until literally the very last moment. The last shot shows him, Justine, and Claire sitting in a makeshift wooden hide, on a green lawn, holding each other's hands until the moment when Melancholia crashes into Earth.

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<sup>10</sup> "Soon you're not sure which is more spectacularly funny and pitiable, the characters or their majestic decors" (Figlerowicz 2012: 23).

*Melancholia* features Wagner's music more prominently than *Epidemic*, and its usage in the latter film establishes new nuances in regard to von Trier's earlier work. Not only is the musical score different now – *Tannhäuser's* overture gives way to that of *Tristan and Isolde's*. More importantly, whereas *Epidemic's* use of a Wagnerian tune, albeit violating the rule by Dogme '95 not to use any music other than that applied directly on location, underlines a certain alienation-effect for the audience, von Trier's use of Wagnerian music in *Melancholia* reinforces the film's excesses both in the location's designs and character placements therein. Thus, I want to argue that *Melancholia*, different from *Epidemic*, exercises a certain 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.

Excessive is any material, soundtrack, or plotline that eventually does not contribute to, but distracts from the film's narrative. What Roland Barthes notes as a component of excess in literary texts<sup>11</sup> also holds true for viewing films: excess is the disruption of a story through overabundance of either visual or aural elements in the film, and "the minute a viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning" (Thompson 1986: 132). Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, like *Epidemic*, has two plots that eventually merge towards the film's end. Justine's melancholic and depressed state leads to both her personal and professional life's downfall. Simultaneously, a rogue planet named Melancholia approaches Earth and threatens to collide with it, whereupon it is predicted to erase all life. Significantly, the closer Melancholia gets to Earth, the more Justine's state of mental health improves, whereas her sister Claire becomes ever more desperate and hysteric<sup>12</sup>.

As mentioned above, Wagnerian music is another element that *Epidemic* and *Melancholia* share. In addition to the alienation effect that Wagner's *Tannhäuser* creates when it accompanies Mesmer's journey into the country side, the theme also functions as an audio commentary on the failing master's discourse which again expresses the disastrous consequences of a politicized idealism as well as the aforementioned 'masculine' failure. In *Melancholia*,

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<sup>11</sup> "The *brio* of the text (without which, after all, there is no text) is its *will to bliss*: just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through the constraint of adjectives – which are those doors of language through which the ideological and the imaginary come flowing in" (Barthes 1975: 13 f.).

<sup>12</sup> "The 'Claire' section is a battle in mood between Claire's anxiety, John's certitude and Justine's will to doom" (James 2011: 30).

however, Wagner's overture to *Tristan and Isolde* functions as an aural leitmotif which first appears together with the film's prologue and then reappears throughout the plot. The viewer hears the musical theme mostly when the camera assumes an aerial perspective, showing either the nightly, starlit sky or, from a bird's perspective, the two sisters while horse-back riding through a misty landscape. Thus, whereas Wagnerian music in *Epidemic* encourages the viewer to reflect on the medico-political implications of Mesmer's actions, as well as on those of their origins, in *Melancholia* it serves to suggest a harmony and idyll that only at the end, through the planet's collision with Earth, turns out to be an illusion.

*Epidemic* and *Melancholia* also share the comment on the failure of masculinity, but again the resulting effects on the viewer are different. Mesmer fails because of his misplaced idealism. In turn, John, Claire's husband and a firm believer in science and mathematical probability calculation, fails because of his misplaced pragmatism. Several male characters in *Epidemic* disappear, with their future remaining either unclear or unimportant for the film's plots. Mesmer remains in a meanwhile plague-ridden swampland, and Udo, after having led his scriptwriter friends to the lake where the phosphor bombs had landed, will never again appear in the setting, not even through verbal reference. When John finds out that his scientific calculations have turned out to be wrong, and that *Melancholia* will hit Earth after all, he realizes the failure of the dominant scientific discourse and commits suicide. However, his suicide takes place in a historical and geographical vacuum, whereas *Epidemic* refers to historical and political events in Europe's and especially in Germany's past which the viewer may identify. Similarly, geographical verification in the form of a continuous reference to Denmark and Germany occurs throughout *Epidemic*. On their journey to Cologne, Vørsel announces all major industrial cities the scriptwriter duo passes through, in geographical order. Such temporal and topological attributions are amiss throughout *Melancholia*. In fact, von Trier's film around the planetary apocalypse purports an isolationist filmmaking aesthetics that ultimately leaves the main characters Claire and Justine in nearly complete isolation. Such atmosphere, in turn, contributes to a filmic excess that is in fact contrary to Dogme 95's ambitions.

## 5. THE NUMBING EFFECTS OF EXCESS: LOCATION AND SOUND

Whereas *Epidemic* ends in a cacophony of screams and shattering glasses, with the medium throwing chairs and tables, Niels's wife vomiting blood all over the dining room's wall and Lars dying on the doorstep to the balcony,

*Melancholia's* design of the world's end resembles an indulgence in excess. Roland Barthes writes about excess as a medium's 'obtuse' meaning: "the other meaning, the third, the one 'too many', the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive..." (Barthes 1978: 54). The effect achieved in such cases is the audience's potential numbing: instead of promoting reflection on the effects of a mind-game the film creates as a challenge for the spectators' minds, excess in *Melancholia* invites them to join Justine in her attraction to the nearing apocalypse<sup>13</sup>.

Largely contributive to that effect are *Melancholia's* soundtrack, which I have discussed above, and its mise-en-scene's color design. *Epidemic* displays a minimalist setting that already announces Dogme 95's 'vow of chastity', with the camera additionally filming in black-and-white shots and the lighting coming mostly from sources that the location has already provided from the start. *Melancholia*, in contrast, shows the castle's garden, its golf course and the surrounding woods, rivers, and the nightly sky with the ever approaching rogue planet in oversaturated colors. Especially interesting, in this context, is the film's prologue, which prominently features Wagner's overture to *Tristan and Isolde* musically accompanying a range of shots which feature several key scenes and motifs such as Justine's sad face in a close-up, horses collapsing in extreme slow-motion on the green lawns, or Claire's son Leo – again in extreme slow motion – cutting woods, together with Justine, for their makeshift shelter.

Regarding the props and mise-en-scenes in *Melancholia*, Figlerowicz notices a shift from its locations' grandeur to the smaller, modest, and almost tiny aspects<sup>14</sup>, which reveals a certain comic effectiveness especially during the film's final take:

As *Melancholia* takes over the entire horizon, its size is overwhelming. But cast behind the stick tent and the forest it also looks gorgeous, with the slight overkill of a psychedelic back-to-nature poster. And there is something ridiculous about the notion that you would need such a big planet to kill three persons in a stick hut (Figlerowicz 2012: 26).

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<sup>13</sup> Martha Figlerowicz observes how Justine's attraction to the rogue planet *Melancholia* assumes erotic and at times even ecstatic connotations and describes how "Justine spreads herself out on a riverbank entirely naked. She basks in *Melancholia's* glow, masturbating" (Figlerowicz 2012: 24).

<sup>14</sup> "As Claire tries to drive over to the village for help, she keeps getting into ever smaller vehicles. She goes from a huge SUV in which she completely disappears to a rickety golf cart that can hardly hold both her and her son" (Figlerowicz 2012: 26).

Filmic excess is not only apparent when there is an overabundance of lighting, coloring, props, or soundtrack which distracts from the narrative and redirects the audience's attention to the film's materiality. These same effects can also be achieved by overemphasizing size and splendor. At the film's very beginning, a camera captures the brightly lit castle, which is full of people impatiently waiting for Justine and her groom to arrive, from a low-angle position, thereby emphasizing the size and luxuriousness of the building. The overabundance of lights outside of the brightly illuminated castle – a component standing in stark contrast to Dogme '95's instructions on lighting on the set<sup>15</sup> – finds its continuity when the camera follows Justine and her groom Michael to the saloon in which the wedding banquet takes place. As requested by Dogme '95, von Trier's camera is still hand-held in these shots in an interior location. But it no longer positions the viewer in a certain state of unease, which had been an important effect to be achieved for the director of *Epidemic*<sup>16</sup>. When *Melancholia* appears on the sky, it is usually at twilight, with dark blue being the most dominant color in the panorama shots. The more emphasis is placed on the surroundings, the lesser people appear on screen. Ultimately, there are only Justine and Claire left, as well as John and Leo. After John has committed suicide, the film centers entirely on the two sisters, with Leo being limited to uttering a few notes of concern to Justine: "I'm afraid that planet will hit us anyway ... Dad said there's nothing to do and nowhere to hide".

When Justine comforts Leo and persuades him to build a 'magic cave' out of wooden sticks that, in her story to him, provides efficient shelter from the collision, this moment marks the recognition of a failed 'masculine' power domain which John's unconditional belief in science represented. Similar to *Epidemic*, *Melancholia* presents a shift from a domain of failed 'masculine' power to a feminine discourse that toys with the supernatural. In the case of *Epidemic*, the supernatural is embodied by the hypnotized medium, and in *Melancholia*, this is accomplished through Justine's depressed state of mind, which again enables her to become clairvoyant. From the start, Justine knows

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<sup>15</sup> Dogme '95's third regulation determines that "[t]he camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)" (Trier 2002).

<sup>16</sup> In this context, also Caroline Bainbridge mentions von Trier's fascination with Brecht and how borrows from the playwright's conception of the epic theater with regard to presumed spectator effects: "Instead of being encouraged to identify unconsciously with protagonists and dramatic events, spectators are required to become stirred up by what they see, responding in ways that question mainstream cultural practices and the ideological values that underpin them" (Bainbridge 2007: 5).

that *Melancholia* will collide with the Earth, and thus she is John's intellectual antagonist from the beginning. Lars von Trier's fascination with the supernatural in several of his films is widely known. Carline Bainbridge observes how "[t]he importance of hypnosis [...] running through these films relates to the temporal suspension that is evoked by their quality of timelessness" (Bainbridge 2007: 36). In *Epidemic*, this 'timeless' pairs with the apocalypse in the film's final scenes, when the medium under hypnosis lives through the script, contracts the disease and passes it on to the present day population. The scriptwriters' research into different time periods of plagues and totalitarian political systems metaphorically describable as plagues – in the medium's screams that introduce the all-annihilating epidemic, all these historical events become nullified within the final cataclysm. Justine's supernatural knowledge – when she expresses that "life is only on Earth. And not for long" – also relates directly to the apocalyptic event. But whereas *Epidemic's* apocalyptic visions leave the viewer with a significant amount of discomfort – for what exactly is this very epidemic which erases life on Earth as we know it?, the film itself does not provide any definite references –, *Melancholia* presents a vision of the world's end to its audience. Being of a cosmological nature, this end is incomprehensible to the human mind and so grandiose in its design that the viewer can do nothing but lean back and watch. *Melancholia's* opulent design suggests exactly this.

The visual excess achieved through *Melancholia's* intensely blue coloring and the recurring Wagnerian music distracts the viewer from the characters' psychological conditions and redirects all attention towards the apocalypse as a spectacle that is deemed beautiful and not horrific at all, in contrast to *Epidemic's* ending. What is more, Lars von Trier's second film of the *Europa* trilogy leaves the spectator with several unanswered questions regarding the spectator's involvement in the cataclysmic events. For, if filmmaking is a part of the dominant cultural discourse and hence of a potentially contagious environment, and if the plots in *Epidemic* are indeed that permeable, is then the consumer of the film infected with the disease as well? In other words, *Epidemic* addresses the viewer and inquires what his or her role is within an apocalyptic procedure as that presented on the screen.

'Timelessness' in *Melancholia*, in contrast, is already evident from the beginning. Its prologue already presumes the events that are yet to come, and its mise-en-scene is already so far removed from all historical and social contexts that the supernatural announcement of the apocalypse is no longer an end to time and history. This does not push the spectator into any discourse around and within the plot, but rather isolates him or her from it: "Planetary, human, and tinier-than-human dramas, tableaux and musical



phrases, are rhymed so deftly and insistently that their collective melancholy [...] seems almost (if never just) a joke” (Figlerowicz 2012: 21). Since this joke involves the facing of the apocalypse, it is most certainly deadly.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Although Lars von Trier's film *Epidemic* plays within a narrower set of location and mostly takes place within the confines of Niels' apartment, it nonetheless sustains a dialogue with its historic and local surrounding. The film “takes place in a Europe of the near distant future that is on the cusp of a disastrous plague, though scenes of the horror transpiring take place off camera and we essentially see only barren rooms and empty fields” (Stevenson 2002: 44). The exceptions are Lars' and Niels' excursions into the Danish national archives to research about past plagues on the first day and their trip to Germany on the third day. Although the latter excursion does not stand in any thematic relation to the script being written as the basis for the film-within-the-film<sup>17</sup>, it nonetheless contributes to the construction of *Epidemic's* historical embedding.

Psychologically, its audience gets acquainted with a net of cataclysmic events and experiences a majority of them, especially the final, apocalyptic one, as being man-made. Thus, *Epidemic* concludes with an appeal to the audience to stay alert, and to remember that the apocalypse might as well be the result out of our own hands.

This very reflective layer is amiss in von Trier's *Melancholia*. The sparse design of *Epidemic* gives way to opulence in colors, soundtrack, and settings, and the focus on a closed circuit of only three characters at the end of all days may easily lead the audience to lean back and enjoy the apocalypse as a film spectacle. Certainly, that does not turn the film into a cultural event of lesser importance. But it veils the ironic possibility that, while today's societies are full with predictions of the world's end, we might as well have long since started to contribute to it through our own civilizations' creations.

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Stevenson assumes that “[t]he trip is apparently just an excuse to get away from their work room in Copenhagen and get some fresh ideas for the script” (Stevenson 2002: 47).

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