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MORE FROM THE SUNSET:

LARS VON TRIER AND “BIPOLAR CINEMA”

“I’ve always demanded more from the sunset.” So confides Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), the harrowed heroine of Danish director Lars Von Trier’s two-part opus *Nymphomaniac*. More colors, more intensity, a bigger high, a more blistering peak: this is the drive and the downfall of Von Trier’s women, who, by this compulsive pursuit, are inevitably burned up, burnt out. All three women experience similarly volatile emotional journeys: *Dancer in the Dark*’s Selma (Björk), a sweet-hearted, distractible factory worker, dreams of a world that bursts into song and dance and raucous color like her favorite classic musicals before her degenerative eye disease makes the stage go dark. *Melancholia*’s Justine (Kirsten Dunst) plunges from the cake- and rug-cutting of a dream wedding to pitch-black, hopeless catatonia. *Nymphomaniac*’s Joe, who we’re first introduced to as a laconic youth (Stacy Martin), fights against existential numbness throughout her life by seeking out constant orgasmic release in increasingly risky ways, a compulsive itch-scratching that ultimately ruins her life. What comes up must go down for these women, a hallmark of Von Trier’s dark fairy tales.

The acts of profane illogic, the breaks from reality, the rapid-cycling mood swings, the high heights and then the dead-eyed anhedonia – these qualities apply to Von Trier’s woeful leading ladies and to the style and rhythm of the films themselves, making

his oeuvre a solid starting point for the development of a conception of “bipolar cinema,” a concept coined by David Coleman in his book “The Bipolar Express: Manic Depression and the Movies.” Coleman articulates “bipolar cinema” as a three-pronged umbrella concept – there are films that center on bipolar disorder, films created by those with bipolar disorder and films that evoke the qualities of manic-depressive episodes in their narrative strategies. Von Trier squarely belongs in the third category, offering a nuanced and clear-eyed visual representation of the experience of the condition’s manic upswings and depressive lows. Due to this expressionistic approach, Von Trier not only offers fully realized heroines with complex psychological profiles but also allows the audience to embark on their emotional journey on an intimate level through his moving storytelling. Von Trier expresses his themes not only explicitly in his screenplays but also through the use of such tools as visual metaphor, recurring motifs, thoughtful camerawork and overall evocative mise-en-scene. His films, with these hyper-connections and frequent tonal shifts, themselves operate like the bipolar mind.

Von Trier is no stranger to the ravages of mental illness, and his explorations of the theme are, by his own admission, intentional. A longtime sufferer from depression, he shared with the press that he uses the filmmaking “to get out of bed” – his depressive episodes would cause him to avoid eye contact with interviewers at festivals and sequester himself from the public for long stretches of time.¹ Von Trier was first inspired to write *Melancholia* after advice from his therapist that he create a filmic meditation on

¹ Coleman, David. *The Bipolar Express: Manic Depression and the Movies*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Print. p. 303-304.

his experience of grief; the film joins *Nymphomaniac* and *Antichrist* in a trilogy he dubs the Depression Trilogy for its heavy commitment to the theme, with *Dancer in the Dark*² belonging to the Golden Heart Trilogy of women facing depressing circumstances and maintaining their dogged positivity. His films explicitly examine one side of the manic-depressive spectrum closely; however, Von Trier depicts the havoc of hypomania as well, whether intentionally or not. The result is a clutch of films that offer expressionist portraits of the suffering bipolar disorder causes in those affected by subjecting audiences to a cinematic approximation of its whiplash effect. His cinematic experiences thus succeed in being transformative emotional experiences; they also foster a sense of empathy in neurotypical audiences and recognition in those who have experienced similar mental health struggles.

PREMONITIONS OF CATASTROPHE

This dynamic is first established by the moody, metaphorical musical interludes that open all three films, introducing their universe by instilling a lingering sense of dread typical of the disorder according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-IV.² *Dancer in the Dark* opens the curtains on its tragedy through a profoundly unsettling depiction of the visual experience of going blind, Selma's ultimate fate. The overture is scored with sumptuous horns and the swirls of color are pleasing, feeling perfectly at home in *Fantasia*. However, in light of the fact that the experience of macular degeneration begins with your vision being blurred by a smudged hodgepodge of color (as described by sufferers), the opening takes on a darker tone. The film's

² "Bipolar and Related Disorders." Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. American Psychiatric Association, Web.

overarching symbolism speaks to joy and its snuffing out – Selma idolizes the hyperactive visual kinetics of musical theatre, but she is progressively unable to experience them. She is slowly becoming, at least in one facet, dead to the world.

The fact that the film sets the audience up for her ultimate loss of a pleasurable sense directly conforms to the anhedonic nature of bipolar disorder; the sense of its inevitability does as well, as those suffering from manic depression report their expectation of the cyclical return of their absence of feeling. Selma understands that the arrival of her fate, being hereditary, is only a matter of time, and we as an audience join her in the countdown. The film's perpetual mood is one of dread, even during the rambunctious musical numbers (which themselves inevitably end in Selma breaking machinery and endangering herself in her carelessness). The worst is constantly breathing down our necks.

Melancholia is similar in its upfront, Cassandra-esque nature, as our first shot of Justine directly informs us of the end of the world that arrives at the denouement of the film. Within the shot, Justine is uncannily immobile while dead birds rain down out of the sky behind her; the stillness is agonizing. Imagery of Justine that ensues features her in a crucified pose surrounded by billowing winged insects and a shot of her raising her hands, a half-smile on her face, as electric beams of light connect her fingertips to the ether. The loss of her life is imminent, yet she is calm, even comforted. This is in keeping with the bipolar depressive's ruminating, doomsday-ready acceptance of the worst; after all, Von Trier was directly inspired to write the film after his therapist prodded him to explore how those suffering from clinical pessimism of this nature often receive disasters with a sense of serenity. Once again, Von Trier intends us to begin the

film with the knowledge that the worst is headed our way – all we can do is sit back and wait for disaster to strike.

Nymphomaniac's setup echoes its grim conclusion by somewhat subtler means; while its significance is undetectable on one's first watch, it still successfully sets up the film's prevailing mood. *Nymphomaniac*, which ends with some nasty business involving the urination on Gainsbourg's character by her betrayer, begins with the suggestive trickling of water, a somewhat off-putting but deft instance of symmetrical foreshadowing on the part of the director. The camera goes on to glide around alleyways until finally arriving on a tableau of defeat: Joe lies on the concrete, beaten, humiliated and alone. Once the kindly Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) discovers her, the film goes on to function almost entirely in flashback; of course, the conclusion of the tale she recounts is already evident, allowing the audience to understand that all of the moments of comfort and happiness that visit Joe are to be short-lived. This anticipation of the bleak is quintessentially Von Trier, who is quoted as saying that "some things may be thrilling precisely because we know what's going to happen, but not how they will happen." It is also a hallmark symptom of catastrophizing in mood disorders; the afflicted are always sure of the "what," even if the how is "how" is unclear.

HYPOMANIA

According to the DSM-IV, among the symptoms of hypomania and mania are the afflicted feeling an extreme sense of elation or euphoria, having delusions that one's day-to-day is operationally larger-than-life, and making rapid, seemingly unrelated connections

between concepts.³ *Dancer in the Dark*'s spontaneous musical numbers are exuberant explosions of dizzy feeling: colors become more vivid, quotidian machine noises become a techno symphony and the co-worker/dancers surrounding Selma adore her as much as she adores them. The world is ecstatic, idyllic and just as it should be; suffering is a million miles away, a common belief of the manic. Selma's world snaps into a hyperdrive that is instantly dropped, however, once reality sets in; the reality segments of the film instead take place under downcast, depressing Washington skies, shot in a drab near-sepia with little enchantment to be found. Selma is no hyper-charismatic performer, as she is in her dreamland; in her drama classes, she is limp as *The Sound of Music*'s Maria, struggling with her blocking as her vision slowly goes. Selma's world is a jagged line graph: she soars to the high heights of elation in her elaborate fantasy worlds before plummeting back down to her oppressive existence.

Melancholia is a film fond of portraying its lead in shots that aestheticize Justine's suffering in an operatic way, vaulting her to the level of a work of art or icon – a sort of visual grandiosity, if you will. Towards the beginning of the film, she strikes a Jesus pose; several moments later, she is Ophelia in the waters, replete with flowers. This sense that her experience of existential ennui is larger-than-life, overshadowing all things, is visually embodied by the planet Melancholia itself, as we see shots of it slowly but surely dwarfing Earth. In a hypomanic or mixed state, to quote Pearl S. Buck, “a touch is a blow...a misfortune is a tragedy...and failure is death.”⁴ Her ambivalence, her

³ "Bipolar and Related Disorders." Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. American Psychiatric Association, Web.

⁴ "Pearl S. Buck Quotes." Pearl S. Buck Quotes (Author of The Good Earth). Goodreads. Web.

catatonia, her doubts and her fears – all manifest in the shape of an all-eclipsing, world-destroying rock floating through space on a direct path, coincidentally, towards the side of the Earth occupied by her stately house in the country. Von Trier’s choice of artistic, religious and celestial symbolism in this film clearly evokes the experience of bipolar delusion as Justine’s inner emotional turmoil inflates to staggering proportions.

Nymphomaniac is creatively structured around the tangential, often wildly off-topic connections made by Seligman and Joe as they discuss her past. Religion, art history, philosophy, mathematics, music, and even fly-fishing are looped into their conversation, often connected by a completely tenuous thread. This is one of the film’s strengths as a propulsive framing device, but it often evokes the kind of scattered thinking typical of someone in the throes of hypomania; the two leapfrog from discussions of cake forks to gun-shaped tea stains with utter confidence that their statement will resolve itself in a Grand Point. Hypomania and creativity of thought and rhetoric are well documented as linked, leading to many of people with bipolar disorder entering the arts and producing a large volume of work; the creativity of Seligman’s allusions, metaphors and parables therefore completely conforms to the symptom. (This does not always mean his digressions lead somewhere insightful, however; “I think this was one of your weakest digressions,” Joe frankly replies to one of his harder sells.)

DEPRESSION

Of course, then comes the downswing, wherein our heroines are hit with the immobilization and spiritual exhaustion typical of the cycle of manic depression. Von Trier’s representative motif of this exhaustion is, consistently, the bed – after all, when

people hit an emotional wall, a universally relatable impulse is to cocoon oneself in one's sheets to insulate oneself against one's inner anguish. The bed becomes a running visual theme of Von Trier's throughout the films, linked to the characters' lowest moments of despair. In *Dancer in the Dark*, the significant bed is Selma's flimsy prison cell cot, on which she is detained before execution. Von Trier shoots her with shaky handheld camera as she lay weeping on the cot, the shot a claustrophobic close-up as she peers out from behind her fidgeting hands. We are given a voyeuristic look of this woman's last moments, experiencing the last creature comfort she will in her life – the ability to lie down and rest.

Justine's prison in *Melancholia*, however, is her wedding, wherein she is confined by the pasted-on smile she is forced into by her relatives, whom she tries desperately to escape; once again, the bed appears as a visual motif tied closely to the character's pitch-black mood. One of the first indicators of the character's depression comes when she is able to sneak away from the festivities and cuddle up in bed away from guests' eyes, mountains of frothy wedding dress still imprisoning her. This is shot in claustrophobic close-up as well – the bride can truly never escape someone's prying gaze, even if it is that of the camera. She attempts to describe her emotional state to her sister Claire (frequent Von Trier collaborator Charlotte Gainsbourg) when discovered: "I'm trudging through this gray woolly yarn, it's clinging to my legs, it's really heavy to drag along..."; later on in the film, she must be physically dragged from her bed and towards a bath, her emotional catatonia is so extreme. This is again shot voyeuristically as the camera bobs behind Claire's back, peering over her shoulder at Justine as the bride lies with the responsiveness of a corpse.

Nymphomaniac's second half opens with Joe's legs sticking out from under her comforter, despondent over the fact that her ability to feel sexual sensation has mysteriously disappeared in the middle of her intercourse with Jérôme (Shia LeBeouf); the film then transitions to the kind of extreme close-up of her affectless face characteristic of Von Trier. This loss of one of her five senses directly hearkens back to Selma's loss of eyesight and inability to watch her cherished Hollywood musicals: both women cannot take pleasure in their driving forces and primary sources of joy due to this deterioration, which echoes depressives' hallmark inability to enjoy what once gave them pleasure. (It's also worth noting that alternating between hypersexuality and loss of interest in sex – the film's driving theme – is a prominent symptom of bipolar disorder.) In a Von Trier film, the bed is a soporific, immobilizing symbol of all-encompassing anhedonia – it's quicksand from which the characters struggle to escape.

VON TRIER'S BIPOLAR CINEMA

You are sentenced to death for a crime you were coerced to commit. A rogue planet destroys Earth and everyone you love. Everyone you trust winds up betraying and taking advantage of you. With overwhelmingly feel-bad grand finales like these, why is it that people continue to seek out Von Trier's emotionally punishing films? What qualities make his movies so hypnotizing in their bleakness? Is it mass audience masochism, or is there something more at play? Simply put, Von Trier takes his audience to drastic emotional realms many viewers may have not immediately experienced. One leaves his films as cratered as his heroines are, and the collective cathexis shared by the audience as it carries the same emotional weight is a testament to the power of Von Trier's filmmaking. The empathy this

fosters is especially important in today's world, where mental illness is still consistently misunderstood, mischaracterized, stigmatized and demonized in cinema. The source of villains' senseless evil in superhero, horror, and other such genre flicks is consistently indicated to be mental illness, despite the fact that the mentally ill are statistically more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.

A way to approach an understanding of where Von Trier fits in the spectrum of David Coleman's developing theory of "bipolar cinema" is to compare and contrast his films with others that belong under the term's larger umbrella. While it can't definitively be said that his work belongs under the first and second prongs of the umbrella (films centering on and made by bipolar sufferers) as the characters are not explicitly diagnosed and Von Trier is by his own admission unipolar, his work is a clear-cut, stellar example of the third category – movies that, through mise-en-scene and other storytelling techniques, evoke the qualities of the quintessential manic-depressive episode. For the sake of example: David O. Russell's *Silver Linings Playbook* belongs to the first category; *Vertigo*, the second (Alfred Hitchcock purportedly suffered from hereditary manic depression.)⁵

The third category that Von Trier occupies might potentially share the designation with Baz Lurhmann's *Moulin Rouge!*, Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* and, more recently, Rick Alverson's *Entertainment* as films that attempt to expressionistically depict the mental experience of manic depression. As the theory of "bipolar cinema" is still being fleshed out, there is admittedly no definitive

⁵ Coleman, David. *The Bipolar Express: Manic Depression and the Movies*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Print. p. IX.

consensus on its parameters. However, the fact that the theory is being explored at all is an exciting step in the right direction for healthy media portrayal of mental illness, a cause of which Von Trier is decisively leading the charge with his exquisite portraits of women on the edge.