

TIL THE WORLD ENDS

“Earth-shattering” isn’t a phrase you tend to bandy about. But it’s fully applicable to Lars Von Trier’s latest, *Melancholia* – not just because the opening seconds see an asteroid plow into the side of our planet, but because of KIRSTEN DUNST’s cathartic, sublime and utterly heartbreaking performance in its lead role. This is the story of how America’s foremost teen royal became a world-class actress, and left Cannes with one of film’s most prestigious awards. And rightly so.

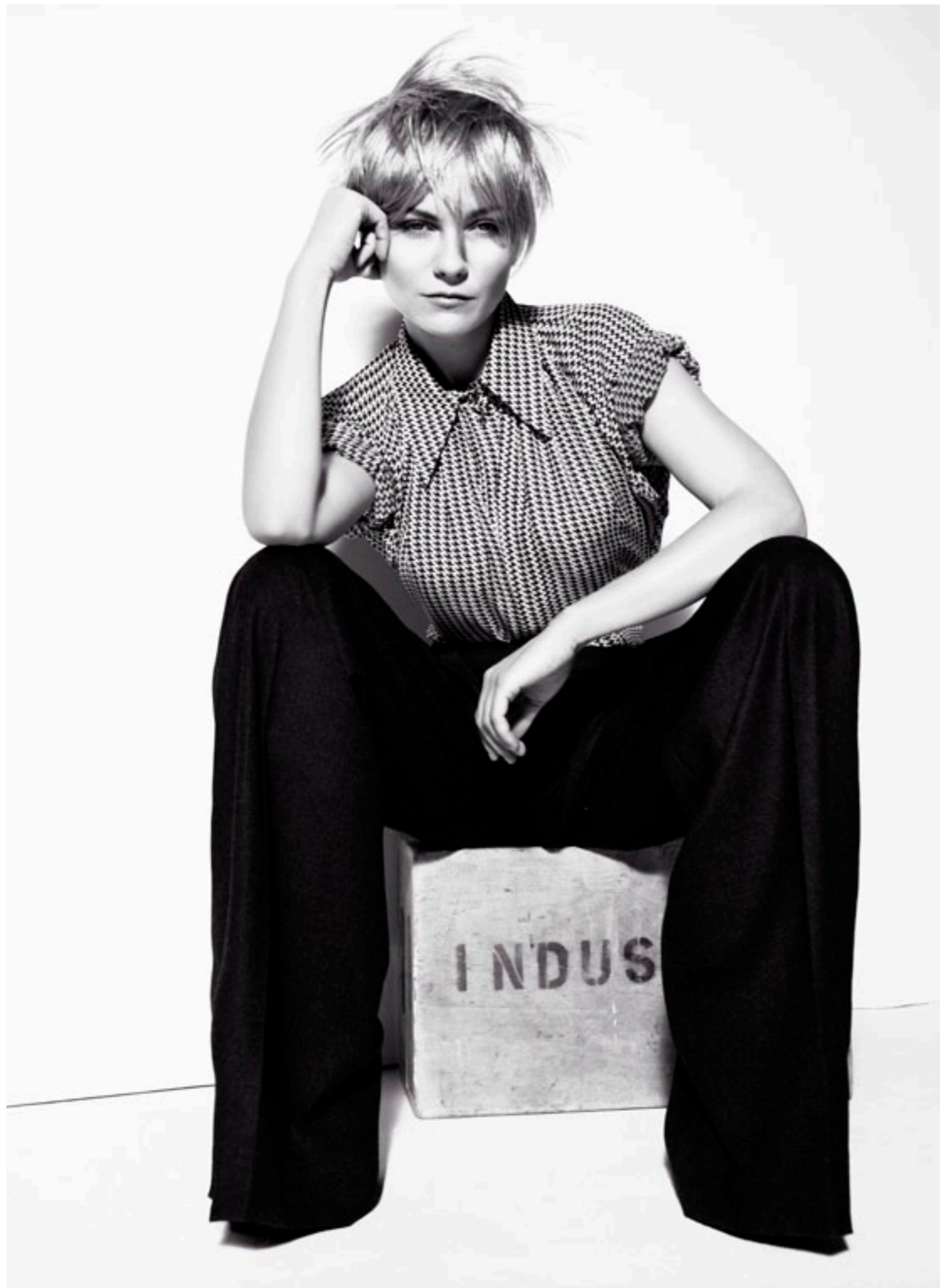
Words Matt Mueller

Photographer Miguel Reveriego *Fashion Editor* Grace Cobb

Kirsten Dunst, we’ve loved you for so long. We loved you as the frozen-in-childhood bloodsucker in *Interview with the Vampire*; as the embodiment of hip, dreamy adolescence in *The Virgin Suicides*; as a heart-wrenchingly sweet, winsome cutie who likes to dance in her underpants and listen to kooky mixtapes (*Bring it On*) and as a divine princess in smashing 18th-century French couture (*Marie Antoinette*). We loved you as Spider-Man’s flame-haired squeeze (particularly because you managed to inject some sex appeal into that odd, upside-down kissing scene), and we’ve loved you off-screen, where you’ve hit headlines for dating co-stars and rock musicians, as well as, according to the tabloids, for having just a little too much fun. But it’s time to forget these many faces of Dunst, because the dark, mesmerising, bizarre *Melancholia*, and her unforgettable, award-winning performance within it, has rocked her world. Not to mention ours. She’s looking pretty calm about it. Gliding into Café Cluny on W.

Jacket with leather detail by HERMÈS, suspender by MYLA, silk stockings by AGENT PROVOCATEUR, brogues by DOLCE & GABBANA and opera length leather gloves by SERMONETTA





12th Street in Manhattan, Dunst appears fresh and nonchalant, as she approaches flashing that charming, slightly snaggle-toothed smile. (She wisely resisted all suggestions to fix it on her way up Hollywood's slippery teen-star pole.) Lending her beauty an imperfect quality, that off-kilter grin is her trademark – one of the many reasons that she's been able to maintain a captivating screen presence for nearly two decades.

She's come straight from the uptown launch of Sofia Coppola's latest collection for Louis Vuitton and is appropriately dressed, both for her good friend's promotional event and the city's steamy June weather, in a blue, summery Louis Vuitton dress with gold strappy sandals. Dunst lives further downtown, in TriBeCa, but suggested this cosy West Village eaterie because it's "mellow and reliable". The table we're seated at shields the actress from most of the café's lunchtime crowd, apart from Matthew Broderick who's sitting at a table opposite. He doesn't bat an eyelid in our direction, and Dunst is equally non-plussed by his presence. "Oh yeah, I see him," she drawls, barely suppressing her disinterest. Celeb spotting when you're with an actual celebrity isn't half as much fun, it must be said.

Dunst is right in the midst of a celebratory surge with her friends, still less than a month off winning Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival for her role in *Melancholia*. For an actress not used to winning prizes (our guess? It'll take pride of place over her MTV Movie Award for Best Kiss in *Spider-Man*), this one's a doozy, and richly deserved for a monumental performance – and testing role – that runs the gamut of human emotion.

Melancholia is a film of two halves. In the first, Dunst's initially cheery Justine slowly unravels at her own wedding party, where she comes across as a spoiled, capricious and ungrateful bride. But the latter half reveals that, several weeks later, Justine has lapsed into a state of virtual catatonia, with depressive-like symptoms that are so severe that she can barely get out of bed, or make it through breakfast without breaking down in desolate floods of tears. Stripped of make-up, her hair unkempt and her face blank and drooping, she seems like a tortured presence from the beyond, doomed to inhabit a world that makes her shudder with disgust. But, as Earth faces

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Armageddon, courtesy of the titular mega-planet heading its way, she achieves a transcendental, cathartic and utterly spine-chilling state of grace. "Whatever that planet represents in the film," muses Dunst, both inspiration for and beneficiary of Von Trier's stunning visual approach, "I connected with it by believing, 'That's where I'm from – I was born on that planet.'"

When they heard she'd won the Cannes trophy, her mother Inez and brother Christian wept. Dunst herself hasn't yet come down from cloud nine. "It was a big deal. It's still a big deal. I keep celebrating!" she beams. "It's such a prestigious award to win and I'm very proud of myself. I've been working in this industry for a long time and it feels good to be awarded something." She was asked to hang around by the festival for the closing-night awards ceremony, although initially she thought she might be picking up something for Von Trier, who had been declared "persona non grata" by Cannes following his truly weird Nazi-sympathising joke-rant at *Melancholia*'s press conference. I happened to be there and, like most in the room that day, knew that Von Trier's verbal diarrhoea was an attempt at Scandinavian humour that went very badly wrong. Dunst's reaction was priceless: she stared at the Danish filmmaker completely agog as he self-destructed inches away from her.

"I was so embarrassed for him and for everything that came out of his mouth," she shudders. "He's someone I care about and to watch your friend slowly crucifying himself... you can't say those things. Even if you think you're being funny, it's very offensive. I was just dying." The night before her Best Actress triumph, Von Trier took Dunst out to dinner along with a few others. "He was like, 'Are you mad at me? Are you mad at me?' I think he wanted me to say everything was alright... He apologised in the way Lars would apologise."

Although the controversy-magnet director has long made a habit of seeking unlikely female-star collaborators – Nicole Kidman, Bryce Dallas Howard, Björk – he and Dunst seem a particularly unusual combination.

Houndstooth blouse, wool wide leg trousers and belt all by GUCCI.

Von Trier approached her after Penelope Cruz dropped out, and [Danish filmmaker] Susanne Bier and [*There Will be Blood* director] Paul Thomas Anderson offered up glowing recommendations. “I owe it to them big time because I don’t think Lars had seen any of my movies,” muses Dunst. “I’m not sure he’d even seen me in *Spider-Man*.” The pair bonded on Skype over their mutual love of Liliana Cavani’s 1974 cult film *The Night Porter*. When he offered her the part, Dunst dashed upstairs to her bedroom and jumped up and down with some visiting friends like a gaggle of shrieking teenagers who’d just been informed their favourite hunky pin-up was about to drop in. “Opportunities like this don’t come around very often. I knew it was a huge deal,” she says.

But Von Trier also comes with a reputation for putting his actresses through the wringer, although Dunst’s mind was laid to rest following heart to hearts with Dallas Howard and Charlotte Gainsbourg, who’d starred in Von Trier’s freakfest *Antichrist* and was coming back for more as Dunst’s sister in *Melancholia*. “She wouldn’t work with him again if she’d had a bad experience... I don’t even know what people perceive ‘put through the wringer’ as – maybe someone who yells at you or pushes you to a point where it doesn’t feel right. But, as an actor, that would just close me down and make me feel less and less willing to participate in the film. I had the complete opposite of anything like that with Lars.”

Preparing on her own prior to arriving in Sweden, once she got there Dunst describes her working relationship with Von Trier as “very free and not stilted in any way... it’s a very quiet set. Everyone who does his films have worked with him for a long time so it’s very familiar – a family atmosphere. And very long takes, intensive hours.”

Both director and star brought powerful personal emotions to the story of *Melancholia*. Von Trier declares that Justine is a manifestation of his own battles with depression, while Dunst revealed in 2008 that she had entered the Cirque Lodge Treatment Center in Utah to be treated for the same illness, partly to dispel tittle-tattle that her stint in the posh rehab facility was for drug and alcohol abuse. Three years on, Dunst pigeonholes her

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depression to a brief “growing” period in her life, rather than something she’d been dealing with for years. “I’m not anywhere near that now,” she explains. “I’m a very positive person, I’m not a depressive personality at all, but there were a succession of things that happened to me personally that helped bring it on – which I can’t really talk about... I think everyone goes through it at some point in their life. It’s just human, right? There are so many facets to depression and if you’re not treated well, it just gets worse and worse. It’s very hard to figure out while you’re in it.” At that point, Dunst abruptly slams the door on the subject. “I’m being brutal but I don’t want to keep talking about it because it just gets handled in the wrong way. Not by you, but by other people who will then feel they can ask me about it...”

Melancholia is filled with gorgeous, striking imagery, including one shot in which Dunst, in her wedding dress, floats down a stream (inspired by John Everett Millais’s painting *Ophelia*). There were deep discussions about how Von Trier planned to handle the film’s nudity too, in particular a scene where Dunst lies outstretched and naked on a riverbank, bathed in an eerie bluish light that gives her body a strange translucence.

“I have to say, if it weren’t for women like Charlotte Rampling, I would never have the bravery to do stuff like that,” she says. Dunst has long looked up to the *Night Porter* star, who plays her bitter, venting mother in *Melancholia*, but admits she could be a slightly intimidating presence on set. They did, however, connect over a book about cats in the wardrobe room. “We both love cats!” giggles Dunst, who once dressed up in her idol’s iconic *Night Porter* look – hat, gloves, braces, topless (although Dunst added a thin body stocking) – for a Halloween bash. Did she tell Rampling? “No! I don’t know why. She knows I’m a big fan already.”

An entire wave of pop-culture consumers have grown up with Dunst in their midst, testament to the actress’s lasting popularity and hardy resilience. Ever since her breakout performance in 1994’s *Interview with*

Jacket with leather detail by HERMÈS, black lace bra by MIMI HOLIDAY



White cotton shirt
by MARC JACOBS
and leather blazer by GILES
Right: Leather blazer
by GILES, bra and knickers
by MYLA, stockings by
AGENT PROVOCATEUR.



the Vampire, she's been – “part of a generation,” she interjects, nodding. “And the younger generation too because of *Spider-Man*.” You can tell it makes Dunst proud, being both significant and a survivor. “I like the fact that my life's documented from early on. That's really, really cool, really special.” So she doesn't cringe at hearing things she's uttered in past interviews repeated back to her? “I was talking about the pictorial documentation rather than the words! That, I don't like so much...”

Of her contemporaries, Dunst has made the most lasting impression journeying from precocious child star to adult actress. She trots out the usual theories about why she's succeeded where so many have failed – staying true to herself, going with her gut instinct, working with good directors and avoiding phonies. “It's an intuitive thing,” she vouches. “You know when someone's phony or when someone's snotty, you know when someone picks projects because their heart's in it or they're doing it for other reasons. I feel the authenticity in certain people and not in others.” There's a bit of luck too in any career, but Dunst's warm, sunny, intensely likeable persona, tinged with enough edginess to stop her being bland, gives her the intangible “star” essence that keeps audiences interested.

Prior to *Melancholia*, the last time we saw Dunst on our screens was in *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, which she made in the UK and followed with a two-year career hiatus (*All Good Things*, an indie she shot with Ryan Gosling shortly after her stay at the Cirque clinic, is still unreleased). She won't subscribe to my choice of the word “burnout”, but does agree that “sometimes I just got tired of it... when you're so successful at a young age, you need to stand back sometimes and look at the career you're having. Earlier in my career, I relied too much on it fulfilling me instead of being fulfilled in an artistic way.” Is she referring to the pressure to stay fresh and current and employable? “It was more about taking a break to do other things that you love. I went to art school for a while... I needed to do something creative that I didn't have to share with everyone else. Because that can be exhausting.”

Born and raised in New Jersey, Dunst has migrated back to the East coast, selling her place in LA and calling New York home for the past couple of years. Both parents still live on the West coast, and she'll often crash with Inez when she's out there, while her brother, who's studying sports management at NYU, lives nearby. Having stayed in the UK for film shoots and previously dated Razorlight frontman Johnny Borrell (her current squeeze is Rilo Kiley drummer Jason Boesel), Dunst has a strong affinity for London too. “If you don't have friends, it's hard,” she says “but now that I've built relationships, I have a much better time.” She usually stays in Hackney in east London, hangs out in “the Cat & Mutton area” and loves J. Sheekey's (“their iced berries are amazing!”), the Covent Garden Hotel (“one of my favourite hotels ever”), and lunch at the Wolseley (“it feels really fancy”).

She was thinking of coming over for Glastonbury, and was also planning a summer trip to Florence with her Rodarte chums Kate and Laura Mulleavy. But she's also waiting – and excited – to see what impact *Melancholia* will have away from the Cannes hothouse and in the real world. None of her family have seen the film yet, with Dunst feeling the need to warn them about the nudity (she even spread the word to her uncle and grandfather in Germany when she stopped over to see them in February on a road trip from Italy to Denmark). “My dad [Klaus] was so sweet. I told him I was naked in the movie and he's like, ‘I trust my daughter and I know you would only do it in a tasteful, artful way.’ Whereas my brother was like, ‘Yeah, whatever Keek... I'll close my eyes.’”

But if *Melancholia*, and the acclaim Von Trier's film has already garnered her, would seem to signify a new phase in Dunst's career of seeking out deeper, darker, more challenging fare, then hold that thought. The 29-year-old hasn't been overcome by an urge to work exclusively in future with tortured European auteurs. “No WAY!” she hoots. “I've never been that kind of actress. Not at all. I hate it when people win awards and then feel like they have to do something different. I'm not an actress that takes herself too seriously at all. I like big movies and I like comedy and I just wanna have a good time now. At least for a while.”

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 FOORD DIGITAL ARTISTRY for MASQUE MEDIA. *Digital* ALEX VERRON at MILK
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Jacket by MARC JACOBS, *bra* by MYLA, *latex skirt* by RUBBER
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