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Cannes 2011: Melancholia - a whimper, then a bang

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Lars von Trier wastes no time topping the world in *Melancholia*, writes *Matt Mueller*. And then, after some ill-judged comments in the press conference about Nazis, the controversial director is promptly banned from the festival.

Yesterday, the Danish director told assembled journalists: "What can I say? I understand Hitler. He did some wrong things, absolutely, but I can see him sitting there in his bunker at the end... I sympathise with him, yes, a little bit". This did not go down well. The director promptly apologised, saying, "If I have hurt someone this morning by the words I said at the press conference, I sincerely apologise. I am not antisemitic or racially prejudiced in any way, nor am I a Nazi."

But then, this morning, he has been made "a persona non grata" by the festival powers that be. Anyway, what of *Melancholia*? About which this farrago really has very little to do with.

At the close of a five-minute prelude of strange, striking imagery — set to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, it features Charlotte Gainsbourg fleeing in super slo-mo, with child in arms, across a putting green while sinking into the turf, and Kirsten Dunst in floaty communion with the atmosphere as dead birds drop from the sky — the Danish button-pusher hurls a gargantuan celestial body into our planet in an art-house take on *Armageddon*.

After enticing us so thrillingly, however, *Melancholia* settles into catatonia. There's something exhilarating about the way von Trier has decided to tell the tale of the destruction of the world on a micro level, through the eyes, actions and ennui of privileged wedding guests on a palatial rural estate. But who knew the end of the world could be so boring?

Melancholia is divided into two chapters, named after two sisters. "Justine" shows Kirsten Dunst turning into the world's most dissatisfied bride, ruining her own wedding party as her unsettled

emotions overwhelm her, and thoroughly annoying the sister (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and grumpy brother-in-law (Kiefer Sutherland) who have paid for everything. If von Trier is trying to make us feel like Gainsbourg in the opening frames, he's successful, but it's a tedious trawl.

The second half — “Claire” — is more of the same, with Dunst mired in an extreme depression that renders her barely able to walk, and the titular planet Sutherland confidently predicts will pass earth dominating the conversation. Then, as it becomes clear that *Melancholia* won't be vacating the galaxy, the film starts to reach a pitch of anxiety that's like von Trier's two-fingered salute to blockbuster film-making, thanks to his ability to manufacture a mood of ominous dread through Claire's rising hysteria and the simple but haunting special effects. Michael Bay, eat your bloated-budget heart out. If only the filling in between had been more substantial.