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Cannes 2011 Day Eight, Nine and Ten: "Melancholia" As Von Trier and Almodovar Disappoint

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Let's dive right in as the festival continues to produce challenging and ambitious movies right through the final days.

MELANCHOLIA ** out of ****

You've already read mountains of coverage about the press conference for Lars Von Trier's new movie. But how was the movie itself? Unlike so many of his films both good and bad, this one wasn't controversial or shocking. If the world was about to end in a few days, how would you spend your final hours. Von Trier oddly chose to spend it with a handful of deeply uninteresting, self-involved rich people on a private estate. A "rogue" planet from outside our solar system (or just "hiding"

behind the sun all these millennia), is on a trajectory to pass right by earth. Scientists say we're safe while many others see disaster in the making. *Melancholia* begins at the end with the planet smashing into our home. The first five or so minutes are filled with some stunning, sharply original images of our destruction set to the music of Wagner. We see a bride running down a field, a mother clutching her son to her chest, the moment of impact itself from a vantage point just past the moon and so on. It's a thrilling, memorable montage that nothing else in the movie comes close to matching. We then flashback

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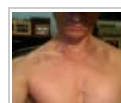
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to a day or two before the planet strikes. Life goes on, in this case an elaborate wedding for Kirsten Dunst arranged by her sister Charlotte Gainsbourg and paid for by her tiresome brother-in-law Keifer Sutherland (whose quite funny in his bitchy little role). Dunst suffers from severe mental depression so she keeps wandering away from the party at crucial moments while her mother and father (Charlotte Rampling and John Hurt) snipe at each other. It's kind of fun but just as the planet comes closer and closer the movie grows more tiresome by the minute. These people aren't unpleasant in any interesting way, just unpleasant, despite excellent actors up and down the line -- Dunst in particular is very good. In some ways, it's the polar opposite of Terrence Malick's far more accomplished *The Tree Of Life*. That movie said every moment of existence is shot through with glory. *Melancholia* says life is miserable, so who cares if the world ends?


THE SKIN I LIVE IN ** out of ****


Usually, reading the book a movie is based on can help me see what attracted the filmmaker to the story and illuminate why he or she made the choices they did. In this case, reading the novel *Mygale* by Thierry Jonquet might have been a disadvantage. I was thrown for a loop by all the shifts in perspective and it may take a second viewing for me to get my bearings on the latest from Pedro Almodovar. It's a serious melodrama filled with noir-ish twists and turns. Antonio Banderas is a plastic surgeon with a beautiful woman kept prisoner in his home while he works on softening her skin ever more. Throw into the mix a maid who is also (unknown to him) Banderas' mother, a thuggish brother, a mentally deranged daughter, sex, violence, rape and numerous flashbacks and you've got a seriously potent mix for thriller. Almodovar made numerous smart changes to the story of the book, making the tale both (slightly) less twisted and definitely more believable. But for me those positive changes can't erase the fact that the plot twists are so rapid and over-the-top that I kept wishing Almodovar would embrace the telenovela-ness of his movies recently rather than play them so straight-faced and serious.


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I think Sean Penn's performance in this oddball comedy is delightful. But I seem to be alone on this one, if the early reviews and reactions of my roommates and other journalists I've bumped into are any indication. But if you like quirky, you'll want to check this out. [Read my full review here.](#)

ICHIMEI AKA HARA-KIRI: DEATH OF A SAMURAI **

Most everyone seems in agreement on the latest film from Takashi Miike. First, it's a great example of a movie that absolutely did not need to be shown in 3-D. Miike used the 3-D to go deep, so rather than pushing the images out into the crowd, it created a window effect where you felt you were peering in. That was nice, but essentially the 3-D was cumbersome and added nothing, certainly nothing to the major fight scene. You watched the movie with your cumbersome glasses and wished you were seeing it in 2-D. Not a good sign. Second, the movie is too long, telling a very simple basic story that should have lasted 80 minutes and dragging it out for two hours. Third, even if it had been short, that wouldn't have dramatically improved this unremarkable story of samurais and revenge and honor and the such. A samurai comes to the house of a major figure and asks for permission to commit suicide. The head says, hold on, let me tell about the last time this happened. And we get a lengthy flashback. Then our hero says, oh yeah, I've got a story of my own and we get another flashback revealing the true story behind the first tale. And then there's a fight. Thin stuff despite the fine acting and production values.

LA CONQUETE/THE CONQUEST ** 1/2

France was agog over the temerity of this movie, a fictional look at the rise to power of the current French President Nicolas Sarkozy. A film about someone when they're still in office? Mon dieu! Everyone seemed to think this was common in the US but a first for France. I pointed out that to my knowledge, the only time a fictional film had been made about a sitting President was Oliver Stone's *W*. I did read Sarkozy's self-serving, dull-ish political tract *Testimony* to get an idea of the man. I needn't have bothered. The hunger for power and the self-serving behavior of politicians is universal. This movie begins on the day Sarkozy is elected to the head of France and flashes back to his years in the Cabinet and slow but sure rise to the top. It probably won't translate for US audiences, even though it's light on its feet and pretty amusing. Denis Podalydes as Sarkozy kept reminding me of the UK's Tony Blair, or a pitbull as he doggedly walked down the hallways of power. And Bernard Le Coq was especially amusing as Jacques Chirac. The score is a major plus as you can tell from this trailer, which includes a few curse words. Politicians!



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OSLO, 31 AUGUST **

Joachim Trier's follow-up to his acclaimed debut *Reprise* is not the breakthrough one hoped for. If anything, it feels like a small step back, though clearly Trier has talent. The movie looks at an addict out on a day pass from his treatment center. He reconnects with old friends, reaches out to his sister, visits the home his parents are selling to pay for his medical care and even goes on a job interview. Anders Danielson Lie is very good and sympathetic as the fragile man who feels his life is slipping away. But the way the story is structured, we feel at the end we've gone virtually nowhere from where we started. That's as depressing as the fear of backsliding that pervades the story. Decently made but unrevealing.

L'EXERCICE DE L'ETAT/THE MINISTER ** 1/2

Another film focused on French politics and another example that the more focused you stay on the particulars of anything (be it French politics, astronomers or the lifestyle of the bonobo ape) the more universal it will be. The always good Olivier Gourmet plays the Minister Of Transportation, a man embattled on all sides as he builds his power base and (of course) has his eyes on ever higher office. Of course, I know nothing about French politics or how ministers work, so it's surprising to see Gourmet helicopter off to the scene of a traffic accident. But I realize that this might be impractical in a country as vast as the US, because it's possible for the Minister of Transportation to arrive at a major traffic accident involving multiple fatalities that therefore he must travel to the accident. Gourmet battles with his staff, other ministers, the media and his fragile family life while getting through the day. Some vivid twists and turns add depth to the film, but ultimately the obvious lesson is that if you're willing to compromise your ethics and the firm issues you believe in, then you'll get ahead. If you're not willing to ditch those core values, then you'll get crushed. Sadly, we already suspected that.

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Movies rated on a four star scale

Arirang no stars out of four

The Artist *** 1/2

Bonsai **

The Conquest/La Conquete ** 1/2

Drive **

The Footnote/Hearat Shulayam *** 1/2

Habemus Papam/We Have A Pope ***

Hanezu No Tsuki * 1/2

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Wu Xia aka Dragon aka Swordsmen ** 1/2

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