Lars von Trier has been accused of misogyny by a select number of short-sighted filmgoers and critics, but a closer look reveals that to be a woeful misinterpretation. Sure, von Trier films like BREAKING THE WAVES, DANCER IN THE DARK, DOGVILLE and especially ANTICHRIST see the director putting women in all manner of psychological and physical peril—but the thing is, he’s always on their side. In a von Trier picture, women are beacons of strength and tragedy, strong forces who valiantly fight for space and sanity in a harsh world run by bumbling, aggressive and weak men who fear their powers.

If you’ve seen ANTICHRIST and are saying, “Yeah, but in that flick Charlotte Gainsbourg cuts off her own clitoris in splattery detail,” and thus are writing my defense off as romanticized hogwash, I urge you to evaluate his body of work, starting with his latest—and perhaps most accomplished—intimate epic, the allegorical sci-fi masterpiece MELANCHOLIA. Playing the Toronto International Film Festival after a typically (for von Trier, who goes out of his way to stir pots) controversial premiere at Cannes earlier this year, MELANCHOLIA is really dual movements of an otherworldly investigation of depression, the apathy of nature and feminine strength.

After a gorgeous, stylized opening sequence (like the death ballet in ANTICHRIST, a film unto itself), we meet our heroine, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), who is struggling, along with her newly minted spouse (Alexander Skarsgård), to make the gala wedding reception put on by her doting, frustrated sister Claire (Gainsbourg again). When they arrive at their destination—a massive golf course/resort owned by her brother-in-law (Kiefer Sutherland)—the audience is treated to an Altman-esque tapestry of encounters with her entire family, including welcome turns by legends John Hurt and Charlotte Rampling as her parents, Skarsgård’s dad Stellan as her sleazy boss and genre icon (and von Trier regular) Udo Kier as a distressed party planner. And though all initially seems the picture of bliss, a bright future paved for the gorgeous, affluent couple, a dark, escalating streak of depression courses through Justine, one that slowly, over the next hour, plays its disastrous hand.

And then comes act two…

Very quickly we learn that a blue planet, dubbed “Melancholia,” is on a collision course with Earth, and as the narrative focus switches from the mentally ill Justine to the strong, put-together Claire, the film becomes an emotional science-fiction drama, yet still functions as an analogy to Justine’s devastating condition. As Claire frets about the potential death of the planet, the dubious future of her darling son and the increasingly taxing state of her sister, her husband tries to talk her off a ledge, optimistically believing the planet will in fact simply pass them by.

To say more would be to over-dissect and in turn spoil von Trier’s delicately constructed, disarming film, one that may not on the surface seem like it belongs in FANGORIA but, like so many more thoughtful films by auteurs like David Cronenberg, Roman Polanski and Darren Aronofsky, deals with the same themes and motifs—of death, the unexpected and of the terrors of our own selves attacking us—as every genre picture does. Only it does it so much more beautifully. With its hypnotic use of opera on the soundtrack (Tristan and Isolde), von Trier’s patented juxtaposition of more immediate, jump-cut-littered *nouvelle vague* techniques with sequences of great, artificial gloss and a staggering collection of Oscar-worthy performances (especially Gainsbourg, who once more proves she is one of the greatest talents of her generation), MELANCHOLIA is pure cinema without peer. And von Trier once again proves himself to be one of history’s greatest audio/visual poets.