



MELANCHOLIA

Disquiet ON THE SET

Angst, anxiety & the apocalypse:

THE YEAR IN FILM

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

“It’s the end of the world. Everyone dies.
It’s rather important, really.”

— *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*’S LIBRARIAN, RUPERT GILES

The end of the world has been depicted — repeatedly — in movies before. But 2011 wasn’t a time for grand heroics, for world saving and self-sacrifice. Instead, we got existential angst. Maybe that sounds a little grim, and sometimes it was. Dead birds fell from the sky; young men, overgrown kids, built flamethrowers for their violent fantasy life; a planet appeared, slipping out from its hiding place behind the sun, and someone named it Melancholia.

I left *Melancholia*, the most astonishing of the year’s apocalyptic visions, with my heart racing

and my breath a little short. Leave it to Lars von Trier to nearly bring on a panic attack. He couldn’t have done it without two superb stars: Charlotte Gainsbourg, as Claire, offers the capable but frightened flip side — the “normal” life, the husband and kids, the practicality — to Kirsten Dunst’s self-destructive, disconnected Justine. Justine cannot get it together, much to the annoyance of her family, who are almost willfully oblivious to the depths of Justine’s depression.

Life on earth is evil, Justine says, as fear sets in around her; Melancholia may pass by Earth, or it may hit. Claire takes a different viewpoint: Life is, and it matters. Life is, until subsumed by Melancholia. Von Trier’s glorious doomsday fable wraps all kinds of fears into its elegant, operatic whole — fear for one’s children, fear of losing oneself, fear of the unknown, fear of death, fear of everything you can’t control. Its bleakness is overwhelming and yet somehow, in all the loss and destruction, there’s a strange peace in his explosive finale.

Where does all this apocalyptic fallout come from? The easy answers: the economy, the uncertainty, the deteriorating belief in various American dreams. (The glib answer: Well, the world’s supposed to end in a few months, right?) In *Take Shelter*, an ordinary husband sees visions of the end, but whether those visions are prophecy or madness, writer-director Jeff Nichols leaves in your hands — until he doesn’t, and the film cracks, a sharp fracture right through the middle of it.

Von Trier’s feminine apocalypse is particularly welcome as a counterpoint to *Bellflower*, in which writer-director Evan Glodell stars as Woodrow,

a directionless post-collegiate fellow whose most productive free time is spent working on a flamethrower or tricking out his car so that the heating system dispenses whiskey (it’s California; who needs heat?). He and his buddy Aiden (Tyler Dawson) figure that when the world ends, they’ll have the best weapons. Woodrow’s world ends in a rather different fashion, in violent upheaval and a rage fantasy so intense and nightmarish it made me feel physically ill. But *Bellflower* isn’t glorifying anything; the film’s super-stylized look, perfect bumbling dialogue and self-destructive characters combine for a sharp critique of a hard-to-pin-down kind of aimless young male rage. Is it self-loathing or a terribly keen eye for what bubbles behind all that too-cool posturing that fuels Glodell’s film? Either way, I can’t get it out of my head, much as I’d like to.

The world almost ends in a London council estate in the underappreciated *Attack the Block*, a scruffy, clever (and raucously fun) flick that dismantles a handful of sci-fi tropes while leaving the fate of the world — or at least the building — in the hands of a gaggle of would-be muggers. Even Kelly Reichardt’s atypical Western, *Meek’s Cutoff*, has a fatalistic quality, one made tangible in the dry, unforgiving Eastern Oregon settings through which the film’s characters slowly traipse. The Willamette Valley is so close, but so far, especially when your guide is unreliable and your party is coming apart under the strain.

Apocalypse aside, if there was one other trend in the movies that most moved me last year, it was one even less expected: family. (Stop rolling your eyes;