

“IT WAS PERFECT”:
DESIRE, CORPOREALITY, AND DENIAL
IN DARREN ARONOFSKY’S *BLACK SWAN*¹

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Abstract

The acquisition of a corporeal sense of self, central to the formation of a balanced identity, is often barred in the Western world by women’s internalization of somatophobia. Drawing on theories of gender and corporeality, my contribution focuses on the representation and implications of eating disorders and deliberate self-harm practices as portrayed in Darren Aronofsky’s feature film *Black Swan* (2010). Protagonist Nina Sayers is rendered as a perfectionist workaholic whose compulsions include scratching and peeling off her skin. Her yearning for professional success is but an extra burden over and above her virginal sexual repression and her claustrophobic family environment.

My main contention is that, beyond the psycho-sexual thriller cliché and the rather obvious metalepses between film and ballet, Aronofsky’s movie can be read as a denunciation of the lethal struggle some women undergo in their desperate attempts to transcend both their corporeality and the negative values attached to the female body, i.e. as that which clutters the mind with hungers and desires, barring them from “perfection.”

Keywords: *Black Swan*, gender, corporeality, somatophobia, transcendence, perfection, obsessive compulsive disorder.

Resumen

La interiorización del odio a lo corporal por parte de algunas mujeres en el mundo occidental a menudo dificulta la adquisición de un sentido corpóreo del yo, tan importante para la formación de una identidad equilibrada. Partiendo de teorías sobre el género y la corporeidad, el artículo se centra en la representación e implicaciones de los desórdenes alimentarios y en los comportamientos auto-lesivos en la película *Cisne negro*, de Darren Aronofsky (2010). La protagonista, Nina Sayers, es una perfeccionista adicta al trabajo que se rasca compulsivamente y se arranca la piel. Su anhelado éxito profesional es una carga añadida a su represión sexual virginal y a su entorno familiar claustrofóbico.

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Mi argumento principal es que, más allá del cliché del *thriller* psicosexual y las obvias metalepsis entre la película y el ballet, el filme de Aronofsky puede interpretarse como una denuncia de la lucha letal a la que algunas mujeres se ven sometidas en sus intentos desesperados por trascender su corporeidad y los valores negativos relacionados con el cuerpo femenino como aquello que ofusca la mente con apetitos y deseos, y que hace imposible que alcancen la “perfección.”

Palabras clave: Cisne negro, género, corporeidad, somatofobia, transcendencia, perfección, trastorno obsesivo compulsivo.

Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010) is one of those films that stir in the spectator a desire to go back to the cinema and watch it again. Its narrative intensity and aesthetic beauty notwithstanding, it was mostly a need to discern which scenes are “real” from those which are products of the protagonist’s disturbed mind that compelled me to watch the film more than once. That this was not just a personal mania was confirmed when the students who had to discuss the film in my M.A. course confessed they had watched certain parts of the movie in slow motion in the (unsatisfied) hope that they would find some clue about the ontological status of those sequences. The merely anecdotal converges here with the premise on which my essay is grounded: as clinical psychologists Danielle Vanier and Russell Searight explain, by challenging the viewer to distinguish between delusion and reality, *Black Swan* successfully creates identification with the protagonist, deftly conveying the troubling experience of those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorder (2012: 5,7).² Fully immersed in the protagonist’s disturbed mental condition, the viewer can vicariously experience (or at least witness with awe) the harmful effects to which an excessive search for perfection may lead.

In this line of thought, my essay presents *Black Swan* as a counter-patriarchal exploration of, and statement on, the potentially lethal consequences brought about by the denial of corporeal demands in which certain women engage, consciously or not, in their pursuit of “perfection.” What they may not realize is that this sense of perfection is based on a centuries-long dualistic heritage that hierarchized and elevated the pure realm of the mind over the lower realm of the body. In other words, my intention is to centre on the analysis of the body as a site of conflict where the paradoxical role of women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may materialize in various

² Obsessive behaviour and self-destruction as a vehicle to achieve self-knowledge are not new in Aronofsky’s filmography. These were central motifs in *Pi: Faith in Chaos* (1998), *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *The Fountain* (2006) and *The Wrestler* (2008).

forms. Thus, I will ground my analysis of the film on theorizations of the body, its needs, its denial, the pull towards transcendence and the sublime, with a focus on the manifestation of repression in the form of compulsive behaviours like eating disorders and deliberate self-harm.

The female body acts as the site of conflict and repository where the psychological strain that underlies Aronofsky’s acclaimed psycho-thriller crystalizes. The film is blatant about the centrality of the protagonist’s mind and unstable sense of identity from the very first sequence, as it starts with a dream that functions as a prolepsis of the whole movie, and full-frame close-ups of her head and troubled facial expression predominate throughout. Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman) is presented from the outset as a frail, nervous young woman with incipient paranoia: already in the initial shots she is disturbed by the view of a woman in the contiguous tube car that she mistakes for a reflection of herself in black clothes (in contrast with her pink and white ones) on the glass door that separates the tube compartments. This sequence is followed by Nina’s walk towards the headquarters of the ballet company where she works as a dancer. Framing is again significant, as the full-frame close-up of her head tracks her at a high pace and is shaky, as if shot by a handheld camera, thus projecting a sense of instability that foreshadows what comes next: the seductive company director, Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) announces the opening of the season with a revision of Tchaikovsky’s ballet *Swan Lake*, in which the two opposing characters, Odette (the White Swan) and Odile (the Black Swan) will be played by the same dancer: Nina Sayers.³ This proves a stressful challenge to Nina, presented in a state of arrested psycho-sexual development caused or exacerbated by her domineering single mother and former ballet dancer Erica (Barbara Hershey), whose unexpected pregnancy ends her career. Erica calls Nina “my sweet girl,” watches her in her sleep, monitors her food intake and bouts of self-harm, and castrates her sexual desire so that she does not divert from her ballet ambition. Nina, whose butterfly wallpapered bedroom is pink, white, and frilly, packed with Teddy bears, plush toys, and dolls, undergoes a process of metamorphosis when she is forced to unearth and integrate the “dark side” of her self in order to successfully perform the role of the sensual, seductive Black Swan. She is aided in this process of liberation and sexual awakening by black-clad Lily (Mila Kunis), a voluptuous, unrestrained new dancer (the woman she saw in the initial tube scene and the perfect cast for the Black Swan) who acts as the mirror image possessing what

³ What Leroy presents as a revision of the ballet (the two swans being played by the same dancer and the tragic ending in which Odette commits suicide as the only way to break the spell and free herself) is in fact the original version as written in its first libretto. Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov later changed the finale to include a happy ending for its St. Petersburg’s première by the Mariinsky Ballet (1895), which has become better-known than the original.

Nina lacks: spontaneity and the relish of bodily pleasures. The force of Nina's repression is so deeply rooted that, instead of integrating both sides of her self, she will suffer from severe disassociation. However, it would be imprecise to state that Nina's conflict is entirely due to the difficulty of performing two contradictory personalities onstage. The character's mental instability is visible before the challenge is posed: apart from the two scenes described above, she is shown forcing herself to vomit when she feels stressed and already suffers from psychogenic excoriation, or "skin picking." As Vanier and Searight (2012) explain, many psychiatrists consider self-mutilation and eating disorders as frequent symptoms of patients suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), while others like Yaryura-Robias *et al.* (1995) consider these behaviours as comorbid, or accompanying, conditions. It is also important to note that extreme perfectionism is a recurrent personality trait in OCD patients.

Much has been written on Aronofsky's film since its release in 2010. Most approaches are psychoanalytic, mainly Lacanian, and focus on the motifs of the mirror and the double (the *doppelgänger*) in the frame of the psycho-thriller (see Christiansen 2011; Efthimiou 2012; España 2012; Fernández Cobo 2015). My approach is cultural, rather than psychoanalytic, and the focus of this essay is an interpretation of Nina's plight as a very graphic metaphor for many contemporary women's inner struggle with the interrelated (or contradictory) notions of perfection and female identity. Following this line of thought, self-injuring bulimic Nina's fragmented psyche, symbolically projected onto the ballet plot, is but an extreme representation of the psychic condition of countless women; it is a condition pertaining to those who have so deeply internalized the patriarchal repression of female bodily demands and impulses that their obsession with perfection leads to literal self-destruction through the annihilation of the body.

It seems obvious that human beings cannot deny our bodies: we may say that we carry them everywhere we go or, rather, that they are inevitably part of us. The centuries-old Greek phrase *καλόςκαι αγαθός*, which associates beauty and goodness (as opposed to evil) seems to corroborate the idea that our looks are a reflection of our identity and values. In this sense, feminist critics like Susan Bordo (2003) and Elizabeth Grosz (1995) coincide in the relevance of the mind/body divide established in Western ideology from Plato's time. Bordo calls this separation the "dualistic heritage," which presents us with an utterly bifurcated view of human existence. In this view, the "lower," or material, body is radically disassociated from the "higher," or spiritual, mind. Plato inaugurated the notion of the body as alien, as the not-self, as "*confinement and limitation* [...] from which the soul, will, or mind struggles to escape" (Bordo 1988: 92). In "Phaedo," Plato pictured the body as "*an epistemological deceiver*, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real" (Bordo 2003: 3), the

enemy and source of confusion that diverted the philosopher’s attention away from thought through its appetites of various kinds and as a threat to his attempts at self-control: “a source of countless distractions by reason of the mere requirement of food” (Bordo 1988: 92). In *The Confessions*, Augustine expressed his concern with the control of lust and sexual drives, as it is the body that pulls man towards sin and therefore needs to be tamed. Indeed, hunger and sexuality have always been intimately connected, as both are seen as bodily temptations and distractions, as the expression of the “basic instincts,” the animal drive for survival. For Descartes, “the body is the brute material envelope for the inner and essential self, the thinking thing; it is ontologically distinct from that inner self, is as mechanical in its operations as a machine, is, indeed, comparable to animal existence” (Bordo 2003: 144). The three philosophers addressed the need to control the body and its desires so as to finally transcend it and learn to “live without it” (Bordo 1988: 93). Among other things, they advocated *men’s* rejection of their bodies as something unworthy and inferior to their own minds and souls.

The mind/body dichotomy was later gendered. As Grosz puts it, “these binary pairs function in lateral alignments, which are cross-correlated with other pairs, particularly the distinction between male and female” (1995: 32). Hence, men came to be associated to the superior realm of the mind, of intellect, of creation, while women were connected to the body due to their biological reproductive role. In Simone de Beauvoir’s terms, women are weighed down by their bodies while men cast themselves as the “inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit” (1957: 146).

Immanuel Kant’s theories on beauty and the sublime support a parallel dualism. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, he explicitly states that the sublime belongs to the realm of men, limiting women to that of beauty: “the fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a beautiful understanding, whereas ours should be a deep understanding, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime” (1960: 78).⁴ In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the sublime as the phenomenon that emerges in the subject when the recognition of frightening natural forces allows the subject to discern his strength of spirit, which “transcends the dominion of nature” (Lintott 2003: 71). In this view, the sublime as the aesthetic judgment of fearsome nature “gives us the opportunity to gain some perspective on life” by showing

⁴ Kant’s association of the sublime with men and beauty with women can be further appreciated in the following passage: “[a] woman is embarrassed little that she does not possess certain high insights, that she is timid, and not fit for serious employment, and so forth; she is beautiful and captivates, and that is enough. On the other hand, she demands all these qualities in a man, and the sublimity of her soul shows itself only in that she knows to treasure these noble qualities so far as they are found in him” (1960: 93-94).

how the worries and concerns of daily life pale in comparison to its magnitude. The self-knowledge provided by experiencing the sublime teaches us that we can transcend our needs as physical beings. As Sheila Lintott argues, “this realization of the extent of our conceptual depth and mental fortitude is the sublime. Furthermore, our capacity for the sublime –entailing as it does intelligence and strength– is grounds for respect and admiration, including, most saliently, self-respect and self-admiration” (2003: 72).

Apart from this philosophical heritage, material and economic factors like the maintenance of the division of labour within the hetero-patriarchal family unit as the cornerstone of capitalist society have substantially contributed to reinforcing the gendered duality. For centuries, then, women were systematically denied full access or claim to the intellectual domain through the imposed connection of the female to biological functions and to the reproduction of the species (see Ortner 1974 and Eisenstein 1984). Thus, while women were inextricably attached to the earth and soil, men cultivated their identities, minds and spirits. The behaviour of eating-disordered women is partly explained by this distinction: it is not the attainment of a beauty ideal that anorexics pursue, but rather the triumph of their will-power over their “animal” bodily needs, which are denied (anorexics’ bodies usually end up being far from beautiful in their extreme thinness). In other words, anorexics’ ultimate goal is to transcend their bodies, while their efforts open a door to self-knowledge through the discovery of their inner strength (see Lintott 2003: 72-73). As Lintott suggests in her essay “Sublime Hunger,” the eating disordered woman focuses not on the improvement of her physical self but “on the ability to overcome the physical self by an act of will, [...] an attempt to verify that her existence transcends the physical aspects with which she is identified by others at every turn” (2003: 74).⁵ Thus, when the anorexic rejects nourishment, she is rejecting the dominance of nature that Western culture has ascribed to her for centuries. In other words, anorexic women may be said to refuse the traditional female role in a move towards the male sphere of culture, the spirit, and the intellect. The flesh is seen as a betrayal of their actual selves, so much so that “the goal of an eating disorder is *complete perfection*-total domination of the will over matter” (Lintott 2003: 76; my emphasis). Self-starvation thus allows them not only to be proud of their will-power but also to transcend corporeality in a move towards the Kantian notion of the sublime. As Lintott contends, “via the sublime a woman is assured that her value as a person transcends her value as an imperfect and limited physical being; her confidence that she is free and worthy of respect is stoked” (2003: 80).

⁵ In this respect, Kim Chernin states that an eating disorder is “an illness of self-division and can only be understood through the tragic splitting of body from mind” (1982: 47).

However, acquiring a corporeal sense of self is pivotal in the development of a stable identity. In this sense, anorectics’ urge to disassociate themselves from their bodies or to transfigure into non-corporeal beings evinces the intimate relation between eating disorders and the formation of identity. From the time of Aristotle, who described women as imperfect, defective men, the Western world has been characterized by a strong somatophobic component (Grosz 1994). Every culture undervalues the female body for its natural rhythms and fluids, connecting it to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable, much in the line of Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. As she states: “the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic” (Kristeva 1982: 102). Hence, the denial of corporeality (the flesh: food and sex) as other in order to reach the ideal of spirituality and integrity.

For their part, self-induced vomiting and deliberate self-harm (Nina’s symptoms and rituals) are frequently associated with one another, as both compulsions seem to be different ways of achieving a similar goal, apart from punishing the body: releasing pressure, tension, and energy that has been repressed or contained. Testimonies by women who engage in self-mutilation are highly illustrative in this respect; they feel “immediate relief, as if injected with Valium or something. It helps stop the inner turmoil for a while” (in Mangnall and Yurkovich 2008: 179). One of the interviewees whose account is recorded in Caroline Knapp’s theoretically informed memoirs *Why Women Want* explains the feeling in the following terms:

It’s as though my whole body is so swollen up that it’s about to burst, literally about to explode, and the only way to relieve that feeling is to cut. Bleed it out. [...] I think cutting is a lot like throwing up. The compulsion is huge – just to get rid of it, get rid of whatever the hell you’re feeling because it’s unbearable. (in Knapp 2003: 172)

Part of this pressure stems from social demands stipulating that female bodies be kept at bay and, if possible, at its minimum expression. As Susie Orbach points out, this may trigger a conflicting relation to corporeality: “The way young women are encouraged to be in their bodies –restrained and contained– is strikingly at odds with the actual physical potential that their bodies hold,” and those who are physically strong or unruly can be perceived as unfeminine (1993: 61). In this sense, the ballet dancer’s body is the epitome of femininity: it is extra thin, light and graceful in its tiptoe spinning and dancing, in its precise, ever-controlled movements on the stage. Yet, these qualities are not spontaneous; they are the product of a controlled diet and strenuous work.

Eating disorders can be considered a traumatic illness since they generate a state of psychological fracture in the individual, the two conflicting parts

struggling against each other for survival or self-destruction. The anorectic, like the bulimic, suffers from a kind of schizophrenia that is frequently represented in literature by means of a split self that speaks through two different, conflicting voices in the character's mind—two voices at war with one another. This psychological condition is represented in *Black Swan* by means of disassociation in Nina's personality. Indeed, we can interpret most of the film as a metaphor for this state of mind—an extended metaphor that obviously takes cue from the plot in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* ballet and the lead dancer's dual role of the innocent, pure, controlled white swan and the seductive, exuberant, uncontrolled black one. Throughout the film, Nina is “torn between her long standing perfectionistic, rigid, and controlled personality, and her director's desire for her to explore a more spontaneous, relaxed side of herself” (Vanier and Searight 2012: 4). As a result, Nina engages in a struggle between her virginal, perfectionistic self and the impulsive, sexual self she has never faced before, which is inside her, and which she must accept as her own and integrate into her personality; but, before that, she must allow it to surface from a hidden recess in her unconscious. In other words: she must break the rigid boundaries of the internalized repression of her bodily impulses; she must fully accept her corporeality.

The destabilizing effects of the change Nina must undergo are set in motion by the proleptic nightmare that opens the film. The music of the *Swan Lake* Prologue is accompanied by a sequence in which a dark-feathered Rothbart casts his spell on an innocent, frightened-looking, white-clad dancer (Nina). The scene shifts from the calm beauty of her dance and extreme close-ups of her tiptoes to chiaroscuro shots when Rothbart takes her in his arms and makes her spin wildly, metaphorically forcing her to give free rein to her instincts. After he exits the frame, she is left on her own, losing feathers from her swan costume, as if damaged and defiled; her facial expression has shifted from fearful to frightened. The fade to black that closes the scene symbolically contrasts with the following all-pink background in the extreme close-up of Nina's sweet-girl smile when she wakes up from her nightmare. The sequence conspicuously foreshadows the eruption of the turmoil contained in the dancer's unconscious.

Nina's difficulties in dealing with stress are manifest from the moment she induces her vomit to release tension before the audition and after moments of heightened anxiety or distress.⁶ The same applies to her pattern of delusional self-injury. According to Vanier and Searight, “obsessive-compulsive disorder, characterized by a repetitive pattern of intrusive thoughts that are briefly quelled

⁶ That this habit is also part of an eating disorder is suggested when Nina refuses to eat a portion of the elaborated cake Erica takes home to celebrate Nina's cast as the Swan Queen.

by engaging in some ritualistic action, has historically, and is currently, classified as an anxiety disorder” (2012: 4). As they point out, while most OCD patients show insight into their condition and recognize that the obsessions are irrational, there are a small number of atypically psychotic OCD patients with delusions, most commonly suffering from schizophrenia. That this is clearly Nina’s case is shown from the moment, when, during her official introduction as the new leading dancer in the company, she takes refuge in the toilet and picks the skin of a cuticle only to end up pulling the skin of her whole finger. Blood stains the washbasin, but the spectator realizes seconds later that Nina’s finger is fine and the skin-pulling scene was just a hallucination. The rapid juxtaposition of subjective shots from Nina’s point of view and objective close-up shots of the skin being pulled off her finger places the viewers in an uncertain position: on the one hand, they are forced to share her delusion while, on the other, the confusing ontological status of her acts and visions is further enhanced, heightening in the spectator the tension that Nina seems to release through her bouts of self-injury. Besides, Nina’s self-aggression may be read as an outlet to lose (or loose) control by a character who is always too self-controlled, displaying an excess of restraint that cannot be sustained for good.

As the plot progresses, the blurring of hallucination and fact escalates. In the sequence where Nina visits Beth Macintyre (Winona Ryder) in the hospital for the second time, the viewer beholds astonished how Beth cuts her own face with a nail file in a frantic montage of subjective and objective shots. Nina takes the file from Beth’s grasp to prevent further damage, but the scene is succeeded by a shot where Beth’s face has turned into Nina’s and she is still cutting holes in her face with the file. To the viewer’s (and Nina’s) dismay, the equivocal status of the sequence is further reinforced as, in her frightened escape, Nina realizes that she is holding the nail file in her blood-stained hand. The scene is highly significant: Nina had Beth as a role model and aspired to reach her level of “perfection.” Beth’s role as Nina’s *doppelgänger* highlights her obsession with unattainable perfection. Thus, the image of Beth’s suicidal and self-injuring attitude while shouting that she is “nothing” rather than “perfect” forebodes Nina’s own self-destructive drive and leaves her in a state of shock metaphorized by her mental vision of her self-cutting double.

Nina’s psychotic phase is sustained in the following sequence: she arrives home only to see the superimposed image of Beth and her double covered in blood in the kitchen, washes blood off her hands, induces her vomit, and is attracted by screams to Erica’s room, where all the drawings of Nina’s face are moaning and shouting “sweet girl” in terrified grins. The sequence climaxes when black feathers start growing out of Nina’s skin. The fact that subjective shots of the drawings first and of the feathers afterwards are followed by objective shots of Nina pulling the screaming drawings off the wall and pulling out one feather, which she looks at with swan-like blood-red eyes, makes the

viewer see what Nina is seeing; yet, rather than limit the delusion to her own perception (as would happen if it were only conveyed through subjective shots) and provide the spectator with a knowledgeable superior position, he/she is led to perceive Nina's delusion as real/factual through the objective shots that include Nina's figure in them. The sequence does not inform the viewer, by means of its form, that it is all a delusion. Here, I believe, lies the key to Aronofsky's success in making the viewer share Nina's anxiety and paranoia.

Nevertheless, other scenes visually establish the acts of self-aggression as the struggle between the two opposed sides of Nina's personality. This is clearly the case when Nina tries to masturbate in the bathtub and, after noticing some blood in the water, starts cutting her fingernails in front of the bathroom mirror. Subjective shots of this activity, nervously and hastily performed, are followed by a shot of the mirror reflecting Nina's face with a perverse, wicked smile and stare, marking the moment when she cuts her fingertip on purpose, only to return to her usual fearful, sweet-girl look in the mirror. This sequence presents the fight for domination between the castrated self that follows her mother's orders and tries to stop self-aggression, and the dark impulse within that leads Nina to self-destruction.

Nina's mother and the curtailing of the dancer's sexuality are linked throughout the film. There is a sense of growing claustrophobia that Nina experiences at home. However, Erica's presence extends beyond their shared apartment. Nina's cell phone rings throughout the movie –it is always "mom" on the phone's pink screen backdrop, and a fragment of *Swan Lake* music as a ringtone. If Nina does not answer the phone, mom persists in calling. There is a tightly ordered, self-contained universe that does not allow outsiders: Erica tries to prevent her daughter even from talking to Lily when the latter calls on her to offer an apology. As Vanier and Searight explain, Aronofsky effectively conveys Minuchin's concept of enmeshment –the absence of individual emotional and even physical boundaries between parent and child– which is a frequent environment for OCD patients as proper individuation is denied. Erica's oppressive, suffocating attitude is a constant in the film: she checks Nina's skin, sometimes as a kind of petty revenge on her daughter (e.g. after Nina says that Erica had no career to leave behind when she got pregnant at the age of twenty-eight); Erica clips Nina's nails, enquires whether Thomas has made any sexual advances towards her daughter, tries to prevent her from going out at night, and sleeps by her bed while she tries to masturbate.

Sex is precisely the outlet Nina has to open and explore in order to release her body from its (technical) constraints, from its containment. Leroy's advice in the initial part of the film is crucial:

In four years, every time you dance, I see you obsess over getting each move exactly right, but I never see you lose yourself. All the

discipline, for what? [Nina: I want to be perfect] Perfection’s not just about control. It’s also about letting go. Surprising the audience, surprising yourself. Transcendence. Very few have it in them. (*Black Swan*)

Leroy’s understanding of transcendence and perfection differ from the traditional approach as he does not advocate the denial of the body and its impulses but rather the opposite. The dancer’s body must not be restrained and controlled, it must be allowed to go wild and speak for itself, to express and transmit rather than merely perform a series of steps and movements; and, for this purpose, the body must be lived through and relished. In other words, its impulses, sexual and otherwise, must be integrated in the self.

When Leroy later tells Nina to “touch [her]self” and “live a little” we attend to Nina’s failed attempt to reach orgasm when she masturbates at home. Liberation will only be possible beyond Erica’s reach, so she goes clubbing with Lily. The club scene is a turning point in the protagonist’s transformation. The moment when Nina decides to take the drink in which Lily has poured a drug, a pill of some sort, so that she can “relax” for a couple of hours, is accompanied by a barely audible fragment of the Prologue music that, at the film’s opening, framed the prolepsis of Rothbart casting his spell on Nina. She is thus accepting to give free rein to the dark shadow, the menacing forces, contained within her. For the first time Nina puts on a black vest, lustfully kisses some men, and dances wild and unrestrained in the club, but not without voices repeating “sweet girl, sweet girl” in her head. It should be added here that music and noise are important for a subtle analysis of *Black Swan*. One of the accompanying sounds that mark important moments in the process of Nina’s mental deterioration is the presence of a female voice that laughs every time the figure of the double (or Nina’s disassociation) appears. It is first heard, though barely audible, as soon as the words “black swan” appear onscreen in the credit sequence, and then in the following occasions: when Nina crosses her double at night in a kind of tunnel; when she responds with a bite to Leroy’s kiss; the first time she enters her mother’s room and looks at her drawings; when she stares at her scratched skin on the tailor-room mirrors; when her reflection on the rehearsal room mirror moves out of synchrony before Nina seems to see Lily making out with Leroy only to mutate into Nina herself making out with Rothbart; in the première before falling from the prince’s arms; and when she is performing the Black Swan act by the end of the film.

The final stage of Nina’s liberation takes place when she finally reaches orgasm with Lily, as the latter performs cunnilingus on her in what turns out to be part of Nina’s delusional experience, or, as Lily puts it, “a lezzie wet dream.” Yet, regardless of its ontological status, the sex scene marks the moment when

Nina starts dressing in dark clothes and asserting herself in the face of Erica and Leroy. She suddenly becomes stronger and self-determined, by metaphorically killing her old “sweet girl” self: as she reaches climax in her delusion, black spots in her skin suggest the growth of swan feathers; Lily’s face then becomes her own, and this dark double smothers her with a pink cushion. The sequence is mirrored and reversed by the end of the movie. Leroy reminds Nina in an intermission of the *Swan Lake* première that “the only person standing in your way is you. It’s time to let her go. Lose yourself.” Then, clad in her White Swan costume and make-up she kills her dark double, whom she delusively believes to be Lily in her Black Swan costume but is really herself. Just as the dark side tries to strangle the white one, the latter’s neck morphs into a swan’s and she stabs the dark double with a mirror shard while shouting: “It is my turn now!” Thus, it is Nina’s white side that takes control by incorporating her black side, symbolized by her murder of its disassociation (of her *doppelgänger*), and assuming her role. Paradoxically enough, it is only by killing herself that she can do it, which shows the force of the effects of her previous repression.

The film’s climax arrives when, in her enraptured interpretation of the Black Swan solo, Nina loosens herself and feels the character’s power of seduction and exuberance so much that, to the viewer’s eyes and her own perception, she literally morphs into the Black Swan, her slender arms becoming wide black-feathered wings. The scene, which could be described as orgasmic for the protagonist’s elated reaction (her heavy breathing and ecstatic facial expression), very graphically presents Nina’s new self, gained only by losing her old one. She has managed to become a new sexualized, physical, and powerful self that relishes the potential of her own body by overcoming her perfectionistic restraint. In this sense, the last sentence the protagonist utters while she is apparently dying in her White Swan costume is highly significant: “I felt it... perfect... It was perfect.” It is the feeling, the experience (“it”) that was perfect, not “I.” The final fade to white that closes the film can be read as the definitive reassertion of her growth and transformation: she does not go into black; rather, darkness is incorporated and assimilated in a self still capable of being white. To put it differently, the film redefines the meaning of “perfection” by including the acceptance and integration of bodily impulses like sexuality rather than their rejection.

To conclude, the film’s montage and editing techniques take the spectator beyond a mere detached representation of a disordered personality. Through its disturbing yet mesmerizing use of sound and music and a deft rapid interplay of subjective and objective shots, the film manages to successfully engage the spectators in Nina’s spiral of delusion and paranoia, forcing them to share her state of escalating anxiety and also the exhilarating relief and relish of the Black Swan solo climax. Furthermore, Aronofsky’s movie can be read as a denunciation of the lethal struggle some women undergo in their desperate

attempts to transcend both their corporeality and the negative values attached to the female body as that which clutters the mind with hungers and desires, barring them from “perfection” –or, in Kantian terms, from the sublime. Like vomiting, self-injury in the movie is rendered as Nina’s means of trying to empty out and escape her body, which is felt as a trap that contains and constrains her true self. In other words, self-injuring behaviour reveals itself as the only way of speaking out loud what cannot be expressed otherwise: the sexual and sensual awakening that haunt her dreams, and which she needs to embody in order to reach a perfect interpretation of the Black Swan –a “perfection” that consists, paradoxically enough, in unleashing what she has always restrained. Nina’s path of self-destruction and eventual death prove to be the inevitable outcome of her excessive corporeal repression.

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