

A View From the Interior

A review of the film



Black Swan

(2010)

Darren Aronofsky (Director)

Reviewed by

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Black Swan, directed by Darren Aronofsky with a screenplay by Mark Heyman, Andrés Heinz, and John McLaughlin, is about a ballet dancer, Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman). The film can be compared with Aronofsky's (2008) *The Wrestler* in that each is a portrait of an individual devoted intensely to an art form that is so punishing to the body that others can scarcely conceive of the pain involved. Like wrestlers, ballerinas will do anything to transform their bodies; for example, they stuff their feet into unsupportive shoes that bear their weight in damaging maneuvers. Like wrestlers, they routinely bruise and bleed.

However, *Black Swan* is more unusual than *The Wrestler*. In addition to its depiction of a seemingly masochistic devotion to a body-based career, its protagonist suffers from mental illness. Much of the film is devoted to depicting Nina's deterioration. She presents a diagnostic conundrum, meeting *some* of the diagnostic criteria for a number of psychological conditions, including schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anorexia, bulimia, dissociative disorder, and major depression. She also suffers from self-mutilation, psychotic episodes, severe distortions of her body sense, suicidality, and a frightening paranoia.

Aronofsky conveys Nina's paranoia with looming shots of others, distorted and grainy images, long shots down corridors with others approaching threateningly, shots in which lines or objects pass through her, and Nina seeing herself superimposed on the faces of others, as well as multiple iterated and reiterated reflections in mirrors and windows. So effective is this cinematography that, for one of us, the paranoid mood persisted; and on the way home from seeing the film on what is normally a friendly subway system, fellow passengers seemed sinister and threatening.

For psychologists, at least, we recommend understanding this film as taking place entirely within the consciousness of Nina. Viewers need to suspend their notion of reality and not take everything the film depicts as literal; much of the film is intended to represent the breaking down of an individual's mind. Viewing the film in this way allows one to make sense of its strange and horrific effects. Aronofsky has made a psychological film that enables ordinary viewers to experience the world of an extremely disturbed person.

Nina lives in an overstuffed apartment with her mother (Barbara Hershey), who gave up her career as a ballet dancer to have Nina. Nina is chosen by the director (Vincent Cassel) of the prestigious New York ballet company in which she works to play the part of the Swan Queen in a new and raw production of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. The role will involve her dancing both the White Swan, pure and exquisite, and the Black Swan, passionate, seductive, and dangerous.

Nina experiences her mother as overbearing and controlling. There are scenes in which the mother tends Nina's skin and nails with scissors and other implements. Although Nina finds her mother's attentions intrusive and insufferable, she makes no friends and does nothing to establish an independent life. When Nina tells her mother that she has been given the part of the Swan Queen, the mother buys her a lavish cake, which Nina rejects.

Nina takes in the director's judgment that she is utterly perfect as the White Swan but that she is far too inhibited to portray the Black Swan. She sees him as becoming convinced that she can play both roles, however, when he kisses her passionately and she bites him. Nina views her understudy, Lily (Mila Kunis), as favored by the director. Though he finds Lily's dancing technically imperfect, he says, "She's not faking it."

The film's plot involves Nina being drawn to Lily, who is warm and friendly to her. Nina's development toward being able to dance the role of the Black Swan includes her going out drinking with Lily one evening, accepting a capsule of ecstasy, being sexually assaulted by a man in a washroom, going back to her apartment, having a terrible fight with her mother, and then having intense sex with Lily. Meanwhile, the viewer is left to ponder how much of this is real and how much is real only in Nina's mind. Does Lily actually exist, or did Nina's mind create Lily to drive Nina harder in competition and performance?

As the first night approaches, pressure mounts. As Nina acquires the necessary personality for the Black Swan, both her body and her mind begin to change. She displays powerful facial expressions of restraint, overcontrol, joy, and tension. She becomes more and more envious of Lily until, in a horrifying scene, Nina kills Lily with shards of broken

glass and drags her bloody body into a toilet. (Toilet bowls appear frequently in the film.) But like the assault in the washroom, the fight with the mother, and the sex scene, the killing is a hallucinated representation of the transformation of Nina's personality into the sexualized and destructive Black Swan.

In the ballet's first night in front of a packed house Nina, dressed as the White Swan, starts dancing the role that is to be her triumph. She sees Lily as her Black Swan alter approach her onstage, and she falls; this is a disaster for a ballerina. Nina then sees her skin becoming scaly, symbolizing the necessary metamorphosis into the Black Swan that she finally achieves, and she begins to grow black feathers. (Aronofsky may have deliberately inserted the idea of a scaly skin as a parallel to Kafka's, 1916/2009, "Metamorphosis," in which Gregor Samsa becomes something entirely different from himself, an insect.)

What should we make of this film? It illustrates psychopathology, making the point that the inner world of people with severe mental disorders can be both inescapable and terrifying. As an allegory for art, the film suggests that creativity is deviant and depends on both sexual seductiveness and murderousness, an idea that is both offensive and inaccurate, although it reflects a certain romantic view of the passionate artist. The film is a character study, depicting Nina as hardworking, goal-oriented, and striving to overcome obstacles. She has discipline and self-restraint, and she generally avoids temptation.

Whereas these character strengths of perseverance and self-regulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) are useful for an artist—indeed, are crucial for success—Nina has overused them so that perseverance has become obsession and self-regulation has become inhibition. She has lost sight of her health, her relationships, and her life. As she approaches the goal of giving a performance on the ballet's first night that will overwhelm the world, her inner life shatters.

One way to see this film is as a portrait of what Winnicott (1965) called a *false self*. Nina's technically exquisite White Swan is a defense. It's an exterior performance constructed to hide an inner self that is too demeaning to bear, let alone allow others to glimpse. Winnicott describes how the etiology of this kind of personality often involves compliance and the construction—as in this film—of a false self (in this case, a self just like the mother). Inside, Nina experiences her true self as not even existing; it is only a meager and conflicted muddle of introjects from others—her mother, the director, her understudy—who have their own interests at heart.

In therapy for such people, Winnicott said that at first the therapist can talk only to the false self. Such talking can go on indefinitely, because that's the role of a false self. Even when this talking is not indefinite, it takes a long time before the false self, in a role of caretaker, can leave and the therapist can communicate directly with the client's true self. Winnicott maintained that there is usually, then, a long period of dependency. Therapists who are unwilling to accept the burden of this dependency should not take on clients who feel they don't really exist and who display to others only false-self performances.

Wrestling is a low artform, whereas ballet is a high artform. In Aronofsky's twin films, wrestling seems to be preferred because damaging aggression takes place only as a performance in the ring. Outside the ring, in the changing room in *The Wrestler*, the wrestlers are friendly and cooperative. They look after each other because next week, and next year, they have to appear in the ring again. In ballet, it's the other way round. In *Black Swan*, although the performances themselves are beautiful, the shared life of the dancers is horribly competitive, rigid, and regimented.

After the credits roll, many psychologists will walk away wondering about Nina's diagnosis. As with many movies, it is not entirely clear since most filmmakers don't take it upon themselves to review the *DSM-IV* during final edits of the script. But, perhaps this will only enhance the discussions of differential diagnoses and debates among mental health professionals, professors, and students, as they reflect on one of the most fascinating cinematic characters of the last decade.

References

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