

# ***BALLET IN THE DARK: A Critical Review of *Black Swan* by Darren Aronofsky***

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Choreographing the life of a ballerina in an ominous psychological thriller is a highly gendered project that takes us to well-established suspects in the patriarchal schema of the ballet world. *Black Swan's* filmmakers created a narrative out of a performance of the classic ballet *Swan Lake*, making it a mimicry of the life of the tragic heroine Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman). The symptomatic pathology of perfectionism haunts the lead character, revealing her manifest hubris while unmasking the systemic social conditioning of women in the ballet system. These women are driven to become tenacious competitors, pleasant and willing objects of a gaze and patronage that are traditionally male-defined and controlled.

Director Darren Aronofsky delivers the storyline via shots of fatalistic surrealist imagery – violent punctures and scars on the dancer's fragile body, mumbling paintings, homoerotic and other hallucinatory effects. The film's camera literally rushes behind the back of the dancer as she careens on her way to stardom that leads to her own self-destruction. We are invited to watch a sordid performance invested in highlighting the belabored beauty of a fledgling principal dancer living and working in the heart of the dog-eat-dog world that is New York City, revealing in this way the horrors of the aesthetics of ballet.

For it is indeed an irony that while the ballet system has traditionally embraced women as dancers, as epitomized by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic

ballerina, ballet was in fact crafted by 15<sup>th</sup> century male aesthetes under the service of the Italian Renaissance courts, and later developed under the patronage of France's Sun King Louis XIV. Its patronage and aesthetics have always been an idealization of the feminine form; and yet, over its 500-year history, it has been traditionally controlled by male impresarios, masters, choreographers and critics.

Contemporary dance research conducted by critics such as Christy Adair in *Women and Dance* (1992), have offered scathing materialist critiques of women's induced subservience in the patriarchal ballet setup, and have referred to ballerinas as "unthinking bodies." But more recent feminisms (Aalten, 1997; Banes, 1998; Fisher, 2007) have attempted to recover a more empowered reading of the ballerina's agency as an active negotiation with the powers-that-be and the dancer's capacity to reclaim power in her chosen artistic domain. Dance historian Jennifer Fisher in her current ethnographic study of the ballerina's image states:

I doubt if anyone suspected that ballet might help me discover aspects of power, art, dedication, and spiritual resonance. For me and other women I have met in my research, ballet symbolized resistance and independence. . . . Despite her history of stereotyping and attacks against her, the ballerina continues to evolve, embracing both her conventionally 'feminine' side and her steely 'macho' physique and resolve—embracing conflict and finding a transcendent power in doing so. (Fisher, 2007, p. 14)

Yet this filmic foray leans more towards laying bare women's victimization in the ballet company, which is portrayed to be a hothouse for brutality that appears nevertheless to be of a pleasurable kind. And as the story unfolds, spectators are shown three women keeping silent about the scheming sexual maneuvers of a virile artistic director (Victor Cassell) in their bid for principal dancer status, showing how women can be easy prey to unethical acts just to climb up the proverbial ladder. Criticized for her fragility and frigidity, Nina acquiesces to the imperious demands of her master, revealing her own dark character as she jockeys for power. Suddenly, Nina finds herself pushed in real life to personify the fierce and fiendish Black Swan.

Further victimized by a wrong sense of self-volition characterized by a kind of fascism over the body, the dancer is also time and again both subject and

object of psychological disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. American culture is known for producing pop culture's infamous anorexic icons, such as Karen Carpenter and the Barbie doll; and the film does not fail to show its own version of this infirmity through the lead dancer's bulimic bouts through self-induced vomiting. On top of this is the high and precise discipline of keeping the body in shape through a daily regimen of ballet workouts in front of a massive studio mirror that acts like an imposingly powerful panopticon, not to mention enduring the pain of having to dance on highly fetishist satin-laced pointe shoes, exclusively worn by the danseuse.

Instead of a solidarity of women—potentially between Nina and her ex-ballerina mother, between Nina and Lily, and between Nina and Beth—we find a fierce clash of motives among the main female characters that is characteristic of women's portrayal in patriarchal narratives. The trope of power is forever disfigured, and possibilities for empowerment are nowhere in sight. We realize with predictability that this filmic formula is, after all, a contemporary Hollywood version of the tragedy that was the classic Swan Lake ballet, which also saw the heroine Odette killing herself after realizing that her prince had fallen in love with her alter ego, the “wrong” girl, the Black Swan.

And while saturated with powerful subtexts and layering of images surrounding the problematique that emerges from the grotesque mix of patriarchy and ballet culture, the film also allows us to ponder how Hollywood-style commodification of the heinous thriller might not be too different from classical ballet's five centuries-old objectification of women's bodies. For in the thriller genre as in ballet, women's bodies at once become objects of romantic idealization on one hand, and of scopophilic brutality on the other.

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