

Body Refractions

Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*

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Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) is a film which blends many different inspirations into one story. It is obvious that Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1877) stands at the center of the narrative structure, yet Aronofsky himself has also indicated a debt to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Double* (1846). In addition to this, there is also a link to Michael Powell's and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948) and by extension H.C. Andersen's "De røde sko" ("The Red Shoes") (1845). What these stories all share, in different variations, is a concern with transformation. The most obvious transformation of the film, is that of Nina Sawyer (Natalie Portman) and her transformation into a woman; this transformation is one which is both generational (in that Nina becomes independent of her mother) and sexual (in that Nina finds her own sexuality).

There is another transformation, however, which is what this article will focus on and that is the transformation Nina attempts to undergo between playing the part of the Swan Queen and being the Swan Queen - expressed by herself as being perfect. I take this question of wanting to be the Swan Queen as a matter of transgressing the boundary between representation and performance. Nina is not satisfied with simply representing the Swan Queen, of appearing to be or pretending to be. Instead she must go beyond appearance and

embrace being. Nina's change into a woman is thus a transformation, while Nina becoming the Swan Queen is not simply a transformation but instead a transgression, a going beyond the realm of art. Nina's most powerful transformation is therefore her transgression of fiction into life, a transgression which is highlighted by the unstable ontological level of Nina's world throughout the film. *Black Swan* questions the notion of representation, framing it as a discussion between mirror and performance; Nina Sawyer wants to be the Black Swan, not just represent it. This leads us to another transgression, which is that of the morph. The morph is the bridge between the mirror and performance, because when Nina finally performs her role, she physically morphs into the unreal being of swan-woman hybrid, thus smashing the mirror of representation.

My understanding of transgression therefore comes primarily from Foucault's reading of Bataille in his "Preface to Transgression," where Foucault points out the centrality of the eye and sight to Bataille's notion of transgression; the eye signals inner experience (Foucault, 1998, p. 81) but at the same time the eye is also the very limit of experience, "the being of the limit" (84). To see and to be are thus central concerns for transgression, just as it is a central concern for *Black Swan*. I take Foucault's point to be that the non-transgressive eye sees the world as image, as a picture which can be controlled and disciplined by the viewing subject. Transgression would therefore be what is at the same time both invisible and beyond the visible; the transgressive eye is what turns inwards in order to be rather than to image. Transgression is therefore the opposition between image and being, in other words between representation and Being.

If we start with the mirror motif it is evident throughout the entire film; there is hardly a scene without one kind of reflecting surface. The mirror motif thus sets up two immediate areas of tension: the *Doppelgänger* motif and the split personality motif. As far as the *Doppelgänger* motif is concerned, this is established early on in the film, when we see Nina looking in the mirror and seeing someone who resembles her (same hairdo) but wearing a black coat rather than Nina's white. There is even a mirrored movement of fixing the hair, which establishes the similarity between the two, something which is played out to its full extreme when Nina gets to the dressing room. All the women there resemble each other and all are

looking in mirrors and fixing their hair the same way as Nina. With the arrival of the new member Lily (Mila Kunis), we see that there is indeed a striking resemblance between the two, physically. This is contrasted by the fact that Lily wears black, while Nina is the only one wearing white out of all the ballerinas. Even the wide shot of the dance room is a blur of gray and black outfits, Nina still wearing the only white outfit.

Lily is immediately set up as the evil Doppelgänger of Nina and Thomas Leroy, the director, praises Lily for her effortlessness and because she is “not faking it.” The rivalry set up between the two is thus a mirroring of the rivalry between Odette and Odile in Tchaikovsky’s ballet. As a contemporary tale, Lily as the black swan functions more as the temptress for white swan Nina, leading Nina to live out fantasies she has never dared act on before - their primary scene together is when Lily goes out with Nina, where they get drunk, do drugs and fuck guys. Lily’s hedonistic pursuits stand in sharp contrast to Nina’s controlled life of no ice cream, no greasy food, living instead in a state of arrested development with her mother, surrounded by baby pink pillows and stuffed animals. The contrast is glaring, almost too obvious. What clinches the Doppelgänger motif is the way it ties in with the motif of the split personality.

Central to the film’s psychological dimension is Nina’s evident instability. We get hints of Nina’s state early on, when she leaves the ballet company the first night and goes home via the subway, through a long, dark corridor. Here a woman is coming toward her and as Nina nervously glances up at the woman as she passes, we see Nina’s face on the strange woman. Immediately, the face changes back but face-changing becomes a running motif from here on. This is tied most clearly to the mirror motif when Nina and Lily end up back at Nina’s apartment. As they enter the door, we see their reflections in a kaleidoscopic mirror, emphasizing their drunken state but certainly also hinting at the slow unhinging of Nina’s mind. As they rush into Nina’s room and lock the door, one of the more controversial scenes of the film occurs as they make love. Shot primarily from Nina’s point of view with reaction shots of her enjoyment of Lily’s cunnilingus, we as spectators are drawn into the scene through close-ups of Lily’s face looking at Nina. Just before Nina’s orgasm, however, Lily’s face changes for a flash into Nina’s.

Post-coital Nina falls asleep and wakes up alone. Rushing to the rehearsal, she meets Lily who denies having spent the night. While the partying at the club is established by Lily as real, their shared sexual relationship is revealed to be a dream, nothing more than a “lezzie wet dream” according to Lily.

The Doppelgänger and the split personality is therefore two sides of the same coin, or perhaps two sides of the same mirror would be more accurate. Lily stands as Nina’s Doppelgänger because she is the mirror image of Nina’s unstable psyche; Lily simply Nina inverted. Lily is what Nina sees as the opposite of herself and so Nina sees only a reflection of her own inner desires, of the one she wishes she could be. This is Bataille’s power of the eye, for Foucault, “[t]he eye, in a philosophy of reflection, derives from its capacity to observe the power of becoming always more interior to itself.” (Foucault, 1998, p. 81) The world of ballet is set up as a world of reflection; mirrors proliferate and are everywhere. The dancers need mirrors to constitute their selves; they need the mirrors for make-up but they also need them for their dance routines, where only the mirror can reveal if their moves are correct. Mirrors are thus the ground of the image for the ballerinas, and perfection for Nina is at first achieved through the mirror, only Thomas demands more than simple representation. This artistic notion traces all the way back to Plato and its restating by M.H. Abrams in his *The Mirror and the Lamp*, where the mirror is the poor craftsman’s inferior reflection of the outside world, whereas the true artist comes from within, from an ideal or a lamp of imagination.

With all this talk of mirrors, doubles and sex, it becomes necessary to pause and discuss the notion of a psychoanalytic reading of *Black Swan*. At first, such a reading seems evident and natural: Nina, whose father we never even hear of, is trying to resolve her unconscious desires and drives by interrogating them and playing them out with her mirror-image double. This is a strategy which is well-known in classical Hollywood cinema such as precisely *The Red Shoes* which I have already pointed out that *Black Swan* draws heavily on. Maybe it is precisely the obviousness of the reading which makes me hesitate before it, for just as it is typical to see the mirror motif in classical Hollywood cinema as representing unconscious desires of the protagonist, it is also typical in film theory to see the screen as a mirror for the spectator’s identification with the protagonist.

How, then, do we identify with Nina as female protagonist? It is not as simple as it may at first appear, in large part due to the unreliability of Nina's point of view. First of all, there is certainly no Oedipal trajectory for us to rely on, for even though Nina does attempt to break free from her mother by embracing her own sexuality (bisexual, it appears), she also realigns herself with her mother's expectations of her in the final performance. We see how Nina's mother sits crying in the audience at Nina's perfect performance, achieving what the mother herself never managed and so symbolically we might argue that Nina becomes what the mother always wanted to be. Hardly the overcoming of the parent which the Oedipal trajectory signifies, nor are we left with a stable world as the film ends.

If we instead turn to the issue of scopophilia, we do indeed find a male sexual fantasy represented on the screen in the sex scene between Nina and Lily; the lesbian sex triggers the desire of the male viewer who wants to be the third party in the scene and is at least allowed in as a voyeuristic participant. But there is a problem with the scopophilic pleasure taken in the sex scene, for as it unfolds Lily's face changes into Nina's in a few flashes, which certainly distantiates us from the pleasure we might be taking in the images unfolding and upon reflection it certainly also disrupts the ease with which we may see the scene as part of our male scopophilic drive. And of course, the tryst is revealed to be precisely a fantasy - it only happened in Nina's drunken mind and the heterosexual sex which evidently took place is not shown, only the disruption of it. When Nina tells her mother that she fucked two men but we never saw that happen, is Nina lying or did we simply not see? Clearly, Nina is at this point a highly unreliable narrator so we cannot actually know and the pleasure we might derive from the sex scene is disrupted by the uncanny transformation of Lily into Nina, refusing a stable character identification and a stable plot.

For these reasons, I see the sex scene as emblematic of the film's larger structure as a house of mirrors. I have already pointed out how mirrors and reflecting surfaces occupy almost all the mise-en-scene of the film, often positioned so that we see two images of Nina. Not only does this indicate in the mise-en-scene the running theme of the entire film, but combined with the morphing faces (the girl's face in the subway corridor changing into Nina's, Lily's face chang-

ing into Nina's, Nina's face changing into Beth's and so forth), we are forced to face the fact that there is no real possibility for identification in this film. Our aligning ourselves with Nina turns out to be just as disturbing and false as taking pleasure in Lily's and Nina's sex scene. It is both necessary and impossible at the same time. The power of the film comes from this transgressive move of demanding and disrupting identification at the same time. The presence of the sex scene, located 69 minutes into the film no less, must be seen as a knowing joke on the desires of the male audience, giving them what they want but at the same time making it disturbing, uncanny and only an embarrassing wet dream.

One might argue, however, that what I have outlined above still follows a psychoanalytic understanding of desire and that even if the sex scene is narratively cast as false and only a dream, this denial still depends on the heightened significance of the scene and the spectator desire which necessarily arises, despite its ambiguous and uncanny overtones. This remains an erotic spectacle meant to convince us of the necessary sex appeal which Thomas constantly insists Nina must feel in order to present it on stage. Yet, as a false spectacle the scene remains an illusion, and "it works only if it persuades *as an illusion*, deludes; and it works only if we can see that it is an illusion, that we were deluded. The gap between the two moments, Lacan proposes, is the location of desire." (Belsey, 1994, p. 155)

Certainly the scene fulfills these two requirements, but like the rest of the film it also insists on something more than mere fantasy. Nina is not satisfied with the fantasy of sex with Lily, her desire for Lily is in essence a metaphoric substitution for Nina's desire to be the Black Swan and so Nina's desire is not based around the psychoanalytic logic of desire as lack or longing. Instead, Nina's concept of desire is a Deleuzian desire, which is founded in ascesis. Nina is nothing if not self-disciplined and locates her sense of authenticity in that very self-discipline. It is this self-discipline which drives her to desire an ability to go beyond representation, to be the Black Swan rather than a mere illusion of the Black Swan. If we briefly contrast illusion with that of realism in W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding as a matter of power, where illusion is power over the spectator and realism is power over the world (Mitchell, 1994, p. 325), this becomes a way for bringing us back to the question of

representation and performance. Nina's Deleuzian desire comes from the discipline to have power over the world, to move beyond mere illusion as the pretense of "this is the way things looks" and instead be able to assert "this is the way things are."

Identification in *Black Swan* is therefore located in desire but this desire is not that of lack or longing. It is instead a relationship of power; Nina's desire for power over the world, the spectator's desire for power over the screen based on the scopophilic urge to control the images but which becomes frustrated by the mirror motif and the banality of the images in front of us, the easy lure into male fantasy which only works as means to take power over the naive (male) spectator. Classical spectator identification becomes a trap which does not enable us to understand or properly explain the way the film structures its affect and through this affect takes control over the spectator, which is exactly its function as a body genre film as Steven Shaviro points out (Shaviro, 2011). As body genre, the film jerks at the spectator's emotions and intends to overpower the spectator, which in essence is the very opposite of classical film identification's powerful spectator in control of the images. Identification in *Black Swan* is replaced with subjection.

It is this subjection of what we can call the affective image which I regard as the transgressive moment of *Black Swan*. If we return to Foucault's and Bataille's notion of transgression, we see that it comes from the argument that transgression breaks through the image to reveal what is behind it, what is truly at stake. I will argue that we can take this in the case of *Black Swan* to be the argument of fantasy versus experience, where the sexual fantasy of Nina is not enough, it is a weak representation of the actual experience of desire which is what Nina has when she is transformed into the Black Swan. This is why Nina's very body undergoes transformations throughout the film but most explicitly during her final scene as the Black Swan. It is in this performance where Nina oversteps mere representation and fantasy and instead becomes the Black Swan in a moment of affective desire, a moment also meant to transgress the boundary between screen and spectator. We as spectators are clearly meant to be not simply shocked and startled by Nina's physical transformation but also to be elated by Nina's virtuoso performance which clearly transcends the mistake in the first act, where she falls to the floor. Furthermore, we are meant to

be jubilantly heartbroken that Nina reaches a perfect performance only to die from this very performance.

It is not an accident that Nina smashes the mirror and kills the phantasmatic Lily with a shard of the mirror. Not only is it symbolic of the way Nina rejects being bullied by her peers but it also shows Nina's desire to smash the mirror of representation and the mirror-boundary between screen and spectator. Nina's desire is to be completely transformed into an affect image, rather than an image of representation, she wants to reach out and touch her audience in the hall and by extension us. That is why this is the emotional high point of the film, visualized by one of the moments when the film transitions to digital effects in order to morph the image beyond its representational means, to go beyond what we as spectators know is possible. There is no attempt made to explain Nina's transformation, nor any attempts made to make the clearly visual effects appear realistic; Nina looks more like a monster or a hybrid than anything like a swan or a human. The morph, then, is the opposite of the mirror in *Black Swan*, the morph is the logic which resists and rejects the mirror logic set up by classical cinema and instead brings with it a new kind of literalism, as Scott Bukatman argues, "this *becomes* that; it *takes* shape." (Bukatman, 2000, p. 240)

Morphing is thereby the ontological basis which enables this transgression beyond the image; enables the transgression because morphing always undoes its own performance. The ontological basis which I am claiming for the morph is therefore a paradoxical ontology, an ontology which is not stable or structured but instead constantly altered and in the process of becoming. It is this ontological becoming of the image which goes beyond representation in morphing and is exactly a *becoming*, a matter of being rather than appearing or resemblance. Nina smashes the mirror in an act of becoming and this becoming is expressed as morphing, it physically alters and transforms Nina from imperfect image-fantasy to perfect image-being. The image of Nina goes beyond mere representation and achieves (ideally) affect in the spectator. It is this affective morphing image which extends beyond mere illusionism into "a breakdown of the spatial boundaries that separate us and reality from the representation, perceptually collapsing the theatrical frame of the stage." (Ndalianis, 2000, p. 265) Morphing insists

that we must accept as perceptually realistic that which is referentially unreal (Ndalianis, 2000, p. 264)

We must of course keep in mind here that the cinematic images we see are illusions, no matter how realistic the digital effects are. No one believes or is expected to believe that Natalie Portman physically transformed, only that the character Nina within the diegesis does physically transform. That is why I insist first of all on the affective nature of the images and second of all point out that the images transform from celluloid to digital. In the first instance of the affective images, it is through affect that the boundaries between spectator/reality and representation are collapsed moving beyond the division which representation itself implies. That is why the affective image comes most to the fore in the digital images, because here we move beyond the idea of sign and referent because there is no profilmic event (everything in front of the camera), which allows us to realize what Deleuze and Guattari point out, that “representations are bodies, too!” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008, p. 95) It is the representational image-body of *Black Swan* which is transformed through the morph and it is this morphing which allows the film’s transgressive move beyond representation and beyond the image-fantasy of classical Hollywood cinema. Therefore, it is also no accident that the morphing which takes place is centered on the body, as the stable body has generally been the basis for a continuous sense of self. Nina, far from a stable self, is also physically fluid and so the representational image-body breaks down, something we can identify as a dominant motif in pretty much all the films which have been identified as post-cinematic by scholars such as Shaviro, Matt Hanson and David Rodowick. By transgressing the representational boundaries and recognizing that such an issue is deeply problematic in a digital age, *Black Swan* joins a growing line of post-cinematic films which may be indicative of a new emerging cinema to take its place next to the movement-image and the time-image; an image we may begin to call the morph-image.

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