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Bodies and Binaries in *Black Swan*

The horror film, like other genres, has its characteristic conventions—a strong female protagonist, a sort of “monster,” gory spectacles, emphasis on sound, and the prominence of sex or sexuality, to name a few. However, genres are also constantly evolving and taking on new subject matter, and this is evident in the 2010 film *Black Swan*. *Black Swan* tells the story of Nina, a professional ballerina who has just landed the role of the Swan Queen in her dance company’s version of *Swan Lake*. Nina perfectly embodies the purity of the White Swan, but she struggles to portray the seductive nature of the Black Swan. The film unfolds Nina’s transformation from the white swan to the black swan while also highlighting the extreme binaries symbolized by the role: vulnerability versus strength and virgin versus whore. *Black Swan* manipulates, and at times refutes, the conventions of the horror genre in order to critique these binaries within a social context. Thus, through its focus on the vulnerable-strong binary of the female body as well as the virgin-whore binary of female sexuality, *Black Swan* establishes itself as a feminist horror. In the following analysis, I will concentrate mostly on Nina’s final two dances to show how the film encourages a feminist reading.

One of the major binaries exhibited in *Black Swan* is the vulnerability of the female body, as shown in the white swan, versus its absolute power and strength, as shown in the black swan. The vulnerability and fragility of the body is stressed through the various pains inflicted on Nina’s body: peeling hangnails that bleed profusely, a worsening series of scratches on her back,

and blistered and beaten ballerina feet. These instances of physical torture on the protagonist allow the audience to see how fragile the female body can be, serving as a visual crescendo that builds up to the final act of pain in the dénouement: Nina's death. At the end of the final act of *Swan Lake*, Nina must jump off of a platform to symbolize the death of the white swan and end the curse at the center of the ballet. However, just before this act, the audience learns that Nina stabbed herself when she hallucinated that she stabbed and killed Lily, the "evil twin" that Nina competes with for the role of Swan Queen. So, when Nina jumps off of the platform and begins to bleed out, she undergoes the ultimate display of vulnerability: the destruction—and resulting death—of the body.

On the other hand, while the vulnerability of the body is emphasized through the physical pain Nina experiences, her strength is emphasized through the camerawork and sound in the events leading up to the dénouement—especially during the transition into the Black Swan. During Nina's dance number as the black swan, the camera follows her very closely, shocking the audience with such a close proximity. Katherine Fusco refers to this, saying "Aronofsky consistently positions the camera so that audiences view Nina's world as though breathing down her neck rather than seeing through her eyes...As a result, the film's events seem strangely objective rather than subjective" (22). However, the objective cinematography Fusco describes here actually provides an effect closer to both showcasing *and* paralleling Nina's body rather than just watching it; we are not only looking *at* Nina, but *with* her as well. The objectivity is amplified by the camerawork, while other stylistic elements—such as sound—amplify the subjectivity. For example, when Nina re-enters the stage after her feathers begin to sprout, she begins a long series of pirouettes. The camera swiftly moves towards her as she twirls in the opposite direction, making it seem as though her body will collide with the camera. When she

passes, the camera begins to pull back and then rests behind her, allowing the audience to examine her consistent—and quite frankly impressive—dancing in this moment. In addition to the camera's movement, there are also several close-ups on Nina's exceptionally muscular back throughout the scene—showing off her physical strength from an objective standpoint. Finally, the last shot of her performance as the black swan is a long shot as Nina bends back and spreads her arms as if they are wings. The distance of the shot places the camera in the theatre's audience, giving the film audience their perspective and further enforcing the objectivity of the scene. We are watching Nina as she finally achieves the role of the black swan—her physical strength as a dancer allowing her to captivate both the audience within the film and the audience outside of the film. At the same time, the sound style of the scene enforces Nina's point of view: while she twirls around the stage, a whooshing can be heard—the sound of wings flapping—and this continues through her final pose as the black swan. Because we know Nina is not literally becoming a swan, hearing the sound of wings in flight places the audience in Nina's perspective; the viewer is able to feel the uneasiness of being watched and showcased. Thus, *Black Swan* uses sound to give the audience a subjective point-of-view, allowing us to feel the horror in the camerawork that objectifies Nina.

But how does the film's portrayal of the vulnerable-strong binary promote a feminist view? First, displaying the vulnerability of the female body provides insight on the social pressures of being a woman. Nina sustains many injuries throughout the film, each inducing a similar physical pain within the audience. This parallel pain is defined by Linda Williams as the sensations of the "body genre." The "body genre"—in this case, horror—prompts the spectator to mimic the sensations felt by the characters on screen—in this case, the pain and suffering of a ballerina (163). When we see Nina in pain, we mimic the pain when we cringe or gasp or even

scream at the sight. For example, when Nina's mother is cutting Nina's nails and accidentally clips one too far, I found myself clenching my own nails in my fists to endure mirroring Nina's pain. This example, as well as the many other pains Nina endures—vomiting to keep a perfect figure, stressing out so much she scratches herself, having her ribcage poked and prodded while being examined—reflect a real-life problem. Women, including myself, often struggle with distorted or negative body images. By following a protagonist who has difficulty with her own body image, *Black Swan* addresses a social reality that not many films focus on. One cause of this social pressure is the scrutiny that women, especially celebrities, are subject to from the public and the media. This cause is demonstrated with the camerawork that highlights Nina's strength: "*Black Swan*'s cinematography emphasizes the voyeuristic act of looking at Nina...the camera's claustrophobic closeness to Nina's body encourages examination, not empathy" (Fusco 21). Because the camerawork puts the audience in an objective position, we are in turn forced to copy the way society encourages the harsh evaluation of the female body. Equally, the sound of the scene instead gives the audience a subjective view so that we feel the same sense of anxious inspection Nina undergoes. By seeing the film through Nina's eyes—or perhaps, ears—the audience is able to experience the judgement and/or scrutiny Nina faces throughout the entire film. So, *Black Swan* displays a feminist standpoint by presenting a dangerous cause-and-effect relationship: the cause being a skeptical view of women—as shown through cinematography and felt through sound—and the effect being the physical pain and even death of the woman.

Another key binary shown through Nina's transformation is the virgin versus the whore. As stated earlier, the white swan represents the purity of a virgin, while the black swan represents the seductiveness of a whore. Nina symbolizes the "virgin," for she effortlessly plays the white swan. This is enforced through the film's mise-en-scène—especially the costuming.

Nina is often shown wearing all white or very light colored clothing, a sign of her purity. This is especially evident in scenes where Lily is present, for she provides stark contrast to Nina with her all black costuming—not so subtly hinting the ease with which she portrays the black swan. Similarly, Nina is never actually shown having sex or even achieving sexual release anywhere in the film while Lily is caught in many provocative moments. Nina’s lack of blatant sexuality is repeatedly criticized by her dance instructor, Thomas; but when she finally “seduces” the audience within the role of the black swan, she receives the most extreme punishment: her death.

In this moment, *Black Swan* goes against a major horror convention: the death of the virgin. The “sadoomasochistic teen horror film kills off the sexually active “bad girls,” allowing only the nonsexual “good girls” to survive” (Williams 169). In other words, horror films often condemn sex by killing off the characters that engage in it, while the sexually inactive characters survive. But in *Black Swan*, Nina becomes both the “bad girl” and the “good girl” when she transitions into the black swan. So, instead of condemning sex, the film instead condemns the use of such a radical binary by killing both archetypes within one character. Through this series of events, *Black Swan* once again encourages a feminist view by speaking to the societal pressures placed on women: if a woman is a virgin, she is often considered prude, but if she is not, she is proclaimed a whore. Nina is reprimanded the entire film for not having sex—whenever she comes close to sexual release, something awful happens. For example, when Nina “touches herself” as recommended by Thomas, she suddenly realizes her mother is sleeping just feet away—a moment of terror that is accented by choppy cuts, Portman’s traumatized performance, and an intense aural stinger. But when she embraces sexuality with the black swan, she dies in the moments following. Women cannot win while trapped in this system. By definition, it is impossible to be both virgin and whore (Perhaps this is why the actual *Swan Lake* play uses two

separate ballerinas to play the two swans?) Though impossible, Nina is still expected to be able to exemplify both binary extremes, so she must kill her inner white swan in order to develop her black swan. But in her death, both swans die (and thus both virgin and whore), showing the destruction of the binary and furthermore promoting a feminist perspective.

In its depiction of female binaries, *Black Swan* both reinforces generic conventions and denies them. The film reinforces them in order to communicate the binaries of the female body—creating physical discomfort within the viewer with gory displays of pain (the sensations of the body genre) as well as using sound creatively in order for the audience to feel this pain. On the other hand, *Black Swan* goes against the conventional survival of the virgin in order to express the danger of our social binaries with regard to female sexuality. It is through this treatment of horror conventions that *Black Swan* is able to make a bold statement, both criticizing the judgmental way we, as a society, view women and also presenting the horrible effects that judgement has on its undeserving recipients. *Black Swan* takes a giant step in the right direction for feminism in film; and for that, it receives my utmost admiration.

Works Cited

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