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A Lacanian Interpretation of Desire and Hysteria in *Black Swan*

“the hysterical crisis for example, ‘kills two birds with one stone’ when representing (by means of the same representation) both elements of the conflict.”

(Eidelsztein 148)

In this essay, I will provide a Lacanian analysis of *Black Swan* (2010). My primary interest is the psychoanalytic study of the main character, Nina Sayers. Nina is a professional corps-turned-principle ballerina who becomes hysterical when cast as the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*. Throughout the course of this paper, I hope to explicate the nature of Nina’s illness through a Lacanian theoretical framework; specifically, I will provide an interpretation of desire and hysteria. Before I delve into *Black Swan*, though, a foregrounding of the details of *Swan Lake* is required, as there are several significant parallels between the characters in the ballet and the characters (and actors) in the film.

Composed by Russian Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Swan Lake* is the story of the enchanted Princess Odette (the Swan Queen) who is kidnapped and put under the spell of an evil sorcerer, Von Rothbart. The spell is such that she becomes a swan every day with the rising sun and does not return to her human form until dusk. Her enchantment forces her to live by a lake that was formed by the tears of her grieving mother. Her only hope of being released is to fall in eternal love with a man who promises to remain loyal to their union. If the vow of eternal love is broken, Odette will remain a victim of her enchantment forever.

One dusk, Prince Siegfried ventures into the woods while hunting and falls immediately in love with Odette as she is transforming into her human form. He declares his love for her forever and invites her to the Royal Ball at his castle so that he can publicly elect her as his bride. On the night of the ball, Von Rothbart and his daughter Odile, who is cleverly disguised as Odette (both are played by the same ballerina), arrive at the ball. Thinking that she is Odette, Prince Siegfried mistakenly professes his eternal love for her Odette's twin Odile. The vow breaks and Odette must remain forever under Von Rothbart's spell. Siegfried rushes to the lake to beg Odette's forgiveness. She accepts his apology, but confesses that she can only be freed of her wretched fate by committing suicide in the lake. Siegfried promises that he will not live without her and jumps into the lake following her. Their sacrifice divests Von Rothbart of his evil powers. Odette and Siegfried ascend into Heaven united in their love for all of eternity.

Aaron Aronofsky directs the modern cinematic adaptation, *Black Swan*. It is a psychological thriller that induces in its viewers a vast gamut of human emotion. Though she is highly talented and hardworking, Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman) is fragile, virginal, overprotected, and obsessive about her ballet technique. French choreographer Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) reluctantly casts her as the Swan Queen. She is not his initial choice because she lacks promise for the role of the black swan (the Swan Queen's evil twin Odile). Nina endures much internal strife and psychological trauma as she practices to embody the black swan, who is strong, seductive, wily, and dances without regard for technicality.

Worried that she cannot learn to lose control for the role, Thomas exhorts her to explore her own sensuality. He first seduces her in order that she learn to seduce him—and their audience. Nina becomes mad with paranoia and fantasies that the other dancers are contriving to steal her role. New backup dancer Lilly (Mila Kunis) is suave, confident, seductive, and perfectly

embodies the black swan's passionate nature. Eager to lose control, Nina begins to spend time with Lilly partying, doing drugs, and they begin to explore each other sexually.

On opening night of the production, Nina's fantasies climax as she dreams that she murders Lilly for attempting to steal her role. She enters the stage and literally becomes the black swan (cinematic effects). At the end of the ballet, she jumps to her death in the lake. She lands on a mattress behind the scenic construction, blood pouring from her stomach, and the screen goes white. The audience never knows if Nina actually dies; what we do know is that the Swan Queen dies. *Black Swan* begs the question: just how inextricable is Nina from the fragile Swan Queen character that she plays both in the film and in the ballet?

Aronofsky's adaptation is fecund with concepts such as psychological trauma, loss, and desire as proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan argues that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, and is structured like a language. The subjective world is constituted of three orders: Real, Imaginary, Symboli and is knotted by a fourth, the Symptom. The subject experiences the Real before entering into the realm of language. The Real is characterized by inchoate desire and "a state of nature," meaning that the subject does not (cannot) differentiate between the self and everything else; she is complete, in a sense. At the same time, however, she is fragmented. For persons beyond the neo-natal period, on the other hand, "the real is impossible to bear." To encounter the Real is to encounter the void in being which places loss at the center of human life. Any encounter with it causes the person profound suffering and agony. When the Imaginary order enters a subject, the subject is alienated from the completeness of the Real. Nonetheless, the Real returns into language and relationships all the time as disruption, discontinuity, and unpleasant jouissance. The late Lacan even argued that it is omnipresent in all of daily life via fantasies, drives, etc.

The Imaginary order is characterized by narcissism, as the subject is caught up in her fantasies emanating from her Ego Ideal, or her ideal of perfection. The child enters the Mirror Stage, recognizing itself as independent of its surroundings and its mother's breast. Fantasy is, at first, closely related to desire in the Imaginary order because, as I will discuss, Lacan does not describe desire as mundane sexual desire, rather he describes it as an immaterial longing to fill the void.

Finally, the Symbolic order is the recognition of the realm of linguistic exchange, conventional expectations of the subject, subjective relations with others. It also requires the acceptance of the big Other, or Name-of-the-Father. The Name-of-the-Father constitutes the laws that govern and regulate desire as well as the symbolic rules of linguistic communication. Only when the subject has accepted the Name-of-the-Father can the realm of the Symbolic divide her. This is an important point that I will address later, as it demonstrates that Nina is not a psychotic, but an hysteric.

I will address several recurring cinematic themes in conjunction with their psychoanalytic implications: mirrors and self-reflection, perfection, virginal/white and seductress/black dichotomy, and Nina's overbearing mother. The most pervasive is the role of mirrors and Nina's self-reflection. Nina is constantly inspecting her reflection at home, the dance studio, the subway windows, etc. The beauty of her art revolves around the appearance and grace of her body. The still image of Natalie peering at herself suggests the omnipresence of her Ego Ideal.



According to Lacan, the Ego Ideal- is representative of the Imaginary Order, and as such, is at

the base of the subject's fantasies and standard of perfection. Later in the film, Nina begins to fantasize that her identity is *bleeding* through her controlled exterior, as actress Natalie Portman said; she can no longer escape her self: she is everywhere.

The second most pervasive theme is that of perfection. Nina's Ego Ideal- vision of her own perfection is related to what Lacan called, interpreting Freud, the Death Drive. The Death Drive is premised upon the following ideas: (a) every drive pursues its own extinction (or, satisfaction); (b) every drive involves the subject in repetition (in order to satisfy it); (c) this drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle into the realm of surplus jouissance, where ecstasy is experienced as suffering and pain. In other words, to attain perfection is, then, to die. If satisfied desire is not followed by desire, then there is not life, but death. Nina's desire to embody the black swan comes at a high price: the white swan must cease to exist. She must lose herself in order to find herself (the logic seems circular, but follows Lacan's logic).

We see further evidence of this logic as she becomes ill and begins to mutilate herself. The more she succeeds in embodying the black swan, the more effort she puts into her own self-destruction. There is a moment in the film that symbolizes her transformation. Nina is beginning to resist her mother's gaze. She disobeys her mother and goes out with Lilly the night before her dress rehearsal. Nina is peering at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She turns her shoulder so that she can see her self-inflicted wounds. Then she slowly and deliberately slips Lilly's black lace tank top over her own white one. She rejoins Lilly at the bar and they begin to get high on ecstasy. After this night, Nina's fantasies consume her. She dreams that the black swan's feathers sprout from the self-inflicted wounds on her back. Her reflection escapes no mirror; traces of her bleeding identity abound.

I've touched on this before, but the third theme is that of the dichotomies that permeate the film. There are two that are inextricable from each other: white and black, and virgin and seductress. Nina is a master of technicality, passivity, purity, and fragility. It is only via trauma and loss that she masters the black swan's traits of seduction, guile, and charisma. She simultaneously loses her voice and gains another one in the course of her transformation. In an attempt to gain control, she loses it; one could say that *Nina* is seduced by the black swan.

This is evident in the theme of sexuality and the pervasive motif of masturbation and self-exploration. After casting her as the Swan Queen, Thomas gives Nina a homework assignment to "go home and touch yourself, live a little." He says to her: "Your mission is destruction through seduction." She masturbates frequently throughout the course of the film. The first time she masturbates, she looks over and her mother is asleep on the chair in her bedroom reaffirming her paranoia that, *Mother is always watching* (her mother's gaze is always upon her). I will return to the theme of her mother later in the paper. Nina starts to fantasize about Lilly (who, again, symbolizes Odile in the film). She fantasizes that she and Lilly explore each other sexually. It isn't until the morning that Nina finds out that her fantasies of Lilly are illusory; Nina has been masturbating.

Finally, let us turn to Nina's mother, who exhibits symptoms of an obsession in her rituals. She has a shrine of paintings of Nina that she painted herself in her room. She often speaks of Nina with the pronoun "we," insinuating profound co-dependency and symbiosis. Nina's mother gave up her career as a corps de ballet dancer to have Nina, so she lives vicariously through Nina's accomplishments. Nina is her mother's phallic signifier, which signifies her mother's lack-in-being, or void. Because Nina's mother could not satisfy her own desire to be a principle ballerina, in her own fantasy, *because of* Nina's existence, Nina

represents her mother's lack. In some of the final scenes, before Nina the actress jumps to Odette's, the character's, death, Nina glances at the audience, locking eyes with her mother's which are full of nostalgia and tears—but mostly pride; her beloved/hated phallus is both a source of ecstasy and anguish. Hence, *jouissance* originates from both pain and pleasure. Nina's mother is both punished and rewarded by her lack-in-being. I'll return to negative/surplus *jouissance* later when discussing Nina and the Master Discourse. Symbolically, we are reminded of Odette's mother who formed the lake of her tears; it is easy to see the parallel here between Nina's mother and Odette's.

Returning to the masturbation scene, Nina is constantly aware of her mother's domineering presence and gaze. Nina has no privacy and, until her transformation, played the role of mother's docile child. Aside from these issues, a more basic reason for the mother's presence is to illustrate how far Nina detaches herself from her old self. As Nina becomes the black swan, her relationship with her mother deteriorates to the point that Nina declares that she is moving out of their shared apartment. Though Nina's mother suffers psychological trauma herself, she represents the Symbolic order for Nina in many ways.

I shall now discuss these themes in relation to Lacanian concepts. According to Lacan, "every phantasy is articulated in terms of the subject speaking to the imaginary other. This is why human desire is captivated (*capté*) not by an object, but by a phantasy" (1958:15). Nina thinks that she and her object of desire, the black swan (Lilly), have been having sex, but really Nina has just been masturbating; Lilly is a fantasy, so technically, she only symbolizes an object of desire. The idea is that desire is "neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second." The formula is: demand – need (biological) = desire.

As Slavoj Žižek articulates it: "desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire." Desire is theoretically linked to the death drive. The idea is that the subject engages in repetition because desire is an unceasing chain that cannot be realized without the death of the subject: "Desire is the desire for death" (Lacan 36). This drive is one of the most *puissant* (powerful) of unconscious forces underlying Nina's aspiration for perfection. To attain perfection, to embody the black swan means that her virginal self must die.

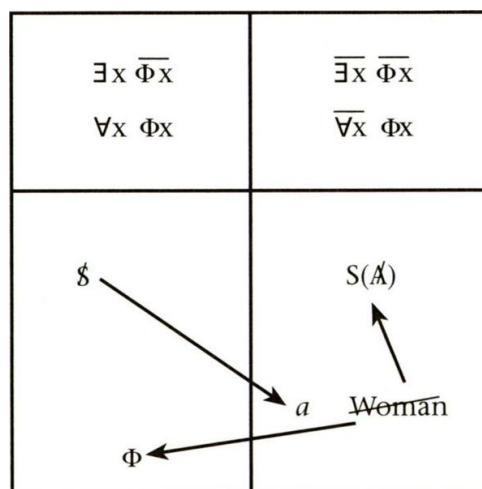
Nina's delusions and fantasies begin to take over as she gets closer and closer to embodying the black swan. She becomes excessively paranoid that other dancers are trying to steal her role. Because the Symbolic and Imaginary orders are intertwined, Nina inevitably gets her value from the gaze of the Other (or her ability to please the Other by embodying the black swan). There are several instances throughout the film where Nina feels that she is under the gaze of the other dancers (esp. Lilly). If you look closely, however, these dancers are none other than herself, i.e., their faces are hers. She feels most threatened by herself. This ties into the theme of mirrors and self-reflection as paranoia plagues her.

Nina is also under the gaze of both her mother and Thomas. To be under the gaze is to be under the scrutiny of, or to be threatened by, the Other. Whenever Nina is acting most unlike herself, e.g., she is taking drugs with Lilly or masturbating, her mother makes her presence known in some way by calling her incessantly or chasing her around the apartment. Nina's paranoia makes her lack of privacy more evident than ever.

Thomas, in this way, represents the Symbolic Other. He is the one that gives Nina a sense of self-worth. If she can seduce him, she can seduce everybody in the audience. He is the measurement by which her embodiment of perfection is measured. The irony here is that he tells

her that no dancer is perfect; he tells her that perfection exists only when there is imperfection. It is a paradox that Nina, in her hysterical state, cannot admit. To admit this would be to admit that her object of desire, her fantasy, is something that cannot be grasped (and it cannot, which is why the Swan Queen dies).

Henceforth, I shall delve into my view of Nina as a hysteric. Hysteria is characterized by a divided subject, lack of identity, guilt, an unconscious defense against pleasure (especially the pleasure of sexuality), and sometimes mania. Symptoms of hysteria, and the neuroses in general, are a result of a failure of defense. Originally, Freud wrote that neuroses such as hysteria occur directly because of the sexual experience of childhood. (he first thought that it occurred because of a traumatic seduction from the outside. His thought evolved eventually to the concept of a fantastical seduction, which gets closer to Lacan's thesis). Lacan argues, contrary to Freud, that hysteria is ultimately caused by the ineluctable effects of language (as a discourse between two subjects) and has much to do with the structure of demand, which I've already touched upon. The hysteric is divided regarding sexual difference and identifies on the masculine side of the sexuation graph. Whereas the obsessional questions am I *dead* or *alive*, the hysteric questions whether she is *female* or *male*.



Hysteria is characterized by an “ethics of dispossession,” as Vicente Palomera put it (387). That is, the hysteric complains of a lack of identity (hence, the barred signifier, which is also called the divided subject), which is why she identifies easily with other people and specifically “other” men. Freud wrote that hysteria is a lack of narcissistic identification, or a

lack of “I am.” The hysteric can be characterized further in three ways: (1) an agent, or mastering subject, (2) a subject who eludes herself as object, and (3) a subject who sacrifices herself. The fact of the matter is that there is no contradiction between her status as both an object and a mastering subject in the position of power. Let me explain.

Rather than asking “who am I?” the hysteric questions “*what* am I?” She objectifies herself by trying to be that object—not subject—for the Other. In this case, she is split between being the object for the phallic signifier she has chosen and existing on the male side. Lacan first described hysteria by means of the fragmented body (referred to in the mirror stage) wherein the hysteric experiences an absence of identification with Woman: “[it is] even tangibly revealed at the organic level, in the lines of ‘fragilization’ that define the anatomy of fantasy, as exhibited in the schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria” (Palomera 391). We see evidence of Nina’s fragmented body as she strives to embody her ideal of perfection—the black swan—for Thomas, the Symbolic Other. Nina’s symptoms likely began with the imaginary alienations that occurred during the mirror stage.

In “The Hysteric’s Discourse,” Gerard Wacjman explicates the nature of hysteria:

“[T]he hysteric is a chimaera, bringing to mind the myth of the sphinx. With the question she poses to man, the sphinx not only institutes a certain relation of speech, but specifically the discursive relation of agent to other. The riddle is the hysteric herself; she is the barred subject [barred signifier], whose body is marked by unexplainable symptoms. These symptoms define her discourse as a question addressed to the other. Brandishing her suffering, she acts as the sphinx posing a riddle to man. Having acknowledged her question, he raises to the position of

master endowed with limitless power: he is the master of knowledge supposed to have the answer capable of silencing her.”

In this way Nina declares that she can be both the Swan Queen and her evil twin; she is everything, she is nothing; which is she? She strives to validate herself as Daddy’s Ideal by luring the prince from Odette. Wacjman continues:

“The hysteric reveals the subject’s symbolic dependence on the Other. She manifests this dependence by keeping up her ‘symbolic debt’ and by inverting the direction of the message (the speaker receives the message from the hearer) [...] The hysteric plays it as though she commanded the Other, yet symbolically she is entirely dependent upon him whom she begs to make her a subject. She commands and at once surrenders. Her question, ‘Who am I?’ receives the answer ‘You are who [and the objectified term “what”] I say.’”

The objectification of the subject is an ineluctable effect of language and occurs because of the lacuna between the subject and object. The subject is acknowledged and brought into being just so long as there is just *any response at all* from the Other. In the case of Nina, she pushes Thomas to answer her: “Look at my body, there you will find the answer to my question.” And there, he does; she is both at once. “She offers herself to man as a ravishing enigma, as the object of a knowledge that divides her from herself.” (Wacjman). Nina only becomes the black swan after surrendering to her sexuality (one of the traditional beliefs of hysteria is that she has “primitive” anxieties that are “asexual”), which she presents as the “object of knowledge” to Thomas. Nina seduces the desiring Other to learn about the object that causes his desire. The object of Thomas’ desire—which has dropped into the lacuna between subject and object, and which was set in motion by her demand (“Tell me who I am”)—is ironically Nina herself.

Let us turn to a graph demonstrating the hysteric's discourse from Wacjman's article. Whereas, according to the Master Discourse, the sequence follows as such: S (barred signifier), S_1 , S_2 , a (in the places of truth, agent, other, production), the Hysteric's Discourse is shifted: a, S (barred signifier), S_1 , S_2 . There is a supposed to be something generated from this graph, namely, S_2 , which signifies knowledge and is in the place open for production. It is also the place for the *jouissance* generated by the discourse. The 'a' represents that which has fallen from the discourse between subject and object, and is placed in Lacan's place for truth. The 'a', or surplus truth, is the cause of the divided subject's lack; what is in the place of S (barred signifier) is uncertainty where there ought to be certainty. The S (barred signifier) is in the place of the agent (or master, in the Master Discourse), and S_1 in the place of the other (or slave, in the Master Discourse). This graph helps make sense of the Hysteric's Discourse, and how it is possible that the hysteric seeks to generate knowledge. In summation, influenced by the cause of desire, or surplus, (a), the split subject calls the master (S_1) into question, demanding him to produce knowledge (S_2) which he cannot; no *jouissance* (pleasure) is derived from his answer. For this reason, I prefaced this essay with Eidelsztein's quote that "the hysterical crisis for example, 'kills two birds with one stone' when representing (by means of the same representation) both elements of the conflict" (148). Figuratively, Nina's hysteria does kill two birds with one stone by representing (by the same means) both the Swan Queen and the black swan.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the nature of hysteria and Nina's status as a hysterical subject, I want to touch upon Nina's self-destructive bulimia and dermatillomania as they pertain to the drives in the instinctual though largely psychological sense of Freud's *die*

Triebe (esp. the oral drive for bulimia).¹ Her self-mutilation and fantasies go hand in hand; the more that her paranoid fantasies consume her, the more she picks her skin and purges her body of food. Her bulimic behavior can be assessed in terms of the oral drive, which governs consumption—both real and imaginary objects: “The mouth opening up in the register of drive (activity) is not going to be satisfied with food,” according to Lacan (180). Further, Lacan writes that that the hysteric who refuses food does so because she has confused the demand for love with the need for survival—pertaining particularly to the mother’s love: “the neurotic [...] identifies the lack in the Other with his demand (D). As a result, the that the Other’s demand assume the function of an object in his fantasy, that is to say, his fantasy is reduced to the drive” (321). Therefore, the hysteric’s desire is maintained only because of the lack of satisfaction that she feels when she eludes herself as object. If unsatisfied desire is the hysteric’s motto, as Palomera writes, then it is her goal to (1) make the Other desire, and (2) to keep desiring herself via refusing to satisfy herself. We are reminded of Thomas’ homework assignment to Nina to go home, masturbate, and live a little; Thomas, the Symbolic Other, is training her for her mission, which is destruction via seduction.

Returning again to the oral drive, Bernard Perot points out that “no food ever gives satisfaction in the drive quest, which is always aiming for the *lost-lacking object*” (2008:504). Purging is a matter of auto-erotic control for the bulimic (hysterical) patient, who sadistically takes her body as an object to be mastered. He continues that bulimic patients have a “repetitive need to reject oral dependence *vis-à-vis* her object;” a pacifying of the oral drive was never experienced in infancy. Perot mentions the relation between the real primordial parent and the symbolic big Other. Indeed, Nina was not satisfied or nurtured by her mother; rather, she was

¹ Interestingly enough, Freud initially wrote that hysteria was linked to the oral drive (Soler 252).

controlled like an object. This makes sense as Nina has had a symbiosis with her mother, who is also representative of the symbolic Other, all her life, causing her to become ill with hysteria.

Perot concludes, “An unvarying (defensive) parental attitude—of mastering, for example—tends to produce specific pathologies of subjectivation, in particular anorexia and bulimia” (505). This result can be avoided, he thinks, if the mother were ever able to let herself become an (oral) object for the infant in the first place. This is problematic in Nina’s case because hysterics seek to learn who they are from other women, assuming that the other Woman knows what a woman is. If the other Woman is her mother, who has objectified her (in order to live vicariously through her) by defensively mastering her, then it is easy to see how Nina suffers inner turmoil which appears as an hysterical crisis wherein she eludes herself as object.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that there are very strong reasons to think that Nina has been hysterisized. She suffers the lack of identity and the defense against pleasure that are characteristic of hysteria. She poses her body as a question to Thomas: *what* am I? In the end, we still do not know which swan Nina is and just how inextricable her identity was from that of the Swan Queen, who committed suicide in the lake formed of her grieving mother’s tears. I suspect Nina the Swan Queen has been lost forever, but that ineluctably happens, as we have learned from Freud and Lacan, when desire is satisfied and perfection achieved. As she lay bleeding on the floor in Thomas’ arms, Nina uttered her last words: “It was perfect.”



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