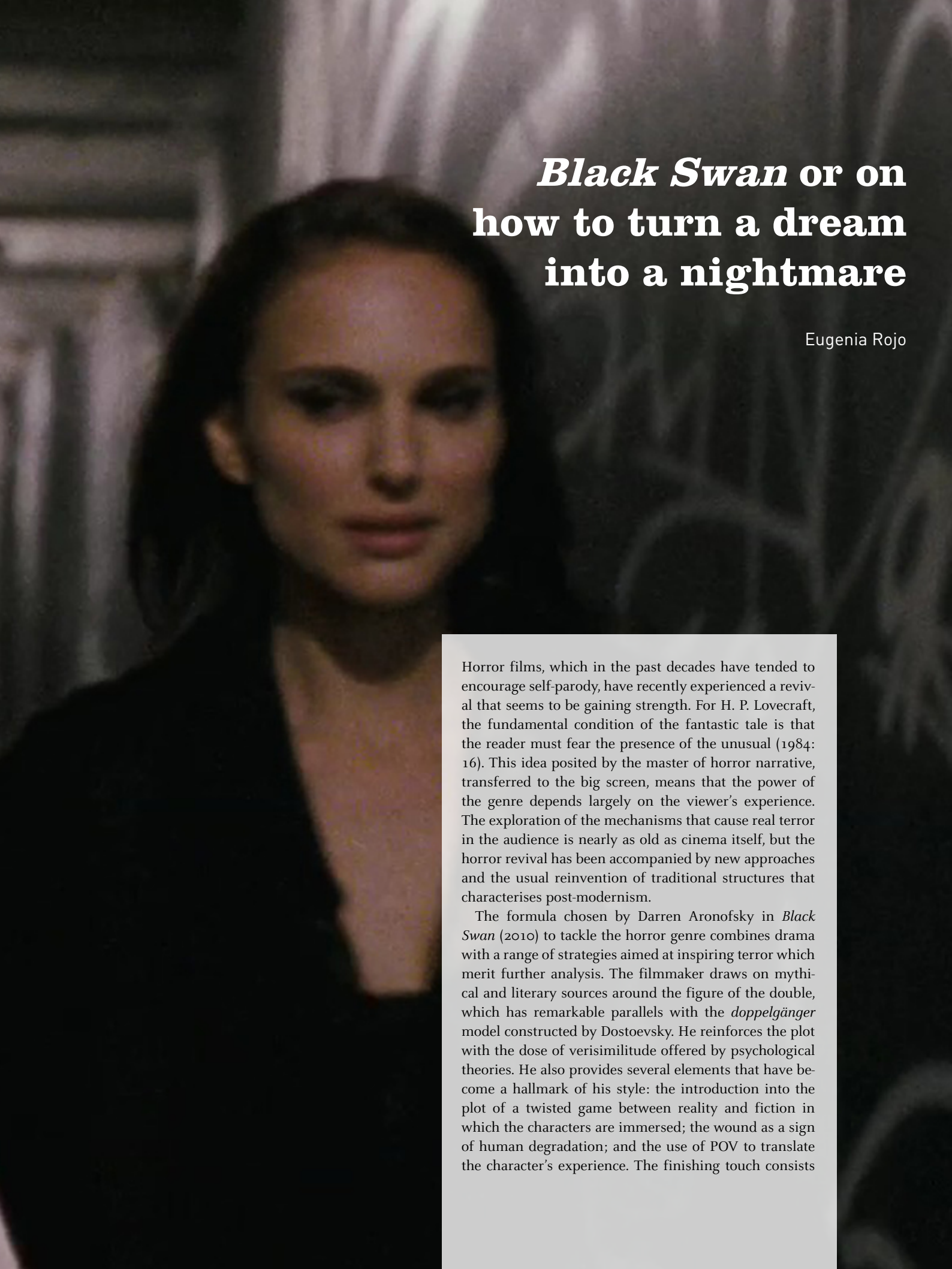




VANISHING POINTS

Figure 1. *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010)



***Black Swan* or on how to turn a dream into a nightmare**

Eugenia Rojo

Horror films, which in the past decades have tended to encourage self-parody, have recently experienced a revival that seems to be gaining strength. For H. P. Lovecraft, the fundamental condition of the fantastic tale is that the reader must fear the presence of the unusual (1984: 16). This idea posited by the master of horror narrative, transferred to the big screen, means that the power of the genre depends largely on the viewer's experience. The exploration of the mechanisms that cause real terror in the audience is nearly as old as cinema itself, but the horror revival has been accompanied by new approaches and the usual reinvention of traditional structures that characterises post-modernism.

The formula chosen by Darren Aronofsky in *Black Swan* (2010) to tackle the horror genre combines drama with a range of strategies aimed at inspiring terror which merit further analysis. The filmmaker draws on mythical and literary sources around the figure of the double, which has remarkable parallels with the *doppelgänger* model constructed by Dostoevsky. He reinforces the plot with the dose of verisimilitude offered by psychological theories. He also provides several elements that have become a hallmark of his style: the introduction into the plot of a twisted game between reality and fiction in which the characters are immersed; the wound as a sign of human degradation; and the use of POV to translate the character's experience. The finishing touch consists

of several layers of special effects created both by traditional methods and by new technologies.

The film chronicles the vicissitudes of a member of the New York City Ballet who has been appointed *prima ballerina* to play the leading role in *Swan Lake* (Lebedínoye óziero, Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, 1877). Aronofsky's basic plot is similar to that of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948). The British motion picture also portrayed the tough atmosphere of professional ballet, in which a star is quickly replaced by new, innocent flesh at the whim of the producer. While The Archers' production adopts the well-known tale of Hans Christian Andersen to frame its *mise en abyme*, Aronofsky's film makes use of the classic ballet *par excellence*, the fairy tale created by Tchaikovsky.

The Russian oeuvre plays two roles in the film: on the one hand, the dance performance itself, crystallised in the rehearsals and the premiere at the end of the story; and on the other hand, the parallels between the double character in the story of the Russian ballet and the protagonist of the story of the film, as well as the fates of both. Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman) will be chosen to play Odette, the young queen. However, as the tradition since the mid-twentieth century requires, the same ballerina will have to wear the shoes of the black swan, Odile, the daughter of the wicked Baron von Rothbart.

Between the tradition of the double and the Freudian personality

The character of Nina constitutes a new translation of the literary motif of the double. Lecouteux (1999: 147-157) locates the origin of this motif in the concept of the astral double derived from the triple conception of the soul in Germanic tradition¹. The Scandinavian sagas would develop these notions, which can be found in many cultures, from Ancient Egypt and Classical Antiquity to Medieval Europe. Out of these mythical roots, stories of doubles would spread and become a popular theme in nineteenth century literature². In the case of *Black Swan*, the director turns to the imaginary of his Russian roots and draws inspiration from Dostoevsky's *The Double* (1856). While the novel adopts a comical and decadent tone quite different from the terrifying atmosphere of the film, the psychological horror is made apparent in certain passages that can also be recognised on the screen.

In the general climate of paranoia that surrounds the story of the unfortunate protagonist of *The Double*, Mr. Golyadkin, the old man Anton Antonovich will warn him of what happened to an aunt of his: "she saw her own double before her death..." (Dostoevsky, 2008: 56). The psychiatric term *heautoscopy*, from the Greek "ó" (*heautón*) "himself" or "herself" and "σκοπός" (*scopós*) "to look", "to observe", was employed by Menninger-Lerch-

enthal and applied to patients who describe perceptions such as running into a replica of themselves. The psychiatrist related this phenomenon to that of the *doppelgänger*, which in German means "the one that walks beside oneself" (LÓPEZ-IBOR, 2011: 32).

After leaving a party to which he was never invited, Golyadkin takes a stroll on Ismailovsky Bridge. He shudders when he feels a presence: a mysterious pedestrian who disappears without a trace, and who later on will be revealed to be his own double, prompting him to exclaim "Why, have I really gone out of my mind, or what?" (DOSTOEVSKY, 2008: 44). Nina will wonder the same thing when she encounters her dark *alter ego* for the first time [Fig. 1], who, like the protagonist in Dostoevsky's novel, is a person notorious for her "treachery and brutal impulses" (2008: 105).

The double would be adopted as one of the motifs of German Romantic literature and subsequently of the fantasy film genre. According to the legend, seeing one's double is a bad omen, a warning or premonition of one's own death. In the triple conception of the soul in Germanic culture, the spiritual double, *Fylgja*, bids a person farewell as a harbinger of the end of that person's existence, generally appearing in the form of a woman or an animal (LECOUTEUX, 1999: 147-157). In Aronofsky's story, the vision of the double not only represents a dire prediction, but also marks a turning point in the character's psyche. As a result of the splitting of the personality, the *alter ego* begins to control the ballerina's life and tries to replace her, as Mr. Golyadkin Junior does in the Russian novel. In Freudian terms, we are witnessing the death of the ego at the hands of the id. The protagonist of *The Double* also exhibits clear signs of a schizophrenic suffering from a dissociative identity disorder, half a century before Freud's transformation of the psychiatric discipline.

Both the film and the novel deal with the death of a healthy mind in which the astonished spectator is presented with events which, on first sight, can only be explained by fantasy or magic. The use of the double and the subjective vision of the protagonist are established as resources that make it possible to present the events to the spectator with a certain ambiguity that is intended to provoke anxiety and confusion. Like Golyadkin, Nina will reach a state where she cannot distinguish between her dreams and reality, and her imagination and distress will meld into the events unfolding around her.

Metamorphosis is another distinctive feature that goes hand-in-hand with the tradition of the double. In *Swan Lake*, the transformation is the result of a spell. What we are witnessing during her final Dionysian dance, when Nina becomes a bird, is the product of her own deranged mind. St. Augustine's *The City of God* (412-426) describes the mutation of a man into an animal, which can only



Figure 2. *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

be the work of the Devil because it constitutes a denaturalisation of God's image. All the classical descriptions of metamorphosis are interpreted by Augustine of Hippo merely as Satanic illusions capable of deceiving the human senses (LECOUTEUX, 1999: 124). In the film, the conversion is triggered by the force of what, in Nina's repressive upbringing, is identified with evil. Inevitably, the character ends up succumbing to her own antithesis, her most primitive and libidinous side which, until that moment, had been dormant.

Aronofsky finds a wonderful excuse here to develop a story about a *wereswan*, a hybrid form, half woman, half swan which, in turn, unfolds into a doubly black and white swan. Ultimately, the resource of the double is simply a way to present the character's internal contradictions and to position ideologies in contrast against one another. In this way, two opposing facets are exposed: the angelic girl who takes on a zoomorphic quality on screen, with her feet in second position and the white tutu serving as plumage; and the woman in a frenzy, revealing her darker side. For Bachelard, the swan symbolises the nude woman and her immaculate whiteness represents the innocence of a nymph. It also constitutes a secret object of desire, and its singing is a metaphor for the *petite morte* (2005: 53-59). The swan is the sublimated figure in which the poet, the director in the story, Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel), seeks to recognise himself. During a rehearsal he declares: "That was me seducing you. It needs to be the other way around", referring to Nina's lack of passion in her performance. In the denouement, this technical, stiff and predictable ballerina will turn into a seductive and impulsive being and her role in the ballet will begin to possess her. Leroy's message expresses this internal struggle: "The only person standing in your way is you". Golyadkin faces the same dilemma when he acknowledges: "I'm my own murderer!" (DOSTOEVSKY, 2008: 99).

Aronofsky's characters suffer torments similar to Dostoevsky's. All are besieged by an obsession: for Max in *Pi* (1998), it is the number that can bring order to the universe; for the mother and son in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), it is the fantasy of an unattainable bliss; for Tommy Creo, it is the idea of saving his wife from an incurable disease in *The Fountain* (2006); and for Randy Robinson in *The Wrestler* (2008), it is the obsession of an ageing wrestler fighting to recapture the glory days of his career. Nina longs blindly to achieve an impossible perfection in her art. When she is promoted, her director, who uses sex to control his ballerinas, informs her of his real purpose: to achieve that perfection at all costs. As the pressure increases, the young woman will become immersed in a private nightmare that will make her reality increasingly incongruous. In this identity crisis, her personality will begin to vanish, to split and drown in realms stifled by monotony and distress.

Links within and outside the diegesis

A mother and child relationship similar to those in *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) or *The Piano Teacher* (La pianiste, Michael Haneke, 2001) can be found between Nina and Erica (Barbara Hershey). The scene where Erika offers Nina a succulent cake to celebrate her winning the leading role in the ballet alludes to the extraordinary tenderness contained in the pernicious love of a mother. The former dancer keeps her daughter trapped in an infantile state, as does her life imprisonment in the world of ballet. With the status of *prima ballerina*, Nina will turn from a young girl dedicated to pleasing others into a woman who exploits her ego in her quest for self-satisfaction. Because of her immature and over-protected condition, she is ignorant of the harsh reality of life, which will gradually be revealed to her, as it is on one of her trips on the subway when an old man makes obscene gestures at her. She will try to overcome her erotic inhibitions in the

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privacy of her room, as advised to do by Leroy, but the vituperative image of her mother will hold her back. Her degradation and the tug of war with her mother have an intimidating effect on the viewer, an awkwardness similar to that aroused in *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965) in its exploration of the alienated personality, resulting in an interesting generic hybrid that straddles

the line between drama and the horror genre that Aronofsky's film falls into.

In addition to her double personality and role, Nina's character is also projected in others: for example, in the character played by Winona Ryder [Fig. 2], the usurped diva who recalls Irina from *The Red Shoes*. Aronofsky has a tendency of recycling his actor's personal life and intertwining it with the story to achieve a convincing effect while at the same time further complicating the plot. He does this with Ryder, the teenage superstar of the 1990s, as he did with the fallen idol Mickey Rourke in *The Wrestler*. And he also establishes a rivalry between the character played by Mila Kunis, the promising young hopeful, and the protagonist played by Natalie Portman, the established star.

Nina's personality feeds on her interaction with the other characters. Her theft of Beth's lipstick and earrings, among other belongings, is suggestive of a fetishist synecdoche of her venerated role model. Her visit to the hospital confirms that the two have points in common: self-destructiveness, a quest for excellence and a dismal fate. On the other hand, Lily, her onstage rival, on whom she projects her own jealousy and aspirations, represents what Eve Harrington represented for Margo Channing in *All about Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950). Initially she appears to be a threat to Nina, since she is a potential candidate for the part of the black swan and represents the antithesis of repression and the epitome of passionate, unbridled commitment to her art. Yet she also constitutes the driving force behind the loss of inhibition that Nina needs to play the role of the impulsive and ruthless bird.

Lily has been described as the protagonist's *doppelgänger*, the unknown ballerina who, in the middle of a persecution crisis, attempts to take over by replacing her (ESPAÑA, 2010: 127). But in fact, Nina already has her double in herself, although on a psychic level, according to the Freudian logic, her Id is personified by Lily (Mila Kunis) and her Super-Ego by her mother (Barbara Hershey). Initially, Beth represents the ideal self who half-

way through the story becomes instead the reflection of a dismal future, while Leroy embodies the trigger for the emergence of the Id (FREUD, 1992: 135-214). Consequently, all these characters, while bearing some parallels with the characters of *Swan Lake*, constitute the organic, animated materialisation of the protagonist's mind. Acting in the realm of reality they set off a series of feelings and reactions in Nina, while at the same time they personify her insecurities, goals, failures and frustrations. This recourse to solipsism constitutes a means for the convergence of the points of view of spectator and protagonist, while at the same time expressing the progressive emergence of the dark side and contradictions of the ballerina.

In her process of inner exploration, the main character loses her sanity, like Mima, who confuses dreams with reality to the point of questioning her own identity in *Perfect Blue* (Satoshi Kon, 1998), of which Aronofsky's film is considered a remake. The need to mature ultimately becomes overwhelming, as it does in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) when Jane, who believes herself still to be a young girl, reacts with horror at the sight of her aged face in the mirror. In *The Double*, Golyadkin will deny himself, exclaiming: "I'm ... quite all right. It's not I, it's not I—and that is the fact of the matter" (Dostoevsky, 2008: 8). Nina will gradually accept the emergence of her *alter ego* until she finally understands that she cannot exist without it, and that it cannot coexist with her pious side.

The imposing power of the camera

The story is set in a wintry New York City that we barely see, because Nina's life takes place entirely at her house or in the theatre. The spirit of the Big Apple can only be glimpsed in the scenes on the subway. The indoor sets are black and white rooms³ captured with a baroque chiaroscuro photography. This aesthetic characterises the moments of terror and is contrasted by the naturalistic lighting used for the dramatic parts of the story. In addition, Vicon cameras are used because of their high resolution and great flexibility because of their small size, as well as steadycams. The handheld camera facilitates the freedom of its operator and suggests a certain degree of improvisation. Its use is intended to highlight the components of *verité* that balance the turbulent and artful visual elements of the horror genre.

One of the technical keys to Aronofsky's cinematography lies in narrative subjectivity: the story from the point of view of the protagonist. The POV constructs the inner monologue of the characters, who are framed in very specific contexts, such as the wrestling world or, in this occasion, professional ballet. At the beginning of the story, Nina is shown rehearsing some pirouettes. In this scene, shots of the ballerina are alternated with shots from her point of view as she turns and then stops, showing Leroy

in the frame. This is another nod to *The Red Shoes* which, apart from communicating the anxious state of the ballerina, establishes a connection with the despotic figure of Lermontov. After a hard day, Nina comes back home to have a soothing bath. We relax with her before suffering a sudden shock, when after a few drops of blood fall into the water, the product of her self-mutilation, we are shown another heautoscopy from her POV.

At the end of the story is the premiere, which was shot using a specialised team of technicians and artists. Powell's approach for such a scene in *The Red Shoes* consists of a stunning series of shots that always give the spectator a privileged point of view of the action, pushing past the frontal limits of the theatre to perform a purely cinematographic exercise. Aronofsky seeks something similar by positioning the camera on the stage to dance in front of the dancers, in a kind of ballet within the ballet. The actors approach the camera suddenly and their unexpected turns vest the shots with dynamism, to which the music and make-up add an intriguing and disquieting quality.

Digital enhancement and hyperbolic sound

The raw footage was extensively manipulated in the postproduction phase by means of sound, music and edition, with elements ranging from the subtly strange to pure fantasy. Animation with After Effects, HDR computer rendering, keyframing and rasterisation are some of the digital editing techniques used. For independent filmmakers with small budgets, such effects offer a good opportunity to fully develop their aesthetic intentions. In *Black Swan*, even the most unlikely elements undergo computer editing. Beyond the indie label, the film falls within what Lipovetsky and Serroy call "trompe l'oe-

il" in the hypercinema age, the ultimate goal of which lies in the pursuit of visual impact, highlighted by increasingly sophisticated technologies that eliminate the distance of the observer. The result is a hybrid analogue-digital image derived from art for mass consumption: hyper-high tech cinema for the society of excess (2009: 43-53).

Examples of digital editing are scattered throughout the film. In the opening scene, during the protagonist's dream, a shining dance floor is digitally altered to achieve a dazzling effect. The same is done to the feather that comes through Nina's shoulder blade, modified to give it even more volume. All these obsessively computer-enhanced details are almost imperceptible and unnecessary, in keeping with the hypermodern aesthetic of saturation and the cinematic logic of excess. In other cases these effects are justifiable in scenes such as the moment during the premiere when the ballerinas pass fleetingly with the face of the star herself. Here, the recourse to solipsism is intensified, signalling Nina's complete loss of contact with reality and the beginning of her self-destructive stage, evoking the same anxiety in the spectator, whose eyes, desensitised by the media, are increasingly difficult to impress.

Aronofsky outdoes *The Red Shoes* in his obsession with mirrors, which play a key role in the dance scenes, forcing the protagonist to observe herself constantly, thus representing the loss of identity in her process of

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Figure 3. *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010)



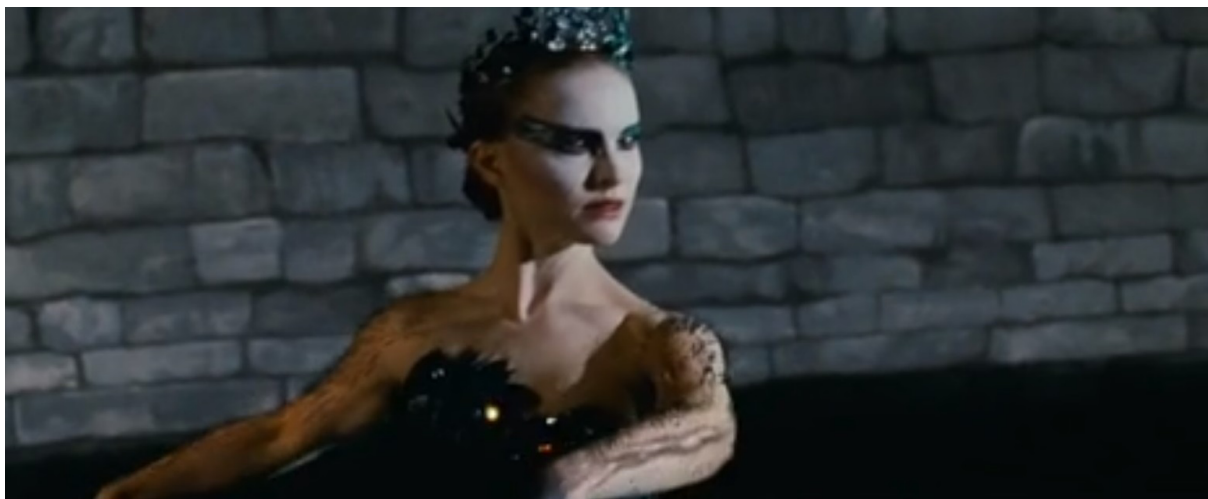


Figure 4. *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

mental degradation and essentially disorienting and unsettling the viewer. The use of mirrors constitutes one of the oldest tricks in horror cinema. Mythology, legend and literature are replete with stories in which an individual observes his or her own reflection and suffers the consequences of doing so. From Narcissus to Dorian Gray, the contemplation of one's own image has tragic results. For Lecouteux, the origin of this tragedy is associated with the belief that the soul can be totally or partially transferred to the representation of its owner. The reproduction of one's own image attracts and holds the double, acting as a catalyst for the curse, as well as representing a connection to death and the invisible world (1999: 167-170).

All the spaces in the film, filled with all kinds of mirrors and reflecting surfaces, are combined with physical and digital trick photography. One of the most striking scenes centres on Nina in the changing room, before the day of the premiere, when her reflection suddenly comes alive [Fig. 3]. The effect is created by filming behind a polarised mirror, allowing the insertion of the image filmed showing Nina's reflection moving independently and the infinite dimension of two mirrors facing each other.

Another of the more digitally complex scenes is the metamorphosis at the end of the film [Fig. 4]. The final product, rather than a monstrous image, results in a magnificent hybrid between swan and woman, a reformulation of the mythical harpy. Her anatomy is practically human, in accordance with the explicit wish of the director, who wanted to play with the beauty of the actress and the spectacular nature of the wings (whose plumage is part real and partly computer generated) to contrast it with the horrendous intensity of the moment of the transformation, when the feathers literally sprout from the epidermis.

The New York filmmaker does not eschew traditional techniques in his configuration of a repulsive universe verging on gore, as he also makes use of make-up, maquettes, puppets and prosthetic devices. Beth's injury to her own face or Nina's numerous wounds are a combination of make-up and prosthetics that form one of the director's hallmarks: the incision in the image of the bloody wound as an external expression of the state of mind. Nina virulently cuts the nails of an electronically articulated hand; Rothbart's make-up is based on a Michelangelo drawing of a satyr and enhanced with a prosthesis. The image-excess posited by the authors of *La pantalla mundial* (2009) is made evident by the emphasis on the spectacular and the detailed. The determination to achieve the perfect finish sometimes even results in the post-production digital enhancement of the already excellently executed make-up.

The whirls of the Bacchic dances, the tearing of the skin, the vivid apparitions and the creaking of the wood under the dancers' afflicted feet are all perceived acoustically in a disproportionate manner in keeping with the hyperbolic aesthetic of a hypermodern cinematic style. Nevertheless, the sonic exaggeration fulfils the needs of the horror genre. One strategy involves making use of sounds initially dissociated from the object from which they emanate, to produce antagonistic sensations and, ultimately, to elicit terror. Among the examples of this strategy are the director's stolen kiss, accompanied by the sound of grating knives, or the sigh we hear while Nina colours her lips with Beth's rouge. When the protagonist tries out her shoes for the first time, and she begins to tear and twist them to adapt them to her feet, image and sound evoke the condition of a discipline which, as in *The Wrestler*, the body is pushed to strain against its own nature.

The film's music is the work of Aronofsky's constant collaborator, Clint Mansel, both for the version of Tchai-

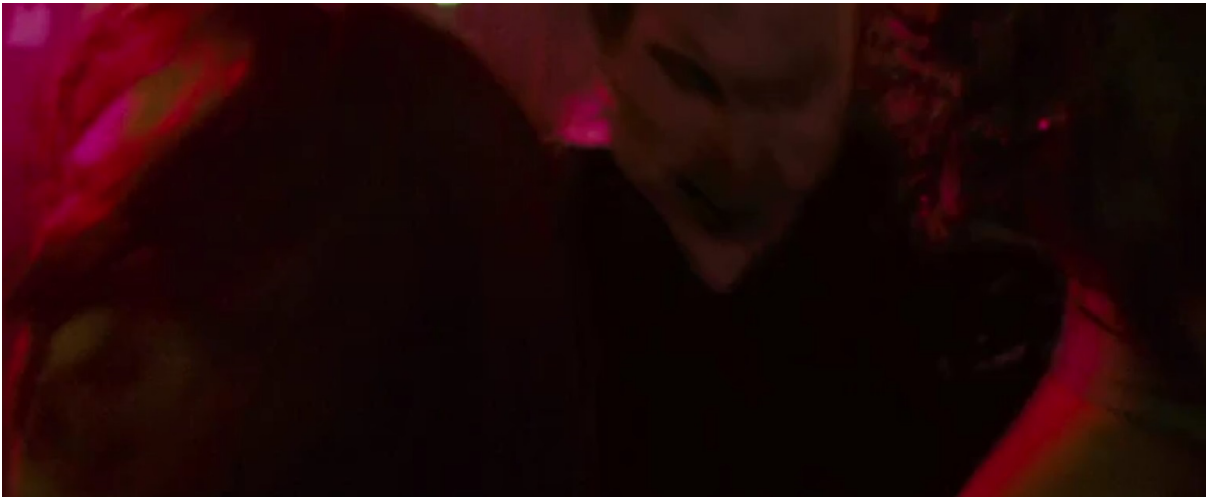


Figure 5. *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

kovsky's ballet and for the whole soundtrack. Music is employed as a conventional element of horror films, to provide atmosphere and to underscore dramatic tension. It is precisely its absence, accentuated by soft background noise, which gives certain scenes a naturalistic touch, generally in less emotionally charged moments in the story. Of note is the collage of very short shots on the nightclub dance floor, in which flashes, coloured lights, duplicated faces and even Rothbart himself are alternated with the images of the young girls [Fig. 5] dancing under the effects of ecstasy to the bacchanalian rhythm of the Chemical Brothers.

Conclusions

Darren Aronofsky successfully takes on the tradition of the double, separating it from its magical connotations by drawing on ideas from the psychiatric and psychological disciplines. In this way he is able to increase the degree of credibility and, at the same time, the anxiety inherent to the suspense film. Riding the wave of the horror film revival, he can just barely maintain the balance between independent cinema and blockbuster production. The realistic element of the filming and the significant weight of the sound are accompanied by special effects typical of the digital age, not only as a mechanism for making an impact, but also to take full advantage of the symbolic power of objects, to highlight the classical phenomena of horror and to make the most of the basic tools of the audiovisual medium.

The film has been essentially conceived for visual enjoyment. However, its bombastic style is not at odds with intellectual commitment. In the plot, the art of dance conceals the wounds that are so caustically reiterated in the film and which, as in all of Aronofsky's work, foreshadow the impending doom and represent a soul in decay. The director has by this point begun to define his

concerns and to reveal an aesthetic marked by some recognisable idiosyncrasies. In this particular story he portrays the mind of the artist, a figure on a constant quest for the impossible, with a perilous mission to bring out the wilder and darker side of the fragile and prudent self.

In this peculiar slasher in which the killer is at the same time the victim, the fable will be completed in the realm of reality: Beth's last role will be Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy. Nina, like Odette, will only find the realisation of her dream in self-annihilation. Horkheimer and Adorno agree that the Freudian *death instinct* or Callois's *mimetisme* needs to be interpreted as an exegesis of the depth of the destructive impulses in modern society, and aggression would likewise constitute an intrinsic element of the human being (2007: 245-246). Perhaps it is more edifying to assume the more positive interpretative dimension that Marcuse gives the concept, when he suggests that *Thanatos* does not seek the destruction of life, but the elimination of its inherent pain (1955: 29). ■

ARONOFSKY HAS BY THIS POINT BEGUN TO DEFINE HIS CONCERNS AND TO REVEAL AN AESTHETIC MARKED BY SOME RECOGNISABLE IDIOSYNCRASIES

Notes

* The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is her responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)

1 In his detailed analysis of the figure of the double in the collective imaginary, the author suggests that *Fylgja* is a person's spiritual double, and it can leave its host while the latter sleeps. *Hamr* represents the physical double, the part suitable for metamorphosis and for the alter ego, which tends to make an appearance to

complete an unfinished act. Finally, *Hugr* is the universal active principle, which manifests in the *Hamr* and brings it to life.

- 2 Among other significant examples are E. T. A. Hoffmann and his tales *The Sandman* and *Automata*; Edgar Allan Poe with *William Wilson*; *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde; and *The Terror* by Guy de Maupassant. It also extends into the twentieth century with *The Jolly Corner* by Henry James; *The Other* by Miguel de Unamuno; and *The Double* by José Saramago, and is expressed in diverse variations in Borges' work.
- 3 With the exception of Nina's bedroom, bathed in pink and full of stuffed animals, denoting her condition as an overprotected child in this claustrophobic apartment. A similar effect can be noted in her clothing, which will become darker and darker until, in the second part of the story, she is dressed completely in black for the first time, just when she decides to ignore her mother and spend time with Lily.

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