LACAN, ‘THE MIRROR STAGE’ AND SUBJECTIVITY: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF BLACK SWAN

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Abstract:
Black swan directed by Darren Aronosky is a critically acclaimed movie which bagged multiple awards at the Oscars. The movie revolves around a timid and nervous Ballerina, Nina who desperately competes to bag the role of the swan queen. This struggle however is marked by images of mutilation, anguish and emotional and psychological upheaval. This paper purports to argue that behind this seemingly simple tale of aspiration, failure and success one can perceive a more complicated narrative of acquisition of subjectivity. An attempt has been made to read Black Swan through the prism of Lacan’s initial postulations to answer questions such as: Why is there a predominance of reflective surfaces such as mirrors in the movie? How does it tie with Lacan’s conception of the constitution of the subject? Is ‘othering’ constitutive of the subject? How does the movie portray the latter? Lastly and most importantly how does one understand Nina’s death in the light of these queries?

Introduction
The publication of Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1975 in the British film theory journal Screen was one of the most visible expressions of the tilt of film theory towards the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The relevance of psychoanalysis to film studies has only acquired firmer grounds in the past decade. From Jean-Louis Baudry's and Christian Metz’s articulations concerning the relationship between the screen and the spectator to Slavoj Zizek’s Pervert’s Guide To Cinema that speaks of how the cinema tells us not just “what to desire” but also “how to desire”, the discourses around psychoanalysis have only widened the peripheries of film theory.

Lacan’s psychoanalysis has been at the heart of multifarious observations made in the practice of film theory. This paper attempts to look at the 2010 release Black Swan directed by Darron Aaronsky (lauded for cinematic wonders such as The Fountain and Requim for a Dream) in the light of Lacan’s conceptualization of the mirror stage. The paper shall begin by summarising some of Lacan's theories and as we progress an attempt will be made to engage those theories with the narrative of Black Swan. Slavoj Zizek, whose manifold writings lie at the
intersection of Lacan and popular Hollywood cinema while commenting on the 2010 release *Black Swan* in an article titled "Redefining family values on film" wrote,

> The other winner at the 2011 Oscars, *Black Swan*, a feminine counterpart to *The King's Speech*, is even more reactionary. Its premise is that, while a man can dedicate himself to his mission (as in *The King's Speech*) and still lead a normal, private life, a woman who totally dedicates herself to her mission (here to be a ballerina) enters the path of self-destruction. It is easy to recognise in this plot the old topos of a woman torn between pursuing her artistic mission and having a happy, calm private life.

This paper shall try to steer clear of any such obvious feminist reading of the text but instead provide an alternative meaning to the story by reading the text in the light of Jacques Lacan’s initial theoretical conjectures.

In the very first few shots of the movie, Thomas Leroy, the choreographer of the swan lake ballet in the movie while describing his ballet in the following words summarises the movie rather simply.

> We all know the story, virginal girl, sweet and innocent trapped in the body of the swan, she desires freedom but only true love can break the spell. Her wish is nearly granted in form of a prince but before he can declare his love, the evil twin, Black Swan tricks and seduces him. Devastated, the White Swan leaps of the cliff killing herself and in death finds freedom.

Thus, on the surface level the movie is a contemporary psychological depiction of this very description of the fairy tale. It is a thriller that hinges on the struggle of a ballerina who is selected for playing the White and the Black Swan in a much acclaimed ballet called the swan lake. However, where she has no trouble dancing and enacting the innocent and virginal White Swan, the manipulative and seductive Black Swan escapes her comprehension. She is threatened by competition from another ballerina who personifies the Black Swan. Her obsessive compulsive mother is not much refuge either. Soon in her struggle for “perfection” she begins to lose herself and her sanity. Gradually, in order to fit into the role of the evil Black Swan she claims a break from her mother, her helpless attitude, acquiring in the end perfection in death.

**The Curious Case of Aimee**

Lacan’s doctoral thesis, “Paranoid Psychosis and its Relations to the Personality” was completed in 1932. The thesis revolved around a certain Marguerite Anzieu (named Aimee after the heroine of her unpublished novel) who had tried to attack/stab Huguette-ex-Duflos, an actress. By plunging into the psychical, personal and social world in which Aimee had grown up (by looking at the inherited nature of her problem, her relationship with her elder sister, the trauma over her still born child, the liability of raising her children rather than fleeing to America to pursue her dream to become an author and so and so forth) Lacan tried to piece together the logic behind her seemingly mindless act.
In brief, this analysis led him to the conclusion that she was suffering from self-punishing paranoia. Aimee tried to stab the actress because the actress became for Aimee both an object of hate and desire. Aimee saw the figure of this actress as a threat to the life of her young son and herself. It was only in punishment and solitude of the mental asylum that Aimee understood the true import of her act. As Olga Cox-Cameron in the essay ‘Lacan's Doctoral Thesis: Turbulent Preface Or Founding Legend?’ writes “It is not the aggressive act in itself which appeases the unconscious desire, but the realisation that she has struck herself by this action which eventually brings the delusional impetus to a halt.” (33) Lacan’s thesis thus impinged on the idea of doubling and images (tropes that are intrinsic to the narrative and cinematography of Black Swan). These ideas became far coherent and pronounced in Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage.

**Mirroring, Reflexivity and Movie-watching**

In his essay ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’—Lacan was to lay down his analysis of the “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image”. (76) This transformation occurs, he argued, because of identification in the mirror stage. Although, he initially argued that such a period lasted from 6 months to 18 months, a shift in this idea took place later in his career where the imaginary was seen as an integral part of the subject's entire life. This section aims at highlighting the chief arguments of the aforementioned essay to elucidate the centrality of doubling and identification to Lacan’s notion of subjectivity.

Lacan argues that children are born prematurely and suffer from “motor impotence and nursling dependence” however whence looking at a mirror they seem “to overcome, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop” (76). Although mirror stage can best be understood “as an identification”, by making this kind of connection the subject/infant/child/individual also implies an ensuing of an eternal war that the subject will wage forever to correspond wholly with the ideal-I.

This form would, moreover, have to be called the "ideal-I". . . the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather,That will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical synthases by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan 76)

Thus, though this identification is important and gives the subject a sense of unity, at the same time the self becomes something that’s outside, external, alienating. The consciousness of a stable unitary self is thus produced at the cost of this self, being regarded as other. The ego comes into being at this moment and has its genesis in, firstly, the lack of completeness in the body and nervous system and, secondly, in an alienating identification.

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, For the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies That proceed from a fragmented image of
the body to what I will call an ‘orthopaedic’ form of its totality—and to the finally
donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental
development with its rigid structure. (Lacan 78)

Thus, even though the body of the infant is still incapable of performing basic functions, the image reflected in the mirror on the other hand is whole, complete. The ambiguous or dual relationship with the specular image thus implies both agressivity and eroticism. ‘This ‘erotic aggression’ continues as a fundamental ambivalence underlying all future forms of identification, and is an essential characteristic of narcissism. Narcissism can thus easily veer from extreme self-love to the opposite extreme of ‘narcissistic suicidal aggression’’(Evans 6). All these arguments will be taken up later in the essay to weigh Lacan’s arguments and the movie on an axis of simultaneity.

It is interesting to note here that there is a recurrent motive of mirroring throughout Black Swan. Except for the last shot of the movie where there is an absence of any kind of reflective surface, the entire movie is loaded with the motive of one or the other kind of mirror. The glasses on the train, the long length mirrors in the ballet class, the mirror at home, water: the trope of themirror keeps reoccurring. This repetition of reflexivity is further embodied in the reflexivity of the camera and subsequently the screen.

To digress from the central engagement of this paper, the film theory propounded by Jean-Louis Baudry’s in his ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, first published in Cinethique wherein he appropriates Lacan's conception of the mirror stage to explain the spectators' gaze, the screen and the function of the camera works with this very phenomenon. He speaks of the screen as the mirror that reflects back images and not reality. The two conditions that dominate the mirror stage: one of immobility and second of enhanced visual comprehension, are both characteristic of the subject watching the movie as well. The identification however as opposed to the original (i.eLacan’s conjectures) happens at two levels. The first one is that which is established between the subject and the images and the second one that which is established between the subject and the camera. Thus reflexivity makes an appearance time and again in terms of symbolism, of narrative and in terms of a prerequisite for the meaning production of the film as such.

Black Swan, Nina and Ideal-I

Nina inhabits a world of stuffed toys, of butterfly ridden wallpapers and of miniature dancing ballerinas. Her obsessive mother consistently refers to her as my sweet girl and does not shy away from undressing her to cutting her nails every single time. During the first thirty minutes of the movie Nina is seen wearing shades of pink (baby pink precisely) she wears a pink muffler, a pink bathing gown, a pink coat and pink shrug.

The motive behind this description is the portrayal of Nina as a child who is still dependent on her mother for the littlest of tasks and lives in a world meant that all girls are stereotypically inscribed to when they are young. This is the world of all things pink, supple and
stuffed. Her room has no locking system and she sleeps while her mother looks over her. She constantly seeks approval from her mother and wants to be admired and accepted by all.

When Lacan spoke of image, reflection and the subject he was not just referring to mirrors or some reflective surface. For the infant, the mother, or another child can also be the ideal-I, the gestalt\(^{19}\). Likewise, Nina also identifies with her mother, who becomes a reflective surface. She learns to desire what her mother desire, a fondness for dancing and the attitude to excel. However the jubilation from achieving the perfection of the (m)other’s image is only short-lived as soon the wholeness of the mother’s image begins to threaten the body with disintegration and fragmentation. This fragmentedness of the self is portrayed through the gruesome images of scratching, accidental skin peeling and toe twisting.

The second identification would be that which she strikes with Beth. A former dancer of the same company, Beth is made to retire since she is growing old. Nina considers Beth perfect. The obsession with perfection is not to be purely understood as some ambitious harking for the zenith of success but rather as the ego’s battle to achieve the wholeness, completeness of the ideal-I. Thus in her search for perfection, for a similarity between her and Beth, that is what she is seeking.

Another pertinent analysis of the movie centres on her identification with Lily, the other of Nina. There is an intermittent bond of alienation and identification that Nina forges with Lily. Where Nina is intrigued by Lily, she is simultaneously infused with a sense of competition. She shares her feelings with Lily, and then immediately derides her; she goes to the night club, discovers her sexuality and in the morning dismisses her. There is an oscillation between aggressivity and eroticism throughout her relationship with Lily. Gradually, she reaches a stage where she is paranoid that Lily is out to steal her part in the ballet reproduction of the folk tale.

*Black Swan* ends with Nina’s death. The movie presents Nina’s death as an inevitable result of an over-arching Faustian deal, as the price the latter has to pay in order to gain penultimate perfection. SlavojZizek on the other hand as mentioned before argues that Nina’s tale and her death relive the age-old rationale of women’s failure and doom when they claim an access to public life and spaces. However, when one reads the text in the light of the postulation that Lacan made in his early career one can welcome a different interpretation.

It is only in Nina’s death that her ego can assimilate with the external image. Her death is the price for a sense of narrative closure and also the cause for a synthesis. The Hegelian dialectic of slave and master relationship thus had a huge influence on Lacan’s ‘The Mirror Stage’. Although, an attempt has been made, through this paper to enrich the body of work done in the field of psychoanalytic film theory, some avenues in the movie still remain uncharted. What symbolic role does Thomas Leroy play? Does he perhaps depict the name of the father of the symbolic order? Does he offer Nina a break from the imaginary and an initiation into the order of society and language? These are some of the questions that can be answered by engaging with Lacan’s later writings.
End notes

iii The paper was first presented in 1936 however since Lacan was interrupted in the middle of his paper. The version in *Écrits* dates from 1949, 13 years later. This explains the beginning of the essay.

iv Gestalt can be best explained as our understanding of a form whose meaning exceeds the totality of its components.


**Webliography**
