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The Doppelganger Effect (2020-2021)

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“The Doppelganger Effect” Jessica Jean-Baptiste (research inquiry example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

In this example of a research inquiry, Jean-Baptiste discusses the use of the concept of the doppelganger as it helps to highlight “the true horrors of mental disorders, sexism within the ballet community, and the overall mood” of the film, *Black Swan*. As you read Jean-Baptiste’s essay, consider:

- Rather than trying to explain the entirety of the film, *Black Swan*, Jean-Baptiste focuses on how one film choice (the use of mirrors and camera work to create doubles or doppelgangers) accomplishes several goals. How do you make choices in your own research inquiry on how to focus or narrow your topic? How can you create cohesion for your conversation about a film or topic while still balancing being specific?
- In addition to the film, *Black Swan*, Jean-Baptiste deftly introduces several other films in order to make brief connections to where a strategy or concept has been used elsewhere, as well. These additional examples offer a model for bringing in supporting examples without going off on a “tangent.” How effective were these other film examples as supporting evidence to you? How can you use brief supporting examples without taking the focus away from your main conversation? What might you want to avoid?
- In the organization of her essay, Jean-Baptiste moves from mental disorders to sexism within the ballet community, and finally, to the overall mood of the film as a thriller. What effect did this organizational structure have for you as the reader? How do you make choices about ordering your sub-topics or concepts?

The Doppelganger Effect by Jessica Jean-Baptiste

Black Swan is a 2010 psychological horror film directed by Darren Aronofsky, which places the audience in the world of Nina Sayers, a prudent and conservative ballerina finally facing the realization that her journey to perfection has led her to remain stagnant in her technique and emotional expressions. In the movie, the main plot focuses on how Nina’s dance company has decided to bring new light to *Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake*, in which a ballerina plays both the White Swan and Black Swan. Throughout the movie, Nina begins to slowly break down because of the stress of trying to achieve a true transformation from the White Swan to the Black Swan. The film explores not only her journey of being the Black Swan, but the psychological damage that comes with performing and being a ballerina in general. Tony E. Jackson, an English Professor at North Carolina, is the author of *Social neuroscience, the imitative animal, and Aronofsky’s Black Swan*, in which he focuses on the psychological damages that dancers incur as a result of being a ballerina dancer. In it, he says, “I show how the movie--specifically Nina’s obsession to perfect her role as Swan Queen, along with the use of mirrors and doppelgangers--becomes an investigation into a negative possibility that necessarily haunts the imitative animal: over-imitation” (Jackson 445). The film uses the special effect of mirrors and doppelgangers to represent the many mental disorders Nina has, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, bulimia,

and excoriation disorder. Darren Aronofsky is quite known for his psychological films which are constantly infusing important social commentary with terror within his films. *Black Swan* is not an exception to this rule, as the film explains to the audience how harmful the push for perfection can be, especially when no family or friends are willing to recognize the drastic life changes a person is going through. To express the message in most of his films, Aronofsky includes doubles to emphasize the terror of not being able to recognize oneself. Monica Calvo Pascual, an English Professor at the University of Zaragoza, who is known for her in-depth papers on films, in her paper “It was Perfect: Desire, Corporeality, and Denial in Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*,” states, “Much has been written on Aronofsky’s film since its release in 2010. Most approaches are psychoanalytic, mainly Lacanian, and focus on the motifs of the mirror and the double (the doppelgänger) in the frame of the psycho-thriller” (Pascual 122). The film’s use of the doppelgänger effect creates horror in thousands of psychological films; however, in *Black Swan* it also helps develop the true horrors of mental disorders, sexism within the ballet community, and influences the overall mood of the film.

Mental disorders are conditions that affect the human brain and unfortunately integrate themselves in the daily lives of hundreds of people around the world. Sports have been an enjoyable pastime for thousands. However, for many it is not that simple; rather than it being a fun source of entertainment, the sport is or becomes a lifestyle/profession. This is why there is an immense amount of concern that comes with the pressure of playing sports, including the psychological damages that come with being a ballerina. Ballerinas are constantly forced to deal with the pressure of being “perfect” not only in their form but in their physique overall. As Antoinette Van Staden, a renowned ballet dancer, Chris P. H. Myburgh, who earned his Educational Psychology degree at University of Johannesburg, and Marie Poggenpoel, a writer who has a degree in nursing at University of Johannesburg, state in their article, “A Psycho-Educational Model to Enhance the Self-Development and Mental Health of Classical Dancers,” “The data reported above suggest that dancers are strongly influenced by their environment, which has a potentially negative influence on identity formation that can lead to dependency, depression, eating disorders, and other personality issues” (Staden, Myburgh, and Poggenpoel 23). Nina Sayer is a clear example of how a dancer can be affected by the environment she surrounds herself in, as she focuses on maintaining her position as the lead expectation, she also has constant pressure from her mother, who has decided to live vicariously through Nina because of her failure at being a true dancer, once she had fallen pregnant with Nina. Nina’s disorders are made clear early on in the movie; in the beginning, one of the first conversations between Nina and her mother, Erica consists of Nina and her recurring need to begin picking at her back when she finds herself overly stressed at the company. As stated by Matthew Libatique, in Ana Espana’s article, “The Double in the Mirror,” the cameraman for the movie said, “In response to the mandate mother, Nina takes scissors and starts cutting the nails firmly. My camera panned slowly from Nina's face to her reflection in the mirror projected. At that moment, a strange presence seems to spring from the body of the girl and her face turns evil, Sinister” (Espana 131). This quote is said by Libatique to explain the use of the camera and mirror effect to help amplify the special effect of creating Nina’s evil double, which is added while she is harming herself to also help the audience see the unhealthy acts Nina would take part in when she is feeling out of control in her dancing. *Black Swan*’s technique of creating evil doubles through cameras can be shown within Manoj Nelliyattu Shyamalan film, *Split* another psychological horror film that focuses on a man with dissociative identity disorder, who has abducted three teenage girls. The movie’s use of camerawork is very similar to the camerawork in *Black Swan*, as both the

directors seem to enjoy using angles and close-ups to focus the audience on important details as well as help emphasize the fears those struggling with their mental disorders face. However, mental disorders are not the only message Aronofsky had decided to speak on.

Black Swan indulges in several social issues and expresses this through the usage of mirrors. The topic of sexism in film and ballet is rather hidden compared to the other topics; however, that does not mean the topic is not as important, as throughout the film, there is a clear chemistry between Nina and her ballet teacher, Thomas Leroy. Their relationship teeters between professional and romantic throughout the film. While some may have found their relationship romantic, most of those who watch the film feel slightly uncomfortable with the ways Leroy is pushing Nina to embrace her sexuality for her in order to remain in her leading position. As explained by Amber Jacobs in her essay with Mark Fisher, where they debate the film as a whole, "Debating Black Swan: Gender and Horror," "Thomas constantly tells her she is repressed, inhibited, fragile, and ultimately passive. He attempts to seduce her into exploring her (dark) side, her inner (black swan) (an age-old male rescue fantasy of unlocking the woman's desire dating back to Sleeping Beauty)" (Fisher and Jacobs 59). Throughout the film, Aronofsky includes that Nina's purity and repression of her sexuality is the main reason why she is failing at embracing the Black Swan the way she should. This idea reduces Nina to an object rather than her own complex person, who simply just may not be ready to indulge in her sexual desires yet. Rather than teaching Nina new techniques, Leroy is continually trying to make sexual advances towards Nina in hopes it will seduce her into seeing the beauty of sex and will help her achieve true perfection. Aronofsky uses the doppelganger effect in his movie to represent the sexist ideals of man in his film through the relationship between Nina and Lily, who is Nina's enemy in the film not simply because she is Nina's backup, but because Lily perfectly embodies Leroy's idea of the Black Swan: she is viewed as sexy, mysterious, and liberating. Lily's character is essentially the complete opposite of Nina, which pushes Nina to dissociate even further as she begins to paint Lily as the Black Swan in her mind. As stated by Nick James, author of the article, "Dancer in the Dark," includes the writer's interview with Aronofsky and the decisions made to create the masterpiece that is *Black Swan*. James states, "Every Woman Who Surrounds Nina is, it seems, Both rival and her double- Including suicidal, washed-up former principal dancer Beth (Winona Ryder); the seemingly friendly, sexy rival Lily (Mila Kunis), Who Wants to take Nina out clubbing; and even her jealous mother Erica (Barbara Hershey), who's terrified of growing up and Nina having the real success that she can not share "(James par. 6). Lily represents the dark side in Nina's head and as she slowly becomes the Black Swan, Lily becomes Nina's double except she is shown wearing black while Nina is wearing white and pink. For example, the first time Nina encounters Lily is when she is on the train on the way to ballet practice and sees a woman that looks identical to her. Nina is extremely disturbed to see her clone, especially since she is clothed in all black, and as the woman gets off the train, Nina is left to ponder what she has just seen, with a look of slight terror as Lily is meant to represent a darker version of Nina. The film uses the reflection on the train window/doors to rotate between Nina's and Lily's silhouettes to represent what is being seen from Nina's point of view. To add more confusion to the scene whenever the reflection somewhat resembles Nina the camera becomes a bit more shaky so it's hard for even the audience to comprehend what they truly saw. The mirror and camera effects when used correctly allow for directors to reveal what the audience should be paying attention to in order to push the storyline further, which is a tool *Black Swan* uses greatly and influences other thriller films to do the same. The final element of how special effects have

influenced the film is how it is the key part of how the movie is a thriller rather than simply a drama.

The general mood is a factor that can affect any work of art, so directors must find techniques and elements that can help the development of their mood in their film. For Aronofsky, that technique is the use of mirrors and other features to create a doppelganger for Nina which will represent not only her dark side but also adds an ominous feature to the film. This feature helps allow the audience to stay intrigued by the story while also being terrified of Nina's other half and the damage it/she will bring into her life. The use of mirrors within the movie helps create the reality that is in Nina's mind, despite knowing most parts of Nina's mind is going crazy the audience is faced with the challenge of figuring out what is real and what is fake throughout the entire film. For instance, during the violent climax of the film Nina's evil counterpart is no longer simply just a reflection, but has finally manifested itself in Nina. Aronofsky develops this idea through having Nina and "Lily," which is actually a hallucination in Nina's mind, fight in order to determine if she truly can personify her role, as both the white and black swan. In the midst of their fight Nina throws Lily/The Black Swan into her vanity mirror and using a shard from the mirror, stabs the evil reflection. This action destroys the usage of mirrors for the rest of the film since Nina has finally won her battle with becoming her role and is now able to fully embody both parts without any obstacles. The destruction of the mirror and its part in being the weapon that leads to Nina's victory is not a coincidence; Tony E. Jackson states, "In this story mirrors are always more than just elements of a set" (Jackson 450). Essentially throughout the film viewers are meant to see the Black Swan as the villain; however, as the film goes on the audience becomes less fearful of the reflection but more of the mirror as whenever a mirror shown spectators react and force themselves to pay close attention to see if they can notice anything different or ominous. The mirrors create a feeling of anticipation and fear, which is how the film crosses the line between drama and thriller. *Black Swan* is an inspiring film in this nature, for following this movie, there are several films which use mirrors as a special effect to represent the evils within a character, movies such as *Look Away*, a 2018 psychological thriller which follows a young teen named Maria, who switches places with her evil reflection. While the films are quite different in plot, the way the camera and mirrors play an effect on the mood. The camera and mirrors also help the audience feel a shift in reality and the characters teetering mental health are extremely similar and because of that, *Black Swan* can be appreciated for influencing an array of thriller films and can continue its influence in other horror movies. Despite the wonderful aspects of social commentary and the ability to create tension and fear with just the use of mirrors, there is still controversy about how to impact the movie *Black Swan* truly is.

For some, *Black Swan* is not a film in which has played a role in developing the truth behind the sexism and abuses ballerinas are forced to deal with in their community. Many argue the film has failed in expressing the sexism within the ballet community but instead fetishize the misogyny that Nina faces throughout the film. As explained by Rina Angela Corpus, an assistant professor at the Department of Art Studies, UP Diliman who focuses most her writings on feminist dancing history and gender issues within the arts, "For in the thriller genre as in ballet, women's bodies at once become objects of romantic idealization on one hand, and of scopophilic brutality on the other" (Corpus 159). There is an argument that the two institutions: the Hollywood industry and ballet enjoy romanticizing the female body and participate in the act of bringing controversial topics such as sexual harassment into their work but avoid the same real life issues that are

practically engraved into their system. The hypocrisy of stating that Arronofsky film *Black Swan* is truly a film that expresses the hardships women face in the arts is that instead of calling out Leroy and his unpleasant advances towards Nina and possible relationship with his previous dancer, the film decides to brush it under the rug and allow for Nina to still perform brilliantly, which confirms Leroy's theory that to become perfect Nina must focus on her sexual prowess rather than her overall ballet skills. However, while some may see Nina's final transformation at the end of the film as an approval towards Leroy's actions throughout the movie, they fail to also recognize the feelings of the audience once the credits begin to roll. The movie ends with Nina barely hanging onto life, stating "it was perfect" (alluding to her performance) followed by a blinding white light, which has brought many to believe that was hinting to Nina dying after accidentally stabbing herself during her hallucination/fight. In the end, Nina's death does call out the struggles within the ballet community, for it shows the brutality of ballet and its community. Nina works herself so hard that despite the beautiful performance in the end it is not worth it since said performance is what leads to her death, which also works in calling out Leroy for unintentionally his push for Nina to be better in every aspect is what has killed her, tying the film into a perfect ending for those who want to call out the disgusting behavior the ballet community allows their dancers to endure. As voiced by Mark Fisher, in his article "Debating Black Swan: Gender and Horror," "Yet Leroy's predatory positivity is stymied by the tragic drive of Black Swan's narrative: once the repressive shackles are released, the result is not erotic fulfillment, but death" (Fisher and Jacobs 59). The film does not fetishize the relationship between Nina and Leroy because it deliberately avoids allowing the audience to see their intimate moments as romantic; and allows them to put a blame on Leroy for Nina's death.

The beauty behind the *Black Swan* is not only within the plot but also the special effects that help develop the plot even further, through the creation of special effects and camera work, Aronofsky is able to emphasize the struggles hundreds of women face within the dancing community all the while maintaining factors in which allows horror fans to appreciate the joy of being scared.

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