

Beyond the Mirror: The Unseen Realm in Black Swan

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Abstract: Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan* utilizes ballet, a highly disciplined art of the body, within a "play-within-a-play" structure to chronicle the psychological fragmentation of its protagonist. The recurring motif of the mirror serves not only as a narrative device but also as a visual metaphor: each shattering of the mirror corresponds to the destabilization and reconstruction of the protagonist's ego boundaries. The gaze of the "other self" within the mirror translates the paradox of Lacan's "mirror stage" into a visceral experience of horror accessible to a broad audience. Through a close reading of the mirror's function as a "meta-image," this paper reveals not only the self-referentiality inherent in its mirror narrative but also highlights the social function of psychologically suggestive cinema, which educates through fear.

Keywords: Mirror; Metaphor; Play-within-a-play; Psychological Space; Visual Communication

In 2010, Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* took the stage, instantly generating a whirlwind of critical and popular attention. The film tells the story of Nina, a ballerina who, under intense external pressure, transforms from the "White Swan" into the "Black Swan." Adhering to a dramatic structure, the film folds Nina's metamorphosis into a labyrinth of mirrors: every point of her shoes becomes a sacrifice to the "other" in the mirror; every crack in the glass signifies the reproduction of self-boundaries. Through a cinematography that blurs the line between reality and illusion, the characters' language, actions, and rhythms are compressed into the gap between "seeing" and "being seen," forcing the audience to oscillate between voyeuristic pleasure and identity anxiety. The ubiquitous presence of mirrors not only reflects the heroine's inner state but also prompts viewers to consciously introspect. As a classic "frame," the mirror confines the visual field to a two-dimensional space, yet it reveals not only what is visible but, more importantly, what remains unseen and unnoticed, thereby generating an infinite realm "beyond the mirror."

1. Dance as a Vehicle for Psychological Externalization

Black Swan drawing inspiration from Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary work *The Double* and adapted from the screenplay *The Understudy*, opens with a portrayal of a ballerina's life. The rehearsal of *Swan Lake* becomes the film's central play-within-a-play. The audience is aware that the ballet performed on stage is a fiction, and the life surrounding the rehearsals, presented through the camera lens, is also a narrative construct. Thus, dance, as the primary expressive vehicle throughout the film, holds significant weight.

1.1 The Duality of the Black and White Swans and Psychological Splitting

The film introduces a fundamental conflict from the outset: the director, Thomas Leroy, demands that the lead ballerina portray both the White Swan and the Black Swan in the new season's production. The White Swan is pure, innocent, and gentle, while the Black Swan is seductive, evil, and cunning. This stark opposition between the two character traits is immediately established. Nina is her mother's "little princess," a sweetheart surrounded by music boxes and stuffed animals, her world initially bathed in pinks and whites, visually cueing the audience that she is the perfect candidate for the White Swan. Consequently, embodying the Black Swan becomes Nina's challenge, the key to ensuring she is not surpassed or replaced, and the central suspense of the film. How to shape the "black swan" into a round character and imbue it with tension, making it a clue that guides the development of the entire film. Although E.M. Forster's

concept of the “round character” was conceived for novels, its application to other art forms, particularly dance, becomes the actor’s goal. Dance, as a body language, possesses the unique advantage of intuitively presenting an individual’s inner world. This duality in image, personality, and choice indeed imbues the film with a sense of contradiction and drama from the very beginning.

The film’s rhythm fluctuates with the narrative. It starts with a steady, cozy tone, but as Nina’s pressure to perfect the Black Swan intensifies, her hallucinations become increasingly frequent. The insertion of imagery—such as the scratches on her back seen in the mirror, her sexual fantasies about Lily, conflicts with her mother, and the vision of holding the knife that injured Beth—layer tension upon tension, culminating in the final performance. Nina makes a mistake in her signature role, the White Swan. Fearing replacement, she hallucinates stabbing her rival, Lily, during the interval. This ebb and flow, this tightening and loosening of pace, creates the film’s classic narrative arc, making the friction and collision of different forces of varying nature and intensity a central highlights. External objective events and internal emotions achieve an isomorphic relationship through a “diagram of forces,” evoking aesthetic experience. The audience glimpses itself in Nina’s transformation on stage, and the end of the performance marks the end of the film.

No individual is merely a one-dimensional caricature; personal growth is a process of “adaptation and change.” Nina is her mother’s self-object. Influenced by her mother—a failed ballerina with narcissistic personality disorder—Nina’s entire life revolves around meticulously executing every ballet step. She can perfectly control and suppress, making every movement flawless, yet lacks passion. The Nina sitting before the mirror is filled with self-alienation and doubt. She steals Beth’s lipstick to construct and hint she could be the Swan Queen; she practices relentlessly to reaffirm and confirm her subjectivity. The sharp nails, weapons of the Black Swan, are forcibly cut by her mother, metaphorically showing how familial influence forces Nina to hide her instincts and suppress her nature. However, the Nina who smashes the music box, discards the stuffed animals, goes to the bar with Lily, and repeatedly shouts “No!” at her mother, experiences the gradual awakening of her inner Black Swan. She is changing; she even needs the empowerment of the Black Swan’s seductive and evil aspects to feel like a complete person. On the night of the performance, Nina, sitting at her dressing table, exhibits infinite certainty and confidence when facing her mirror image. Everyone senses Nina’s “perfect” transformation, essential for her survival. Her final line, “I felt it. Perfect,” as she lies on the mat, leaves the audience not only shocked by her stunning performance but also provokes deep reflection on the nature of “perfection.” For Nina, it is the integration of black and white, the harmony of spirit and desire.

1.2 Resonance with the Chinese Aesthetic of the Unity of Poetry, Music, and Dance

In ancient Chinese society, poetry, music, and dance, as three ancient art forms, shared a common origin and often appeared integrated in performance. The “Great Preface” to the Classic of Poetry states: “When words are insufficient, we sigh them; when sighs are insufficient, we sing them; when song is insufficient, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them.” People’s perspectives on life and their emotional expressions were poetically conveyed through the body language of dance. While these three arts eventually matured and became independent disciplines, Black Swan employs dance to contrast the externalized behaviors stemming from the psychological states of the Black and White Swans, raising philosophical questions about “perfection.” Here, the dance expression is poetically elegant, while the central theme is profoundly philosophical. This American film serendipitously echoes the ideas of ancient Chinese literary theorists, highlighting the inclusive nature of art.

Where there is “emotion” (qing), there must be “ornament” (cai) to embellish it. In the film, after Nina secures the lead role and tells her mother, she hallucinates the word “Whore” written on a mirror. Visiting the injured former Swan Queen, Beth, in the hospital, Nina witnesses Beth

stabbing her own cheek with the knife Nina brought; fleeing in panic, Nina sees the bloody knife in her own hand. The pre-performance argument with her mother, culminating in slamming the door on her mother's fingers, fills the film with tension. These fantastical elements draw viewers into the protagonist's ambiguous psychological world, requiring rapt attention to resolve the narrative puzzles. Each conflict paves the way for Nina's final, perfect bloom on stage. The perfect integration of poetry, music, and dance is vividly realized within the cinematic art form.

1.3 The Construction of the Other and the Male Gaze under a Gender Perspective

Over half of the film's scenes feature Nina and Lily, with Nina's mother, Erica, and Beth also playing significant roles. In contrast, the male lead, Thomas, primarily serves a transitional function; the film does not elaborate on his life, background, or social relations. The female characters become objects of male spectatorship; their images, personalities, and behaviors are designed to cater to the male gaze, with the camera lens representing this masculine perspective. The ever-present mirrors act as channels satisfying the desire to peeping the female body, the female room, female privacy. The construction of the female image still adheres to male standards of judgment. Even Nina's ultimate realization of the Black Swan on stage is depicted and shaped according to socially prescribed "feminine" ideals. In this regard, *Black Swan* does not break from tradition.

Women grow up under the male gaze, maintaining a "diagonal relationship with time," often positioned outside modern temporality, representing eternity or repetition rather than historical progress. Through social judgment and within conventional frameworks, women establish their identities. This process resembles an elaborate performance, where the stage performance, via the element of dance, becomes the reality of performance. Therefore, Nina's daily performance is not false; her performance is her reality. From her masterful interpretation of the White Swan, mirrored in her white-clad, princess-like daily life, to her subsequent rebellion and change—experiencing the state of being a "Black Swan" in reality, signaled by the film's desaturated, darker tone—her life attitude transforms alongside her stage persona. Finally, her collapse at home implies the disintegration of her pink persona. Dressed as the Black Swan for the performance, Nina is confident and assertive; her spins cause black feathers to sprout, forming vigorous wings. The role one performs is oneself. This is a form of "wuse", where "wu" is a tangible entity in the natural world, a perceptible presence, and "se" refers not only to appearance but also to sensory, sometimes even carnal, attraction.^{[1](Owen 289)} Using the camera as a tool and both the film and the ballet stage as vehicles, the director demonstrates through double means that performance is life. Everyone, by examining the initially internalized "Other," through revision and integration, constructs a complete self.

2. The Psychological Schema of the Mirror Stage and Self-Identification

Personal growth involves both pursuing heights and seeking self-identity, with the latter often posing a greater challenge for the individual. Understanding of the self is gained through experience, which necessitates engagement with the world.

2.1 The Mirror as Visual Metaphor and Cognitive Mediator

According to Lacan's "Mirror Theory," the concept of self is established through the continuous recognition of the "Other." The Other is an essential element in constructing self-image, serving as an intermediary for self-knowledge. From the individual to the nation, a correct perspective for examining the Other is crucial for self-reflection. *Black Swan* is less a story about different characters vying for the role of the Swan Queen and more a monodrama of Nina observing her multiple personalities and their development before the mirror, a journey of self-scrutiny and self-seeking. Her mother, seemingly doting, a former ballerina with lost potential, represents Nina's rule-bound, ascetic personality. She cuts Nina's nails—the Black Swan's weapons; this personality interrupts Nina's moments of self-exploration as a warning against desire; she is

always dressed in black, appearing in dark corners or abruptly, like a scar on Nina's id, causing pain when disturbed. Thomas embodies Nina's desire for professional perfection and success. This personality views career success as a source of respect, temptation, and love—desirable yet unfamiliar, an experience absent under her mother's control. Beth represents Nina's perception of an unchanging self: ambitious, craving the spotlight, yet fragile, sensitive, afraid of failure, proud but perpetually fearful of being replaced. Nina subconsciously assigns a tragic ending to this personality, predicting the outcome of stagnation, which fuels her drive to destroy her original self. Lily is more intriguing; she is Nina's darker self. They are alike yet opposite, like the twin sisters in the ballet story, potentially loving the same person. From Lily's first appearance, Nina feels nervous. When Thomas designates Lily as her understudy, Nina's crisis erupts hysterically: "She's following me!" The follower is not "Lily" but her increasingly undeniable second personality, haunting her like a nightmare. This "spiritual exchange," akin to a "body swap," generates new aesthetic content through the deformation of visual structural relationships, a defamiliarizing technique.

The mirror has a crucial role. Nina constantly sees, questions, and ultimately affirms and destroys herself within it. She oscillates between clarity and confusion, between freedom and ecstasy, confronted by mirror illusion. The mirror is both the prop for her self-reconstruction and the weapon with which she metaphorically stabs her monotonous, unappealing former self. The mirror's depth and infinite reflective capacity suggest the unknown future, yet it is also the means for self-identification in the present—a paradox that makes it a fascinating image. Cinema's photographic nature grants it the quality of "the redemption of physical reality". Similarly, the mirror, in reflection, unifies vision and reality. The "mirror" image in the shot is handled adeptly from a visual aesthetic perspective, creating "mirror image" segments based on reality for aesthetic purposes, showing, like photography, a kinship with the real.

2.2 Alienation and the Expression of the Unconscious from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the psyche comprises the id, ego, and superego. Normally, these three maintain a balanced relationship; imbalance can lead to psychopathology. *Black Swan* narrates the story of a "moralized superego" seeking the "primordially desirous id." Consequently, many elements in the film are externalized representations of the protagonist's internal struggles. This filming technique has the advantage of turning psychological activity into intuitive behavior, magnify the "alienation."

The film is replete with scenes that can be interpreted as dreams or hallucinations. Initially, this narrative style disorients the audience alongside Nina. The gradually darkening film tone metaphor her internal struggle, creating a heavy, obscured view for the viewer. As desires clarify, the audience gains the ability to discern reality from illusion. The film begins with Nina's dream: no prelude, just the serene beauty of the Swan Lake melody, evoking familiarity and freedom, punctuated by a faint, unsettling laugh. As the music swells, a single spotlight illuminates a ballerina dancing as the White Swan, casting stark shadows on her face. The dance partner shifts from prince to monster, her costume from long tutu to short, the tempo quickens, and the sound intensifies, tightening the audience's chest—before abruptly cutting to Nina's room, revealing it was a dream. The film ends with Nina on the mat, applause fading, the spotlight's halo expanding until the screen turns white. The entire film could be interpreted as a dream.

The unconscious serves a censoring function in dreams, filtering out unacceptable desires. This necessitates that dream elements be cloaked in metaphor to evade censorship. These intangible psychological processes are skillfully visualized by the director using the mirror, an image representing the "unknown future." During the performance, one can see one's archetype, even that of the undiscovered unconscious. Collective unconscious elements are questioned, filling the individual with nervous and doubt. Excessive desire leads to alienation—where creations meant to serve humanity instead control and enslave their creators. In the film, ballet, inherently beautiful,

pure, and elegant, a body language, becomes burdened with personified characteristics due to human desires, characteristics that can turn back on humanity. The body becomes a crucial site for constructing structures of power, knowledge, meaning, and desire ^{[2](Cavallaro 45)}. The camera not only records the actor's physical performance but also documents the types of artistic bodily existence and the relationship between consciousness and the flesh. This constitutes spiritual alienation.

The most sensitive part of the human body is the eye, indicating the primacy and decisiveness of visual perception. In our contemporary, rationalist society, visual culture still dominates. The supremacy of vision grants "seeing" a pivotal role in life. *Black Swan* acts as a mirror, allowing individuals to glimpse themselves, prompting active reflection on the relationship between pursuing heights and seeking the self, thereby fostering introspection.

3. The Artistic Function of Aesthetic Reception and Catharsis

Every individual is like a beast constrained by societal cages. Socialization is a process of self-taming, sometimes leading to the forgetting of one's innate wildness. While taming is easier, rediscovering the lost or forgotten self proves far more challenging.

3.1 The Call of the Void: Textual Gaps and Audience Participation

Based on social experience, education, and cognitive patterns, individuals approach texts with a "horizon of expectations" shaped by their mental schemata. Sometimes the text aligns with these expectations, sometimes it does not—the latter can lead to delight or disappointment. Effective texts often contain "gaps" or "blanks", creating indeterminacy that invites viewers to actively fill them based on their expectations—what Wolfgang Iser termed the "appeal structure" or "call of the void." *Black Swan* is rich with such structures. Ambiguous scenes allow for multiple interpretations; metaphorical segments spark diverse readings. Even the ending is dual: Nina's stage curtain call. Her final line, "I felt it. Perfect," creates a significant pause. Did Nina, in her hallucination, truly kill herself, experiencing perfection through death? Or did she only destroy her timid, lifeless, soul-less former self, allowing a new Nina to be born? This open-endedness is highly compelling. How recipients interpret these image depends on their ability to recognize what already resides within their own psyches. The viewer's prior experience becomes the prerequisite for viewing and the motivation for "filling the blanks."

The film frequently features close-ups of dancing feet or shoes. Some serve plot functions, while others are purely image-based. Those without narrative burden function as gaps, open to interpretation. They represent the relentless journey of life, cyclical situations, hardship-filled existence, or joyful play. Such openness allows recipients to engage actively through Gestalt-like completion at any time, achieving both cognitive understanding and aesthetic satisfaction, thereby enriching the film's meaning.

3.2 Catharsis through Tragedy: The Sublime Experience and Psychological Resonance

Based on individual "expectations," people select and complete structures according to their mental schemata to grasp the overall characteristics of things—this is the process of aesthetic perception. Aristotle posited that tragedy, through its evocation of the sublime, produces a shocking power that leads to catharsis. The greatest form is formless; the greatest sound is silent. True strength often remains hidden. "Falling flowers are silent; the person is as mild as a chrysanthemum." ^[1] Conversely, water, the softest and most malleable entity, possesses the most enduring and vital force. By centering on a female protagonist, the film inherently follows a relatively weaker social force. Here, the protagonist is not a hero in the traditional sense; she is a ballerina, further labeling her with strong feminine temperament. This seemingly fragile figure, by preset, lacks the power to conquer evil. The White Swan, whose lover is stolen by the Black Swan, chooses death. Nina kills the gentle, pure White Swan within and spreads black wings on

stage. This play-within-a-play setup reinforces the theme, redefining desires one cannot directly confront. Asceticism does not eternally hold the absolute moral high ground; everyone should confront their desires with a proper attitude and values, thus achieving the maximum purification of the recipient's psyche.

3.3 Artistic Sublimation: From Visual Expression to Spiritual Reflection

No artwork exists merely as an independent object. It requires the recipient's participation for the creative process to complete itself. Finding a soulmate who understands one's music is rare. The moving images captured by the camera begin at the surface level, then become narrative symbols entering the viewer's consciousness, traveling from eye to mind to heart. The ability of an artwork to evoke aesthetic emotion, allowing recipients to derive varied meanings from different angles, constitutes the ultimate sublimation of its artistic value.

Achieving this requires, first, an excellent work. *Black Swan* was in preparation since 2000. A decade in the making, bolstered by the director's persistence and Natalie Portman's dedication, the film leverages the powerful spectacle of the body. Based on a well-honed script rich with practical insight, it presents a tightly woven, seamless narrative. Its exquisite costumes, makeup, and props, meticulous lighting, and nearly flawless editing provide a visually satisfying experience, trembling beneath a seemingly plain surface.

Secondly, the work excels in its exploration of the inner world. Viewers find shadows of their own psyches within the film. From posing questions to resolving them, using the life of ballerinas as a vehicle and delving into performance details, it opens small apertures into individual inner worlds. This approach easily resonates, enhancing identification with the film. Even its many metaphorical, image-heavy shots feel accessible rather than obscure, allowing audiences to enjoy face psychological truths directly. The film places no barriers to understanding the plot, on the contrary facilitating the audience's introspection and self-examination, fulfilling art's social function of education through entertainment. Beyond the mirror lies a richer landscape of meaning. Thus, the film achieves comprehensive sublimation beyond mere aesthetic emotion.

Conclusion

Black Swan through its sophisticated script, masterful performances, and meticulous production, uses the play-within-a-play device to explore the essential forces hidden within human nature. The characters shaped in this manner possess profound practical significance and aesthetic value. Superficially portraying the duality of the Black and White Swans, the film conceals the highly tense contradictions inherent in personal growth, making them visible through the recipient's own interpretation and processing. This aesthetic value serendipitously aligns with many tenets of ancient Chinese thought, offering profound inspiration for viewing the convergence of Chinese and Western cultures. Regarding this monodrama of Nina confronting herself before the mirror, we must pay greater attention to its unspoken meanings—the realm “beyond the mirror.”

Reference

- [1]Owen, Stephen. *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 2003.
- [2]Cavallaro, Dani. *Critical and Cultural Theory*. Translated by Zhang Weidong, Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2006.

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