

صياغة صورة المرأة القاتلة في البجعة السوداء (دراسة في نظرية الفلم النسوية)

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MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
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**Abstract**

Feminism is quite known to the academic reader, however, involving it with relatively new forms of literature, such as film, may sound alarming. Film is indeed a popular form of literature that reflects modern life. The message it carries affects a very wide range of audience. It provides a new variety of technique (such as the I-Camera) and simultaneously employs the well-established standards of classic literature.

This paper analyses *Black Swan* according to Feminist Film Theory. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of the heroine, Nina Sayers, especially her transformation into the Black Swan. The transformation is highly symbolic and, thus, it is achieved through many motifs and techniques, which will all be discussed throughout the paper.



### ملخص

على الرغم من شهرة الحركة النسوية لدى القارئ الاكاديمي إلا ان ربطها مع احد الفنون الادبية الجديدة نوعا ما قد يبدو مثيرا للجدل. دخلت الأفلام الى ميدان الادب حديثا لتعبر عن مكنونات الحياة الحديثة وتؤثر من خلال الرسالة التي تحملها على الملايين من متابعيها بطريقة عجزت عنها الفنون الادبية الكلاسيكية. وذلك لكونها توظف التقنيات الحديثة دون المساس بالمعايير الادبية الكلاسيكية.

يتناول هذا البحث تحليل البجعة السوداء باستخدام النظرية السينمائية النسوية التي تهتم بشكل خاص بتصوير الانثى. تخضع البطلة نينا سيرز الى سلسلة من التحولات البطيئة التي تنتج في النهاية بنجاح مسخ البطلة الى بجعة سوداء. تمتاز تلك التحولات برمزياتها وغموضها لذلك فإنها تتطلب توظيف التقنيات والموتيفات خلال العرض للوصول الى تلك الغاية.

### MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

#### I

*Black Swan* is a film based on the ballet<sup>1</sup> *Swan Lake* (Tchaikovsky<sup>2</sup>, 1975-6). The heroine of the ballet suffers bewitchment and falls in love only to be disappointed and commit suicide at the end. The main characters of the ballet are: Odette (the bewitched princess), Siegfried (the prince), Rothbart (the wizard), and Odile (the wizard's daughter, or, in some versions, Odette's evil twin).

The film's plot is about a ballet dancer, Nina Sayers, who simultaneously plays the roles of Odette (the Swan Queen) and Odile (Black Swan). She experiences a major transformation throughout her training. Moreover, the symbolism related to that transformation is immensely rich. Her femininity is sexualized only as she gets closer to the dark side. According to Feminist Film Theory,<sup>3</sup> Nina is the object of the gaze. However, there is still the spectator, who is supposedly genderless if we take into account the variety of possible audience. The male gazer in the film would be Leroy (the director). Clifford Manlove suggests the superiority of the gazer; in this context, it is a male gaze.<sup>4</sup> The gaze sets hierarchical power<sup>5</sup> and, thus, patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> All males are neutralized, as will be discussed later, except for Thomas Leroy who functions as the sole patriarchal power in the film.

#### II



## ❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁

The film starts with a dream, or rather a vision, of Nina dancing as Swan Queen. It is the scene “when Rothbart casts his spell,”<sup>7</sup> (00:04:12) as she tells her mother later. The effect of the spell is shown visually by a change of costume: she wears a fluffy white romantic tutu<sup>8</sup> with a see-through piece, below the knee. That dress changes to the iconic White Swan costume (a tutu) which is seen throughout the film.

The importance of the dream lies in the spell; the story cannot start with a free Swan (Nina, in this case). She must be bewitched, though in a symbolic dream, in order for the journey to start.

Nina is presented as a cute young lady who is still surrounded by stuffed animals and dolls. She never raises her voice, very fragile and can win her mother with an innocent smile. She wears white and light pink clothes, and her room is all pink as well. The presentation of her mother, though, gives a hint that something is abnormal and/or gothic. The mother is awfully old and wrinkled, wearing black. She has a body of a dancer but a very weird fake smile of an obsessed mother. Her dry smile disappears as she holds her daughter, i.e. she fake-smiles only in front of Nina. She will be more elaborated later as a control-freak.

The second dark person in Nina's life is presented in the metro, noticed by Nina on her way to work. It is no other than Lily, the one who has more potential to be Black Swan than Nina.

Then there is Veronica, in the dressing room. Veronica is foregrounded via her opinion that they need fresh faces for the show and that “old Beth” should retire regardless of the fact that she dances beautifully. Nina's contact with her here is all via mirrors.

Thomas Leroy, the director of the company, enters the scene as they practice and picks a few girls in a weird way (00:09:06) while he tells the story of Swan Lake with a foreign accent. He asks the bunch of girls he tapped to pose for an audition for the role of Swan Queen later that day, and while waiting, the spectators meet the last of the evil characters: Beth, the *ex-prima ballerina*.<sup>9</sup>

Beth is the ‘dying Swan’ as described by the IMDb.<sup>10</sup> She is the retiring ballet dancer whose place is to be filled, after the audition, by Nina. Beth smashes a mirror, smashes whatever she had in her room, shouts at Nina and leaves. (00:11:25)

Nina admires all those five characters, and fears them simultaneously. She is filled with ambition that she is ready to take anything from those five, and later step on them to reach her goal. Over-ambition or just higher standards, it is not clear yet. However, she is certainly eager to succeed even if that means giving up her old self.



❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



The transformation happens gradually and is achieved through different triggers. The change appears via motifs all around Nina starting with her feet and ending in her earrings.

The most important and crucial of those influences is sexuality. Nina has to change her role from a person to a “spectacle”; she must attract a “male look” to her “female image.”<sup>11</sup> Nina realizes the vitality of attracting Leroy’s attention when Lily walks in to interrupt her audition (00:14:21). Leroy stops Nina and keeps staring at Lily. Next day, Nina puts on lipstick and styles her hair just to talk to Leroy and “ask for the part” (00:19:37). He reproaches her for being so innocent and stiff, then he kisses her. His note “what are you doing here all doubled up?” (00:20:21) frightens her and awakens the female in her. Until that moment, she has been acting unconsciously depending on her feminine instincts, but now that Leroy comments on her looks, she realizes that looks matter, desire matters. Nina bites him in refusal to let him use her body.<sup>12</sup> However, this is understood as a gesture of feminine violence; Leroy gives her the part only because of “that bite,” as he suggests later: “Give me more of that bite.” (00: 27:56)

Nina goes to the restroom to call her mother and say she has got the part of the Swan Queen, and when she goes out, she finds a bad word written with a red lipstick on the mirror there. Later in the party after declaring her the new Swan Queen, Beth asks her about Leroy’s carnal gain behind choosing her. To which, Nina replies prudently: “Not all of us have to.” (00:35:29)

Beth and the soloists, as well as Nina herself, realize that the patriarchal power in that place (who is Leroy) can only be led by the nose through seduction. Explicitly, it is an accusation of females condemning them for using their bodies to bargain. However, implicitly, it blames the patriarchal power for giving in to seduction. Such a powerful person as a director, responsible for a whole company’s production and, thus, the income of no less than a few hundred people, giving in to seduction! It is certainly a pity.

For a boss to promote a secretary is fine, but to choose a lead role on whom depends the whole production is indigestible! The director does not happen to be a male, because his masculinity is necessary for the forwarding of the plot. He is handsome, authoritative and sexually experienced; all this is necessary and not there by chance. Thus, Leroy may represent the male gaze<sup>13</sup>: what the spectator expects of Nina and how she will be accepted by the audience depend on his look, his judgment of her. Judith Mayne argues that in order for “the look” to have what she calls “power,” there must be a “man as ‘bearer of the look,’





## ❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁

woman as its object” and this is quite applicable to Leroy and Nina.<sup>14</sup> Clifford Manlove also focuses on the “gender positions” in the gaze: i.e. that it is a hetro-sexual gaze from a male point of view which makes it more like “voyeurism.”<sup>15</sup>

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. [. . .] The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.<sup>16</sup>

Details of her breasts are shown for the first time after she has been selected (00:26:40). Leroy’s comment after that rehearsal is:

The real work will be your metamorphosis into the evil twin. And I know I saw a flash of her yesterday. So get ready to give me more of that bite. (00:27:47)

He affirms everyone’s fears that he has chosen her for physical gain, leaving the two assistants attending the rehearsal amazed and astonished. Nina now achieves the “virgin/whore dichotomy” which Mayne describes as a “characteristic of women’s general representation in classical drama.”<sup>17</sup> She is the “whore” in the eyes of everyone, and once she accomplishes the transformation, the virgin part of her will disappear. The transformation creates a “systematic network of binary oppositions.”<sup>18</sup>

Leroy presents her to the world during the party, before which he sends her a bouquet of flowers (white and pink) to emphasize her femininity again (00:29:55). During the party, he holds her hand to keep her close, then takes a couple of Champaign glasses and invites her up the stairs where he would give his speech (00:30:14). Acting as the gentleman he is, he never turns his back to her. He is either holding her hand or, when he could not (while holding Champaign glasses), he keeps looking back towards her. However, he gives himself the right to lead as he keeps walking up front.

[. . .] establishing the male character as active and powerful: he is the agent around whom the dramatic action unfolds and the look gets



❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



organized [. . .] John Berges observes that: “Men act and women appear.”<sup>19</sup>

Leroy's actions are more like ebb and flow to tickle her femininity with his extreme masculinity. He teaches her how to be a seductress. He asks her frankly to start masturbating at home; “a little homework” he calls it (00:37:14).

Nina's first masturbation scene occurs in her room as she wakes up (00:39:39). The scene heightens when, all of a sudden, she notices that her mother is sleeping on a chair next to her bed. Terrified, she stops. During another rehearsal, Leroy again acts as an alpha male<sup>20</sup>; he bids her open her mouth when she refuses his kiss silently (00:48:47). Then he firmly commands her to “feel” his touch on her legs, later between them and on her breasts. He leaves her amazed all of a sudden saying: “That was me seducing you. It should be the other way around” (00:49:19). Truth is: Nina cannot use his technique unless she becomes a *femme fatale* who seduces men and leaves them to suffer without satisfying the need that she created.

Reymond Bellour [. . .] argues for the centrality of male subjectivity in the films: “The woman occupies a central place only to the extent that it is a place assigned to her by the logic of masculine desire.”<sup>21</sup>

Nina is thus obliged by ‘logic’ to be an object of desire for Leroy, with or without satisfying that desire.<sup>22</sup>

The bathroom masturbation scene comes next (00:51:20). However, she stops for no apparent reason, so it is another disappointment. She fails in rehearsal once more then sees an old man in the metro who sends her kisses in the air and touches his crotch repeatedly (00:55:28). This scene is fast and ambiguous, but it shows Nina as a woman; she is not a girl anymore. Men start to feel her attraction.

Going out with Lily is probably the most intense sensual experience Nina has ever had. She watches how Lily effortlessly flirts with a waiter then gets them a couple of gay guys (01:01:51). This couple most likely gives Nina the idea of the lesbo-experience with Lily.

When Nina climaxes with the imaginary Lily, she actually finishes her transformation into the Black Swan (01:09:54). She performs perfectly after that. As soon as she is done with her part during the show, she heads towards Leroy confidently and kisses him so wildly that he blushes. She leaves his lips lipstick-stained and wearing one big shy smile (01:37:13).





## ❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



It is Leroy's gaze after all that changes and along with it, the spectators' opinion. The sign of the object's success is "the gaze of men struck dumb"<sup>23</sup> and the gazer must be "stilled, silenced" yet should show "visible evidence of [the object's] own visual loveliness."<sup>24</sup> This, by default, strikes the spectators 'dumb' as well.<sup>25</sup> The average spectator has no knowledge of ballet and whether Nina and the others are doing well. The spectators are satisfied with Nina's performance and taken by it only when Leroy himself is. He represents experience for both Nina and the audience and can be seen as a link between the two sides.

Leroy is always seen wearing black. In fact, Leroy, the mother, Beth<sup>26</sup> and Lily do wear black or dark clothes all the time. They are the characters who stand for evil, or rather for experience, in the sense that this 'experience' for some spectators insinuates 'evil'. They are set in contrast with the girlish Nina who wears white or light pink till the night out with Lily when she transforms.<sup>27</sup> Lily presents her with a black top<sup>28</sup> then Nina goes to the rehearsal wearing black. Black is also the color of Rothbart (the wizard) and of the feathers of the Black Swan.<sup>29</sup>

The other significant color is red: the color of the lipstick and of blood. Nina steals Beth's lipstick and uses it to seduce Leroy subconsciously. Later the same color is used to write a bad word on the restroom mirror, (00:24:15) and she wears the same lipstick color as Black Swan.

As for the blood, it starts appearing in the film after Nina gets the part. Her back bleeds in the bathroom right before her mother brings the cake in celebration (00:25:15). Then her finger bleeds during the party as Leroy is giving the speech (00:31:00). She goes to the restroom to wash it and ends up pulling her skin off only to discover it was an illusion and her finger is fine (00:32:53).

Later, in the bathtub, after she fails masturbating for the second time, drops of blood fall in the tub and she finds out that her finger is bleeding (00:51:48). She washes it and notices that her back is bleeding as well. It is possible that the blood on her nails came from her back as she unconsciously scratched herself.

Terrified after Lily has tried to take her part, Nina visits Beth at the hospital. Beth stabs herself with an emery board in the face (01:22:25). The bloody emery board is still in Nina's hand as she enters the elevator so she throws it disgusted. Later, the ghost of Beth appears in her kitchen after she washes her blood-stained hands (01:23:15).

Nina's eyes go bloody red as she pulls a feather off her back (01:24:40). They look like an animal's and indicate full transformation. In the last scene, Nina puts a towel over imaginary blood of Lily (01:38:02) only to discover later that she stabbed herself, not Lily. She dances all Act IV

❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



with the wound. At the verge when the Swan Queen is to die, the blood spot widens to cover the whole abdomen after she jumps (01:41:22). The contrast of the white and red in the final scene is impressive as it is the innocent Nina who died, not the Black Swan. Black wins and remains alive while white dies.

Another important motif is the use of mirrors. Nina seems to be surrounded by mirrors for some reason; it would be normal for dancers but, in her case, it is excessively and symbolically employed. Sweeney explains the function of mirrors in films saying:

In folklore, mirrors represent “the realm of the souls, spirits and the dead” . . . as Freud explains, they evoke the “uncanny,” that eerie feeling that what should be inanimate is actually alive.<sup>30</sup>

Nina develops in relation to mirrors as well. At the beginning, she fixes her hair in the train window and later dresses in front of a soloist’s mirror while her colleagues put make up (00:06:25). Innocent as she is at the beginning, mirrors are just a means for practice and they do not attract her attention.

After she steals Beth’s lipstick, she uses it in the train (00:19:07). Soon after, she starts seeing her evil self in the mirrors as well as unreal blood. Nina is shocked with the “frightening difference between her image and herself.”<sup>31</sup> Until, finally, she sees her eyes red and pulls out the black feather in front of her vanity mirror achieving full transformation. What Nina sees is just hallucinations. In the restroom during the party, she sees herself pulling the skin off half her finger and moans in pain in the process. However, when she washes the wound and looks at her finger, she finds it clean and spotless (00:32:54).

Her evil self makes her look schizophrenic: her evil self smiles wickedly at her, scratches her back, and moves all by itself. However, interestingly enough, Nina never sees that evil self in the mirror of Beth’s room. Only at the end, she does face her evil twin incarnated as Lily, (01:33:16) not in a mirror.

Mirrors for Nina present an alternative reality which is highly symbolic of her transformation. Mirrors represent the “relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic,”<sup>32</sup> Mayne believes. Nina uses the mirror to see into the imaginary world inside her head; the mirror acts as a gate between two separate worlds. Once Nina overcomes her innocence, she faces her evil self in the real world without the help of mirrors. Since the encounter of her own face scares her, her brain tends to shape it as Lily and, hence, the imaginary scenes with Lily.





## ❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



Only as she dances *Black Swan* in Act III, does she embrace that evil spirit: she smiles triumphantly as she sees and feels the feathers grow on her skin until, after a couple of spins, she has full wings (01:36:17). The audience and her colleagues are certainly incapable of seeing what she has become. However, the shadow on the walls behind her is that of two wings, not two arms. Since shadows are just as unreal as the image in the mirror, again this is her evil twin coming out. She looks like Odette in person, but in truth she is Odile in disguise.

The black feathers start as a rash in her skin after being bewitched by Rothbart in the dream. The rash increases and she sees her evil self in the mirror of the costumes room scratching it. By the end of the transformation, she pulls the root after many grow making the full wings a possible outcome (01:36:38).

Her skin is prepared in the bedroom scene with Lily. The skin nimples more and more the closer she is to climax. She is encouraged by the wings-tattoo on Lily's back. Nina imagines the tattoo growing and moving.

Another motif related to the swan is the legs and feet. Nina's toe bleeds as she practices alone at home, (00:17:20) then she is at the company's physical therapist's room complaining of some mysterious problem in her feet (00:46:00, on). At the end, the night before the show, her legs break backwards to become like those of a bird (01:25:12). She crashes on the ground and, next morning, she finds out that her toes are fused together in a weird way to resemble the foot of a swan as well (01:28:08).

The other objects which serve as secondary motifs are the earrings, Beth's stolen makeup kit, the music box, the dolls, and the wooden stick she found. When the film starts, Nina's room is presented to look like that of a teenager: full of dolls and stuffed animals. As her mother puts her to bed, she opens a music box to help her relax and fall asleep peacefully. As the plot progresses, Nina breaks the music box in a fit of anger and dumps all the dolls and stuffed animals (01:14:32). Throwing all this behind her allows her to forget her innocence and attempt a transformation. As for the stick, she finds it after she steals Beth's lipstick (00:44:38). Nina knows her mother is a bit of a control-freak, so she needs a barrier. It seems that she does not have any lock for her bedroom door. Therefore, she needs this wooden piece to protect her from her mother and keep that too-much-control out of the way.

Nina uses the stick for the first time when she was with the imaginary Lily. She places the stick against the door and shouts to her mother "Leave it alone!" (01:08:12) or "Go away!" (01:24:23) as if the door's resistance was not enough. However, in an unexplainable scene, she finds

❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



the door open in the morning and her mother is seated quietly in the parlor. She mumbles “I’m moving out!” (01:11:13) and leaves the house. The stick protects her for one night just fine, but next time she uses it, it breaks (01:24:50). She supports the door with it and goes to the vanity mirror, sees her eyes red and pulls the feather root. Just then, her mother forces the door open causing the stick to break in half. With no ‘spells’ to protect her and with her Black Swan potential out, she pushes her mother rudely outside and slams the door. Actually, Nina slams the door on her mother’s fingers, twice, causing the latter to cry in pain and retreat. Now Nina needs no protection or barrier; she overcomes her fear of her mother and her tendency for obedience and she allows the rebel inside her to float to the surface.

Nina’s stealing the lipstick marks the first evil or illegal deed for her. When she puts it on and gets the role, Beth’s stuff starts to be associated with perfection, or rather they start to have a subconscious link with Leroy’s satisfaction. After Nina gets the role, she is placed in the same room with Beth at the company. Beth is not around, but her makeup kit is. She uses Beth’s earrings for the party<sup>33</sup> and after Beth’s the accident, she collects a few things to be considered her own and uses them. She gives up her old earrings and keeps to the new ones.<sup>34</sup> The old man in the metro touches himself while she is using Beth’s emery board. Beth’s belongings make her feel feminine and help enhance her self-confidence. Disappointed and scared that Lily may take her place, she visits Beth at the hospital and tries to give back what she stole, telling Beth she finally understands what it feels like to be replaced. Nina does not simply put the small makeup kit on the table; she takes out the items and arranges them in front of sleeping Beth. This, of course, gives Beth the chance to grab the emery board and stab her face with it.<sup>35</sup> Nina brings the stuff back because she realizes what Beth had was a curse, not perfection. Nina stands there to witness the end to whatever she used to consider perfection: Beth is not “such a beautiful dancer” (00:06:52) anymore. Beth is after all just one of Nina’s foils. She represents past glory and is a constant reminder for Nina that success does not last forever. Ever since the beginning, Nina looks up to Beth and she is against replacing her. Nina describes Beth as “such a beautiful dancer” (00:06:52) and later tells her “I wanted to be perfect like you” (01:22:05). The meter of perfection for Nina is Beth’s title: Leroy calls her “Little Princess.” Lily thinks the title silly but not Nina: the latter looks so up to this title. Taking her last breath at the end, Leroy calls her “Little Princess” and she says “It was perfect” (01:42:33). Aspiring for perfection has killed her just as ambition destroyed Beth before her.





**❁ MOULDING THE ‘FEMME FATALE’ IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁**



However, it is not Beth that worries her most but competition incarnated as Veronica and Lily. Veronica is so confident and beautiful; Leroy tells Nina he has made up his mind and picked Veronica for the Swan Queen (00:20:02). After names are announced, her effect disappears and she is a threat no more. Nina is left to deal with Lily.

Since Nina associates getting the role with physical intimacy with Leroy, she is alarmed every time Leroy looks at Lily.<sup>36</sup> Lily interrupts her *pirouette*<sup>37</sup> rehearsal and gets Leroy’s attention mysteriously. He later describes her to Nina as a natural: “not faking it” (00:29:26). The script describes the scene as follows:

Nina pays close attention to Lily sizing her up. Her dancing is explosive, exudes sex.

Leroy (O.S.)<sup>38</sup>

Watch the way she moves . . .

Leroy has snuck up behind Nina at the doorway and gets very close to her.

Leroy (cont’d)

Imprecise, but sensual. She’s not faking it. Pay attention.

Lily makes a small mistake, but cracks up laughing, amused rather than bothered by her blunder.

Nina stares at her, attracted and threatened. (pp.25-26)

Lily is too carefree and maybe fit to act as Nina’s foil. In the party where Nina is the star, Lily gets all the attention with just a “giggle” (00:31:58). Nina watches her flirting effortlessly with a waiter and getting a couple of guys for company at the bar. The struggle goes to the end when Lily is picked to be the spare Black Swan. However, Nina shows extraordinary self-control as she arrives late and starts putting her makeup:

Leroy

I already asked Lily –  
Nina

Fuck. Have you announced it?

He hasn’t.

Nina (cont’d)

After Beth, do you need more controversy?

Leroy smirks at her directness.

Nina (cont’d)

I’m here, Thomas. I’m doing it.

He looks at her, considering, and gives her a reluctant nod. She smiles.

❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



Nina seems quite composed at the time she is replaced by Lily for real. She actually sounds stronger than both Leroy and Lily at this particular moment.

The last encounter with Lily is in the dressing room and Nina is in the costume of the White Swan. It is not the real Lily though because the real one comes to congratulate her on her magnificent performance later on (01:38:27). The Lily she fights is her evil double. Real Lily is intimidated and overcome already.

In a previous scene, coming back from the bar with the imaginary Lily, Nina is discovered at the door by her mother. The camera does not show Nina, but her image in the three-faced training mirror in an adjacent room (01:07:16). It looks as if it is only Nina at the door, then, slowly, the image splits in two showing Lily moving out of the way to allow Nina have a conversation with her mother. Of course, the audience would not suspect Lily being real because the mother knows who she is already. Sensing defiance; Erica does not want her daughter hanging around with people like Lily, therefore she dismisses her in a previous scene.

Erica is presented as an obsessive mother, a control freak. Ever since the beginning, Erica puts Nina to bed, scolds her about the rash, cuts her nails for her, calls "Suzie in the office" (00:16:15) to check on her, etc. She acts as an over-protective mother. Erica is an ex-ballerina. She gave up her career for some reason, then had Nina. She seems to spend her time painting (probably trying to find another profession). She fills her room with ugly paintings of Nina which are failed attempts to copy a photo of Nina as a young girl posing in a tutu. After the scene of Beth stabbing herself:

Nina flings open the door, but Erica is not there.

She hears rustling, then whispering.

Nina looks around the room. The paintings of her seem to move slightly.

Blink. Mouths move.

They whisper: "Sweet girl"<sup>39</sup> and then start chanting "My turn, my turn, my turn!"

She cups her hands over her ears, trying to block it out. (p.83A)

Nina is actually scared of her mother, not of the paintings. She does not want to end up as no one, like her mother. Erica, on the other hand, wants to see her daughter succeed to compensate for her own past failure. However, Erica tries her best to keep Nina pure and dependent on her. She fights back her Nina's transformation and does her best to keep her





## MOULDS THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

under control. She even takes the liberty to call the office and tell them Nina cannot perform!

Nina feels her mother's control through Suzie, the office administrator. It seems her mother has found a way to control her moves outside the house too. When Nina is late, the mother calls Suzie to check. For a character which appears only once on screen, Suzie seems to have a lot of influence on Nina. Suzie is the same person who gives Lily Nina's address. Later, Erica calls her to tell her Nina is sick and cannot perform. Actually, Nina would have gained, or lost, much more if that character had simply not existed. Minor characters, after all, are so influential on the hero's/heroine's life, as well as on the plot.

A couple of other minor characters are the male soloists playing the Prince and Rothbart. David (playing the Prince) seems more arrogant and inconsiderate and, thus, so unfit for his role. David seems to be rude to Nina. He is a good dancer indeed, but he enjoys dancing with Lily more and Nina watches them flirting while she prepares to dance on stage (01:30:42).

The dancer playing Rothbart is not named; however, it is the costume that scares her, not the person. When David drops her on stage, the Rothbart actor asks her if she is alright, in more of a concerned tone (01:32:29). Ironically, such an unnamed character playing the most evil of all roles in the ballet is more concerned about her than her own mother and the crew. The costume he wears prevents her from empathizing with him. She has seen that same costume mating with Lily after all (in an imaginary scene, Leroy turns into Rothbart, and sleeps with her double).

A crucial technique is used to enhance tension related to transformation and to involve the spectator: the I-camera. It is mostly used in film shooting, thus, it lacks in the script. The term "I-camera"<sup>40</sup> is coined by Catherine Williamson to indicate a cinematic technique that helps spectator identify with the character. In *Black Swan*, it is used to "convey a sensation of instability to the spectator, a sensation, however, that is not capable of recuperating."<sup>41</sup> It is used only with Nina and only in her most tense moments. It starts when she first sees Lily on the train, indicating curiosity (00:05:22). The second is during the audition for the Black Swan role: when she spins and Leroy repeats "ATTACK IT" (00:14:17). Nina is worried in this scene that she may not get the role. Later, it is used as she enters company and sees posters of Beth (00:06:03): her icon of perfection. This scene is to be repeated with the same I-camera view when Nina's posters are on display to show fear of not being as good as perfect Beth.



❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



The I-camera is mostly used with the double: underwater as she takes a bath and drops of blood fall, in the corridor scene as she sees another girl and imagines her double, (00:15:40) when the double (or imaginary Lily) smothers her with the pillow, (01:10:12) and, when she dances White Swan in the show and sees every soloist in the *corps de ballet*<sup>42</sup> as her double (01:31:30). The dance scene is so effective that the spectator may feel her confusion and can foresee her fall. Lastly, as she lies on the floor dying, camera is set from her point of view to show admiring eyes, then same eyes shocked to see her blood (01:41:03).

The I-camera is somehow similar to the written I-narrator or first person narrator in that they both display the inner struggle of a character while completely ignoring all other characters. Nina's fears come first in the film; all other characters are minor and flat. Her transformation into her evil self is necessary for a show. However, the audience would sympathize with her downfall as it is for glory and perfection.

Nina manages to find her way towards perfection though it has lost her herself. It has changed her into a monster, a Black Swan in the ballet and a *femme fatale* in reality. The Black Swan causes lovers to part forever and the death of the Swan Queen. Likewise, the *femme fatale* Nina kills herself both symbolically and literally.

Employing the *femme fatale* in a literary piece as an end in itself rather than a means towards an end is quite atypical.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ballet is a very precise sort of dance which is presented on a stage. (Rinaldi, 13) It is "the most academic form of theatrical dance." (Ibid., 14) The term is derived from the Italian word *balletto* which is the diminutive form of the word *ballo* (Italian for 'a dance').

Robin Rinaldi, *World of Dance: Ballet*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 13-14; See also: "Ballet" available at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=ballet> accessed on October 03, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) is a famous Russian composer.

<sup>3</sup> Feminist Film Theory is a sub-category of Film Studies which provides ample analysis of film according to feminism. It appeared as an outcome of Second Wave Feminism and, thus, is concerned with how women are portrayed in film: "how these characters were stereotyped, how passive or active they were, how much screen time they were allotted, and how they served as positive or negative models for women in the audience."

See: Patricia Erens, *Issues in Feminism Film Criticism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xvi.



## ❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁

<sup>4</sup> The gaze can be of various types depending on its function. For instance there is white and black gazes, tourist gaze, heterosexual and homosexual gazes, the imperial gaze, the animal gaze, etc.

See: Clifford T. Manlove, "Visual 'Drive' and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock and Mulvey", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 46: no. 3, (Spring, 2007), 84.

<sup>5</sup> ". . . observing and being observed signify power and powerlessness," according to Foucault. See: Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Gazing in Edith Wharton's 'Looking Glass'," *Narrative*, vol.3: no.2, (May, 1995), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Manlove, 84.

<sup>7</sup> All references to the film will be set in time (hours:minutes:seconds) according to the Fox Pictures production of the film. References to the script of the film are set in page numbers (within text of the paper or in a separate endnote, as necessary). Script is available at the following link: <http://moviecultists.com/wp-content/uploads/screenplays/black-swan.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Tutu is the "traditional ballet skirt, usually made of many layers of gathered tulle. The length of the tutu varies according to the period or style of the ballet being performed." See: Rinaldi, 105.

<sup>9</sup> The principal female dancer in a ballet company. See: *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>10</sup> IMDb: Internet Movie Database. It is an online authoritative source of information for movie, TV and video games. See: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

<sup>11</sup> Judith Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism," *Signs*, vol.11: no.1, (Autumn, 1985), 97.

<sup>12</sup> The film script uses swear and explicit words culturally accepted to the audience, but not academically and culturally usable. The researcher tried to modify them so they would not harm eastern and academic taste, keeping the original connotation as best as possible.

<sup>13</sup> "Gazing is implicitly erotic because the spectator imagines possessing what he sees," according to Freud. See: Sweeney, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Mayne, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Manlove, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Mayne, 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.



❁ MOULDING THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*:  
A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY ❁



<sup>19</sup> Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Leroy asks David, the soloist playing the prince, if he is aroused by Nina as an indication of her success. Gaining the desire of men for Leroy is a meter of success. Since she fails, he asks others to leave so he can 'train' her personally.

<sup>21</sup> Mayne, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Keeping in mind, of course, that Beth has been excluded after she satisfied the desire she insinuated in Leroy.

<sup>23</sup> Sweeney, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sweeney calls this "Medusa's head" which is "the benumbing effect . . . of man's eyes." See: Ibid., 147.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, Beth does wear black but her rooms are strangely light pink. The two rooms associated with her are her dressing room at the company and her hospital room. Beth has probably started as innocent as Nina and ended up transforming into a fearful creature which Leroy describes: "Everything Beth ever did came from within. From some dark impulse. It's what could make her so thrilling to watch. Even perfect at times. But also destructive." (p. 40)

<sup>27</sup> In the imaginary sex scene between Lily and Nina, Nina is in white underwear and Lily is in black. Her black underwear emphasizes the black-wings tattoo on her back and Nina notices that as part of her change.

<sup>28</sup> The top given to Nina here is black lace tank top, as if it is especially designed to show the rash areas on her back (where feathers grow later).

<sup>29</sup> CF the feather symbolism and significance above.

<sup>30</sup> Sweeny, 145.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.143.

<sup>32</sup> Mayne, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Nina realizes she has done something wrong. In the script, she touches her ears slightly in fear when she sees Beth face to face. She fears Beth would notice the earrings. In the first hospital visit, she takes them off, too, before she arrives at Beth's room.

<sup>34</sup> Nina stops taking the earrings off. She keeps them on even as she sleeps.

<sup>35</sup> The script says it is the double who stabbed herself though the film portrays Beth..





## MOULding THE 'FEMME FATALE' IN *BLACK SWAN*: A STUDY IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

<sup>36</sup> Nina goes as far as imagining Leroy lying intimately with Lily on the back of the stage: Lily is wearing black and he is transforming to Rothbart. This scene is important for her to understand the final act of the ballet where the Swan Queen is betrayed and her prince vows loyalty to the wrong princess.

<sup>37</sup> A turn in place, on one foot. A good dancer can execute four or five continuous revolutions. See: Rinaldi, 103.

<sup>38</sup> A screen play script abbreviation for "off screen."

<sup>39</sup> Her mother calls her "Sweet girl," usually to comfort her.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Williamson, " 'You'll see it just as I saw it': Voyerism, Fetishism, and the Female Spectator in *Lady in the Lake*," *Journal of Film and Video*, vol.48: no.3, Film and Television History, (Fall, 1996), 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>42</sup> The supporting dancers whose role is to perform group dances in unison. See: Rinaldi, 101.

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