

## **Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: A Dancer, Her Psychosis, and the *Black Swan* of the Real**

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### **Abstract**

Jacques Lacan argues that self-identification occurs when individuals first see a mirror image of themselves, known in psychoanalytic theory as 'The Mirror Phase'. Because the individual identifies with this image outside of the self, subjectivity is based upon alienation and misrecognition, creating a dualistic split in the human psyche, and a space between the Imaginary of infancy and the Symbolic of adulthood.

Using *Black Swan* (2010) as a cinematic case study this paper addresses what happens when an individual, during an episode of psychological disturbance (acute psychosis), encounters that problematic space, the Real, in a manner that propels them back into the pre-Mirror stage conflict with the image over an increasingly disarrayed subjectivity. Nina's psychosis is articulated by the onset of a series of hallucinations, which take place in front of mirrors, signaling the disruptive regression to her infantile mirror phase where she has no unified sense of self.

Her psychotic hallucinations are the emergence of the horrific Real, erupting through her reality as she battles with a subjectivity founded on fragmentation and separation. Nina's cinematic interaction with the Real visually portrays the tension between her malevolent inner 'black swan' and the innocent 'white swan' that functions as her imago.

### **Introduction: Psychosis and *Black Swan***

Jacques Lacan provided a solid basis for the discussion of psychosis. He highlighted the central importance of psychosis in psychoanalysis, rather than rehearsing the taken-for-granted Freudian understanding of psychosis as an affiliate of the more commonly

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discussed neurosis. Prior to the rise of either psychoanalysis or popular modern psychology in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the intellectual consideration of psychosis was significantly overshadowed by the generic term 'madness'. This emphasis on 'madness' saw many people who were exhibiting signs of paranoia (one of the symptoms of psychosis) institutionalised (Lacan 1993, 4). Even Sigmund Freud's examination of psychosis in the early twentieth Century was lacking in depth and can be summarised as the repression of a homosexual relationship with the father (Grigg 1999, 51).

This investigation of *Black Swan* (Aronofsky 2010) identifies why the phenomena of psychosis is generally experienced negatively and as having a significant adverse impact on the psychological wellbeing of the individual who experiences it. A Lacanian psychoanalysis of the psychotic character Nina will reveal the mechanism behind her psychosis and the resultant psychological suffering she endures. It will also consider how the subject's relationship with reality is disrupted during a psychotic episode, and confront what is exposed when the fabric of that reality is pulled apart.

Directed by Darren Aronofsky and starring Natalie Portman, *Black Swan* is the story of professional ballerina Nina Sayers, working for the New York City Ballet and desperately trying to achieve prima ballerina status before she retires. She lives with her mother, Erica, also a retired ballerina, whose career was cut short by her pregnancy with Nina. Resultantly Erica lives vicariously through Nina, creating additional pressure for Nina to endure. Both their lives are utterly consumed by dance (Sexeny 2015, 53). The company's premier production for the year is *Swan Lake*, which requires a particularly versatile ballerina to perform two roles: as Odette, the gentle and beautiful White Swan, and Odile, the dangerous, deceptive Black Swan. While Nina's technical ability and gentle nature make her an ideal White Swan dancer she has to fight extremely hard to convince the company choreographer, Thomas, that she is capable of also playing the dangerous and seductive Black Swan. Combined with an overbearing mother, diminished self-esteem and gruelling physical training (Tyrer 2015, 133) Nina enters a downward spiral of overwhelming anxiety. Though she does get the role, there is the additional challenge of keeping it, and performing it to a nearly impossible standard. This situation results in Nina entering into an acute psychotic episode where she experiences the delusions, hallucinations and paranoia typical of a person who has an impaired connection with reality.

### **The Mirror Stage, the White Swan Imago and the Real Breaking Through**

Lacan's recognition of the centrality of psychosis stems from its particularly deep psychic roots, its early involvement in the human life cycle (Grigg 1999, 50) and its relation to an inherently divided subject. Lacan uses the terms repression, foreclosure and disavowal (ibid., 48) to discuss the main defense mechanisms of psychological pathology.<sup>1</sup> Each of these pathologies has a differing underlying structure and the mechanism is different in

each case (ibid.). Therefore, even if symptoms of, for example, psychosis (which operates through foreclosure) have not manifested yet, the subject's psyche has some differences to that of a subject who is yet to manifest symptoms of neurosis. However, according to Lacan, 'the great secret of psychoanalysis is that there is no psychogenesis' (Lacan 1993, 7). The psychological is the subject's response to the surrounding environment, and this much is evident in *Black Swan* when Nina's psychosis materialises as a result of the extraordinary (and unprecedented) pressure she is under personally and professionally.

Lacan suggests that every human goes through a universal development phase between six and eighteen months of age called the mirror stage. This period is articulated by the moment that the infant subject first recognises itself in a reflection. Specifically, Lacan talks about the infant looking into a mirror although, realistically, the subject could enter this phase upon seeing their reflection in any reflective surface. *Black Swan* does not depict Nina's first interaction with a reflective surface, but based on her profession the viewer understands that she has, over many years, spent several hours each day in front of a reflective surface. *Black Swan* articulates the relationship between the image of a character (who has almost constant interaction with mirrored surfaces) and psychosis, and formally recognises the destructive power of the image. Such power is multiplied for people who have lifestyles that focus on the visual and the beautiful. Examples of these lifestyles include people with careers in dancing, modeling, gymnastics and acting – people who spend significant time in front of mirrors or have their image recorded, to later be played back to a large audience. I refer to these careers as the 'aesthetic professions'.

Prior to entering the mirror stage, Lacan claims that humans are born with no mastery of their own body or understanding of their body as a separate entity to their mother's body. Resultantly, the infant exists in a state where no sense of unified self has yet developed. Upon seeing a mirror image of themselves (and understanding that the surface is reflective), the subject identifies with that coherent reflection – providing the sense of mastery of their physical state that had been previously absent. By first identifying with a reflection, the subject forms an identity based on an image. Therefore, the innate understanding of 'the self' is founded not on 'the self' but on the image of the self, and this is problematic because it suggests that the internalisation of an external image, and the resultant development of human selfhood, merely disguises the pre-mirror phase non-unified subject (Grosz 1990, 40). Because they spend such a great deal of time in front of the mirror, dancers such as Nina have this internalisation of the external reiterated to a greater extent than those who are not in the aesthetic professions. In these professions there is emphasis on the aesthetic perfection of the performance and there is also pressure to sustain that perfection beyond the performance into other aspects of their lives. This additional stress is particularly harmful to women in these professions, who suffer from an increased perceived obligation to *be* the image rather than just perform it. This is

problematic as it encourages identity to be based in image. In other words, Nina the ballerina is particularly vulnerable to the unstable foundation of a pre-mirror phase, non-unified, subject that is disguised (or covered over) by her image in the mirror.

During the mirror phase, infants are fascinated and entertained by their reflections. Through a series of gestures and movements, the child understands the relationship between their own bodily movements and their precise reflections in the virtual world of the mirror. Lacan refers to this moment of interplay between child and image as a 'striking spectacle' and a 'flutter of jubilant activity' (Lacan 2002, 94-95). What interests me is the way in which this spectacle and activity can be sustained beyond infantile years if the subject engages in an aesthetic profession that puts increased pressure on the understanding of the self through imagery. I use the Lacanian mirror phase to argue that Nina's ego is actually rooted in her ability to perform herself as bodily image, which means that the mirrors in the dance studio are not only reflections of her athletic skill but visual depictions of 'her' as an identity based overwhelmingly on her aesthetic. Similarly to the anorexic, who looks in the mirror and sees only faults, Nina's hyper critical gaze is utilised to edit the image of her body into a series of performative flaws which can supposedly be fixed and perfected through the repetition of movement (similarly to the toddler who gestures and re-gestures in order to gain understanding of the reflective surface). Such moments are common in *Black Swan* as the film covers multiple technique classes, individual practice sessions, auditions and rehearsals. In these scenes, Nina is frequently told to stop her sequence of movement, to start over and to do it better the next time. Sometimes this instruction comes from her trainer or choreographer, and sometimes it is self-administered.

While the adult subject has a more complex sense of self than that of the infant who enters the mirror stage, adults continue to look at their reflections from time to time for some confirmation of their ego ideal. If the adult subject constantly refers to the reflection (as is the case with those in the aesthetic professions), the image goes from being a mere confirmation of the ego ideal into the basis of the ego ideal. As previously stated the image gains power by in-forming identity rather than sustaining it (Grosz, 40). In other words, a professional dancer such as Nina in *Black Swan* hasn't formed a sense of self which has dependable stability should all reflective surfaces be removed from her life. Nina's reliance on the mirror image disempowers her and this interaction with the Lacanian Imaginary register, along with her very stressful life circumstances; help to trigger the onset of her psychosis. The following paragraphs discuss the role of the Imaginary, and Lacan's two other proposed registers of human subjectivity, the Symbolic and the Real, in the development and manifestation of Nina's psychosis.

The Imaginary works in two ways. Firstly it is based beyond tangible reality. Secondly it operates in the visual. Thus, when the infant subject assumes an image-based sense of ego

identity, it is locating its identity in the Imaginary realm. Lacan theorises that the developmental stage beyond the mirror phase is entry into the second register – the Symbolic. The Symbolic, in contrast to the Imaginary, is the realm of language. As a result, the entry into the Symbolic stage occurs with the individual's use of the pronoun 'I' in reference to the self. Therefore, assuming identity through an image is only the first step in claiming ownership of the self as an individual who is separate from others (and in particular the mother).

The Real, (Lacan's third register) is an in-between space. It is located externally to subjectivity and manifests only as trauma. The understanding that the subject has no self (because the understanding of the self is based on a 'misrecognised' external image) is so unsettling for the ego which has formed out of this misrecognised image, that this knowledge exists in the domain of the Real and only emerges at times of massive psychological stress. Such is the case in *Black Swan* where the self as 'fragmented' (Lacan 2002, 78) and incomplete is revealed during acutely stressful moments when Nina's reality is interrupted by the emergence of the Real during a series of hallucinations. This is represented onscreen by horrific bodily malfunctions (Laine 2015, 127-131) that involve the penetration and replacement of her own body parts with that of a feathered Black Swan.

Almost every scene in *Black Swan* features a mirror as part of the set. Mirrors appear not only in the dance studio, but also in bathroom settings, changing rooms, restaurants and offices. Because of this, Nina is constantly surrounded by her own reflection – the place where her misrecognised ego abides. However, as her anxiety grows during the film, this reflected image becomes less and less a source of security and more an intimidating visual field that she fears to confront. This suggests that the understanding of the self as fragmented (knowledge which is located in the Real) is moving closer to the perimeter of the external where it threatens to pierce the boundary and enter her conscious mind. Nina has spent her entire life gazing into the mirror for confirmation of her identity as a White Swan, her idealised imago. She cannot embrace her own body because her understanding of it remains pre-mirror phase. That is to say that, while striving for the White Swan imago, Nina unconsciously interprets herself as fractured and incomplete, represented cinematically by the grotesque and malevolent Black Swan.

Nina's greatest fear is a reflection of herself (her double) which is in fragments (because that would reflect her internal state) (Easthope 1999, 163) This fear manifests onscreen with the increasing emerging presence of the Black Swan (portrayed both in mirror reflections and through changes to her physical body) which are *representative* of her internal fragmentation and the knowledge that primal repression has not occurred (Žižek 2008, 25). These moments also represent the converging of two registers – the Real

(represented by the Black Swan), and the Imaginary (her image-based, pre-language reality).

Therefore, most abominable for Nina is the moment when the body parts of the Black Swan literally break through the boundaries of her own body, as opposed to remaining in the comparable safety of the glass surface of a mirror. The confines of the mirror (the glass surface) represent the boundary of her unconscious mind. Resultantly the Black Swan's appearances in mirror reflections are less frightening to Nina. So long as the image stays 'behind' the glass wall, the unconscious understanding of her fragmented self is stirring but has not yet broken through the boundary. By comparison, the Black Swan that transcends glass and enters bodily space suggests the divide between unconscious and conscious has been broken, and is the visual construction of the Imaginary being pierced by the Real. This first occurs half an hour into *Black Swan*, when Nina washes her hands in the bathroom of a concert hall foyer. She notices a small nick in the skin of her middle finger near the nail. She attempts to remove the stray piece of skin but the skin won't detach from her finger and instead she pulls back several centimeters of skin in the direction of her knuckle. Though simplistic, this image is simultaneously fascinating and repulsive. This scene symbolises Nina's entrance into psychosis as, after blinking several times, she realises she hasn't removed skin from her finger after all, thereby signaling that her initial perception of reality was impaired. This hallucination is the visual depiction of her unconscious breaking into her conscious, cinematically conveyed by the parallel image of her body breaking apart – indicative of the psychotic individual whose symptoms manifest from a divided subject who is struggling for, but failing at, an integrated identity.

Though it may seem that the Black Swan is the only symbol of the existence of psychosis, the presence of the White Swan (as the mirror image and something she attempts to embody) is as much a manifestation of Nina's psychosis as the Black Swan. The White Swan is also only an image to aspire to (an imago) in the same way that the Black Swan is only an image to cower from. Neither of them are real and the White Swan is no more able to provide Nina with stable selfhood than the Black Swan.

### **Foreclosure, the Name-of-the-Father and Psychosis**

The Oedipus complex follows on from the mirror stage, so while the fear of castration usually stems from the paternal function, the alienation and body fragmentation an infant endures prior to the mirror phase is related to the mother (Dor 1998, 95). Resultantly the development of the subject's identity is affected by both male and female roles. In *Black Swan* Nina suffers negative affect from her mother Erica and her male choreographer Thomas. In fact, Lacan emphasises the importance of acknowledging the triadic Oedipal family particularly in the understanding of psychosis; psychosis is a mechanism because there are several parts (in this case people and stages) involved in it, it is not a singular

shift from one point to another (Grigg 1999, 64). Psychoanalysis maintains that the individual's development of identity is based on repression and the very nature of repressed material is that it always returns in an attempt to be un-repressed (Lacan 1993, 12). However, there are some life-experiences that do not make it into the Symbolic order to begin with, and therefore cannot be repressed. These things are 'foreclosed' instead and manifest during trauma in the order of the Real, where they are untouched by language and structure. Such is the case when Nina experiences the morphing of her physical body into swan body parts or when she hallucinates the tearing of skin back from her fingernail – the foreclosed is manifesting at these moments as something unspeakable, something not representable in the Symbolic, something from the Real.

During the process of foreclosure, the subject banishes the possibility of castration threatened by the Name-of-the-Father paternal metaphor from the register of language and symbolisation; it is sent to 'another place'. This place is external to the subject (and the subject's world) so the foreclosed is expelled into the alien domain of the Real. Note that the Real differs from reality, as reality can be represented and consciously perceived (Grigg 1999), although interestingly the Real can manifest in reality for the psychotic subject. As previously discussed, this is the case in *Black Swan* where the psychotic experiences of Nina are cinematically conveyed to the viewer as they present themselves visually in her reality. Only through this manifestation of the Real emerging in reality can the viewer understand the way that Nina experiences her psychosis (hallucinations and paranoia primarily) (Ouweneel 2012, 199).

Lacan's concept of foreclosure is based on Jacques Damouretts' and Edouard Pichon's use of the term (Grigg 1999, 49). As structural linguists, they believed that once a speaker has uttered a word, it then prevents certain possibilities from occurring so the utterance forecloses future events. However, for Lacan, rather than the utterance preventing the possibility of an event taking place, foreclosure refers to the 'fact that the speaker lacks the very linguistic resources for making the statement at all' (ibid.). This is because the foreclosed experience never made it into the Symbolic order in the first place, and therefore cannot be represented with language (ibid.) because the word (the signifier) is absent. Herein lies a key difference between repression and foreclosure; repression is linguistic in nature because for something to be repressed in the unconscious (which is structured like a language) it has to be first registered in the Symbolic (the realm of language) (Wright 2000, 74). If the repressed element has been registered in the Symbolic then it has already been recognised by the subject. However, in psychosis the 'necessary signifiers' (the words and the language) are absent, so the subject cannot recognise and then repress, so forecloses instead and, here, foreclosure works as a 'mechanism that simply treats the foreclosed as if it did not exist' (Grigg 2008, 7). It follows then, that Nina's

psychotic hallucinations exist through trauma, in the domain of the Real – she doesn't have the linguistic resources for these unspeakable symptoms to manifest within the Symbolic.

In order for the child to successfully navigate the full trajectory of the pre-Oedipal stage and the Oedipus complex it must be able to differentiate itself as a subject (Nina in this case) as a separate individual from the mother (Erica). This differentiation, and movement into the Symbolic order, requires the ability to substitute experience for a representation of experience. In other words symbolisation must occur through language. However, the foundation for symbolisation occurs during primal repression – a process which secures the primordial signifier, referred to by Lacan as the Name-of-the-Father (Dor 1998, 113). Given that Nina has not a single paternal figure but a very over-bearing maternal figure in her life, primal repression is blocked by foreclosure. The Name-of-the-Father paternal metaphor does not occur and Nina does not have an Oedipus complex (at the usual age), does not gain entry into the Symbolic and continues to exist instead within the Imaginary for most of her adult life. Foreclosure is the action which prevents primal repression from occurring in some cases (ibid., 121) but as foreclosure doesn't necessarily lead to psychosis, it is important to recognise that it is only Name-of-the-Father foreclosure which creates psychosis, because the Name-of-the-Father is the primordial signifier.

Therefore, as foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father creates psychosis (Restuccia 2004, 203), it is logical that Nina's psychosis in *Black Swan* emerges not only at the climax of her career (and therefore an emotionally stressed time), but also at the time in her life she first comes under the control of a male choreographer (Thomas) who both functions as the object of her sexual desire and the governor of her career. While Nina's childhood is lacking a father figure and is overly endowed with the maternal presence, it could be argued that she does not escape the primordial signifier altogether; rather, it appears in a deferred form (as Thomas). Thomas has an influential position in Nina's life; he wields significant power and his actions have considerable effect on her physically, mentally and emotionally, indicating his role as the master phallus. Thomas may be seen as governing the ballet world where his opinion is law and he regulates the desire of his dancers. It is during her interactions with Thomas that it becomes apparent that Nina never embarked on an Oedipal trajectory: she simultaneously fears him (she cowers before his criticism), rebels against him (resists his advice), and desires him (attempts to sexually seduce him in order to get the role of Swan Queen). Two decades after it was meant to occur, a male figure enters Nina's life and fulfills the paternal metaphor; Thomas enters the position of Name-of-the-Father for Nina. Resultantly Nina resumes the trajectory of her Oedipal complex, although in delayed form, and far too late to prevent foreclosure. This leads to her psychosis. As the Name-of-the-Father is a paternal metaphor which replaces desire for the mother (and the mother's desire) and puts in its place phallic meaning (Grigg ibid.), this explains the hostile tension between Erica and Thomas who are fighting for control over,



and intimacy with, Nina. If we view Thomas as a belated primordial signifier for Nina, perhaps this is why he has even more effect on her than her mother during the timeframe of *Black Swan*. As the father figure he outranks the mother in the same way that the paternal metaphor (Name-of-the-Father) is a primordial signifier because it holds a particularly powerful position in the 'subject's symbolic universe' where it governs order, including regulating laws and rules surrounding desire of both the child and mother (Dor 1998, 93).

According to Lacan the onset of a psychotic episode cannot be predicted although the elements required for the onset are present all along, existing dormant within the subject since childhood (Grigg 1999, 60). The trigger is an event where the Name-of-the-Father is called into 'symbolic opposition to the subject', meaning the subject is called into a position, through language, that illuminates the lack of the signifier (ibid.), which results from the Name-of-the-Father being foreclosed. This outcome is somewhat more significant than neurosis – which occurs if the resolution of the Oedipus complex merely suffers a disruption. Foreclosure (prevention from ever coming into being) means primal repression is blocked, the paternal metaphor fails and entrance to the Symbolic order is prohibited. This in turn means that the child remains stuck in the Imaginary register where the libidinal closeness between mother and child continues and the child fails to develop an understanding of the self as individual and distinct from the mother. For example, Nina and Erica share a home, a profession, and a relationship that resents the development of all other relationships; Erica is both wary of Thomas and outright hostile towards another dancer (Lily) who visits Nina at home. Indeed, *Black Swan* suggests that Erica and Nina are each other's sole companion and fulfill a variety of functions beyond the traditional boundaries of adult-child and mother-daughter relationships. This is articulated in a scene where Nina and Erica cut into a celebratory cake after Nina's casting as the Swan Queen. Erica, with her index finger covered in sponge and icing, encourages Nina to lick it off. Such an action might be normal for a mother and an infant, but for a mother and a grown woman, this level of intimacy feels unusual and uncomfortable.

Having said this, Lacan considers that in subjects with an underlying psychotic structure who are yet to enter into a full-blown psychosis there is a degree of 'suppletion' (*suppleance*). Suppletion is the pre-psychosis attempt to find an alternative substitute for what is absent at the level of the Symbolic register. In other words the subject finds a 'stand in', another person, who can temporarily cover for the absence of the Name-of-the-Father. The substitute is adequate until an enigma occurs and the lack of meaning beneath is revealed. Grigg states that it is not uncommon for this series of events to occur at the beginning of adulthood, where previously the libidinal relationship between mother and child was not challenged (ibid.). Although *Black Swan* casts Nina in her mid-late twenties, the foreclosure on the Name-of-the-Father and absence of primal repression in her

childhood enable the continuation of her adolescence well into her adult years. Resultantly, until the time frame in which *Black Swan* is set, the Nina-Erica libidinal relationship thrived. With her new role as the prima ballerina, this relationship is challenged for the first time by Thomas, who makes Nina aware of her own ambitions and desires beyond the ones she shares with Erica. Erica views Thomas as a threat, having endangered the intimacy she had previously shared unspoiled with Nina in their pre-Oedipal dyad; however, once Thomas activates the position of Name-of-the-Father for Nina, anyone else can theoretically occupy this function too – Erica included.

### **The Conscious Unconscious and the Breaking of Boundaries**

Given that Nina suffers a gradual banishment from the Imaginary and has also been prevented from entering the Symbolic, she is theoretically left nowhere to exist besides Lacan's third register – the Real. In other words, it seems logical that she experiences foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father in such a traumatic way and psychologically suffers because of this. During psychosis the unconscious is (unusually) at the surface of the subject and becomes conscious (Lacan 1993, 11). Take, for example, Nina's unconscious understanding of herself as fragmented and incomplete – a knowledge so horrific that it is located in the Real and manifests visually through the depiction of a Black Swan appearing at certain moments at the boundaries of her own body. However, articulating the unconscious through certain (psychotic) behaviours doesn't necessarily mean that the unconscious recognises itself. Lacan also states, 'The subject speaks to himself with his ego' (ibid. 14), although, ironically, it would seem the subject is unaware this conversation is occurring.

Psychosis is marked by the subject reacting to seemingly insignificant signs and investing in them meaning and significance (ibid., 9). Lacan uses the example of the subject who sees a red car in the street; if the subject is psychotic they will conceive that the red car went past deliberately at that moment, that its presence is significant; they imbue it with meaning. Similarly, everything becomes a sign for the psychotic individual (Kristeva 1993, 139). The whole world is full of attributed meanings, many of them negative and sinister – making the psychotic subject alienated and often afraid. Nina's decline into psychosis is highlighted through her investment of meaning into events that are insignificant. For example, she perceives that a single glance from Lily (the rival dancer) is evidence of Lily attempting to usurp Nina's position in the company. Later, fleeting shadows in the dance studio are interpreted by Nina as Lily and Thomas erotically embracing. These insignificant moments are imbued with significance because the absence of a primordial signifier in Nina's childhood, and hence the absence of primal repression, means that signifying chains remain unanchored to the Symbolic. Those signifying chains float freely so signification occurs anywhere at any time, or as Lacan says, this process is 'the emergence in reality of an enormous meaning that has the appearance of being nothing at all' (Lacan 1993, 85).

The meaning the psychotic garners from these experiences (elements, objects, events or people) is understandable to them, yet totally unnatural to others, making paranoia a difficult phenomenon for the non-paranoid to comprehend. For example, Lily and Thomas are both completely baffled by Nina's accusations and suspicions. Each psychotic subject reinvents a Symbolic realm, where they alone exist. The difficulty for the analyst is that the psychotic's signifiers are random, so the problem lies in understanding the mechanism the subject (unknowingly) employs. In other words, the psychoanalyst needs to consider structural traits and patterns rather than simply observing symptoms (Dor 1997, 16). In the case of Nina there is a definite persecution paranoia occurring, although the viewer of *Black Swan* is not in a position to know whether this paranoia is justified.

The central clinical characteristic of psychosis is an altered relationship with reality (Lacan 1993, 44). This altered relationship with reality is called 'delusion' and functions as a defense mechanism for the subject (ibid., 79). Interestingly, for the psychotic, an alternative connection with reality is not necessarily problematic, given that those experiences may not be negatively affecting (ibid., 75). The problem lies in the psychotic's certainty of that reality, that they believe what they are experiencing to be real regardless of what that entails – even the extraordinary. It is the psychotic's utter conviction of the truth of signifying events that makes them delusional. So while it is unlikely that Lily wishes to usurp Nina's prima ballerina position, Nina is not in a frame of mind where she can view the situation objectively. She is certain that Lily slipped drugs into her drink so that she would be late for rehearsal the following day, despite this being an extraordinary accusation. Lacan claims the psychotic's 'certainty is radical' (ibid., 75), meaning that others who are not psychotic may experience the same things but have significant doubt surrounding the truth or reality of the experience. Indeed, the truly deluded subject will become increasingly certain of their beliefs (ibid., 77). In addition to this, the deeper the psychotic enters into the conviction of their delusion, the more of their world the delusion will encapsulate. In *Black Swan* for example, Nina's suspicion of Lily as a sabotaging force grows to also include Thomas, her mother and some of the other dancers in the company. In theory, left untreated, the psychotic subject's whole existence will be pulled into the delusion.

Mirrors are an appropriate prop for the depiction of psychosis given that they provide an image which functions as the vision-based manifestation of the emergence of the Real in reality. In other words the viewer is able to see what Nina is experiencing as generating meaning. Further, since the subject's self identity is based on a reflective image, Nina continues to look to the image for confirmation of the ideal ego (her imago). Nonetheless, the mirror is also the object that exposes the unconscious understanding of the body as fragmented and incomplete, thereby revealing the Oedipus complex as unresolved. Expressly, the mirror has multiple functions in *Black Swan* – it both reflects the ideal ego,

while simultaneously performing the ego ideal, which polices social standards and moral behaviours. Yet, the mirror also serves as an aesthetic representative of subjective destitution – the eventual realisation that the supposed ‘reflection’ is actually not reliable in its depiction of ‘reality’. Eventually *Black Swan* conveys that the assumed authenticity and accurateness of the mirror image, is actually not truthful; the reflection cannot be trusted.

Not surprisingly then, given the constant presence of mirrors in *Black Swan*, three moments of psychosis take place in front of full length dance studio mirrors. To begin with, the psychotic deterioration of Nina’s psyche is depicted in a costume-measuring scene where she senses a shift in the reflected image in front of her, though she herself does not move. When she tries to scrutinise this movement the mirror image ‘behaves’ and whatever she thought she saw disappears. A second key scene shows Nina rehearsing by herself in the studio late at night. Her body and the image in the reflection are framed simultaneously through a series of long shots and extreme long shots. As she rotates *en pointe* before the mirror the reflected image loses synchronisation with her real world self. The mirror image is slightly behind her timing, completing the rotation a second after her. When she attempts to eradicate her suspicions (as in the previous costume-measuring scene), the mirror image doesn’t conform this time, but instead refuses to move though Nina lifts an arm. It is at this moment that the malevolent Black Swan Nina fears, which is the visual representation of the fragmented self, becomes explicitly and the effect is horrifying for both Nina and the viewer.

This moment indicates the emergence of Nina’s pathology, a psychosis that is based on the realisation that she is fragmented and incomplete. As previously stated, the confines of the mirror’s glass surface, function as something of a safety barrier – a boundary between Nina’s unconscious and conscious mind. So long as Nina’s real body and mirror image remain synchronised, the horrific understanding of the self as fragmented and incomplete remains undisturbed. These two images falling out of synch visually signifies that Nina’s conscious and unconscious are out of synch – they contain different information. Her conscious contains the White Swan imago while the unconscious contains the Black Swan reality. Terrified, Nina takes several steps backwards, reversing into another studio mirror. Now the reflection, still representative of the Black Swan, turns independently to look malevolently at the real Nina. This moment – this turning and confronting – is the first visual representation of outright rivalry between the ideal-ego gained in the mirror phase (the White Swan imago) and the misrecognised fragmented self (the Black Swan).

These ‘mirror moments’ in *Black Swan* are visual hallucinations – part of the set of symptoms that occur with psychosis. Lacan refers to a number of ‘elementary phenomena’ that manifest during psychosis (op cit in Grigg 1999, 57). Such phenomena can specifically include thought-echoes, verbal enunciations and hallucinations. Hallucinations exist within the realm of the Real but appear as if in reality to the psychotic subject (ibid., 53). This is

because hallucinations form the site where the repressed returns as a neurotic symptom, and the foreclosed returns in a form 'outside the subject' by reappearing in the Real (ibid., 56). Hallucinations may be verbal, visual or tactile in nature (Lacan 1993, 14) and are 'located at both the symbolic and imaginary levels', meaning symptoms of psychosis may contain language and image and manifest in the form of hallucination (Grigg 1999, 53). In Nina's case her psychosis reveals itself insidiously through the increasingly frightening visual depiction of body malformations, which are entirely appropriate given that her psychosis is based on the realisation of the self as fragmented and incomplete. In contrast to the grace of her body on the dance floor, her psychosis initially manifests in the form of her body encountering monstrous phenomena such as her skin peeling back from her nail, the emergence of black feathers through her skin and eventually the snapping of her shin bone which reforms into a swan's leg (Laine, 127-131). These grotesque events are the horrific Real piercing through into Nina's reality, pushing at the seams of her conscious. Nina's psychological deterioration manifests visually and physically in the image of a Swan for a particular reason. Not only is the Black Swan representative of horrific knowledge, but also the White Swan is Nina's imago. The emergence of separated swan body parts; pushed through her skin, suggest that her fragmented self is literalised onscreen as dissected pieces of her imago. This further suggests that both the illusion of the White Swan imago and the Black Swan spectre of foreclosure must be shattered if she is to regain psychological health. It is also reconfirmation that the White Swan is as much a symbol of her psychosis as the Black Swan, thereby reinforcing the third function of the mirror within *Black Swan* previously mentioned - that the mirror is an anaesthetised version of subjective destitution; the realisation that the depiction of reality in the identical reflection is actually not an identical depiction of reality, and the mirror image is untrustworthy.

*Black Swan's* climax involves a physically aggressive altercation on opening night of *Swan Lake*. Interestingly Nina and Lily look similar, though Lily is a better embodiment of the seductive Black Swan. Consequentially, when Nina looks in her dressing room mirror during the interval she (being in a paranoid psychosis) sees Lily in the reflection, dressed and ready to go on stage as the Black Swan. Mistaking the reflection for the real thing, in a moment of physical aggression, Nina (as the White Swan) fights with the reflection and shatters the mirror. The shattering of the mirror is indicative of the moment that the barrier surrounding Nina's conscious mind is fully punctured by the traumatic unconscious knowledge. The breaking of the glass surface indicates the walls are down, and the conscious is being flooded with the psychosis that is based on her traumatic understanding of her fragmented self. As she fights, the image of Lily morphs slightly to reveal that Nina was in the reflection all along and what the viewer sees is an image where Nina is fighting her absolute replica - herself - hereby suggesting a very palpable struggle between the imago White Swan and the fragmented self of the Black Swan. This physical altercation suggests that Nina is struggling desperately to maintain the ideal ego she aspires to whilst

her ego ideal attempts to reveal the details of her infantile life with her mother by pushing through to the conscious. Although she has already succumbed to psychosis, any acknowledgement of her incomplete self is horrific, and this physical fight is the last ditch attempt to avoid acknowledging those traumatic truths. The White-Swan-Nina stabs the reflection-Nina with a shard of glass from the shattered mirror.

This action – when Nina stabs her reflection/herself with a shard of glass – is particularly meaningful. The destabilisation of her imago happens as an internal process. As Nina's unconscious Black Swan pushes increasingly at her conscious boundaries during the course of the film, she does not so much unravel as implode. This self-destructive process is symbolised in a finale where she shatters her reflection in the mirror and stabs her own torso. She is so engulfed by the psychosis and yet, so desperately afraid of acknowledging the truth, that she uses a fragment (the shard of mirror), of her fragmented self (the Black Swan reflection), to avoid acknowledging the truth (that she is fragmented). It is important to recognise that she uses a shard of her former Black Swan reflection to stab her White Swan self, suggesting (again) the unconscious attempt to 'free' the truth by breaking the shell of the White Swan imago and symbolically challenging the mirror's presumed truthfulness and reflective accuracy. Therefore, while for the majority of the film the Black Swan has appeared to be a malevolent force, this scene turns this perception on its head and reinforces the notion that the White Swan imago is as much a symbol of Nina's psychosis as the Black Swan. This inversion occurs when one considers the Black Swan is actually trying to 'help' Nina recognise her underlying fragmented self in order to repair it, to move beyond the mother-child libidinal relationship and to become a better functioning adult. It also reveals that Nina's ideal sense of self (her imago) being based in the reflected image is also flawed; she cannot properly 'see' herself by looking at her reflection, because the reflection is not reliable.

As the Black-Swan-reflection lies unconscious in a pool of her own blood Nina goes out to perform the role of the Black Swan. During the performance the skin on her arms gradually develops black feathers. This is a visual symbol that despite her attempts to silence the truth (by stabbing the reflection), with her conscious and unconscious walls down, Nina finally recognises she is fragmented and she is the Black Swan. By the end of the performance the feathers have grown into huge, fully developed black wings. Previously the emergence of Black Swan body parts through Nina's own skin was grotesque and something against which she rebelled. The uninhibited growth of the wings and their full, ethereal beauty suggests Nina is no longer attempting to fight the appearance of the Black Swan and that she has acknowledged her self as fragmented. The presence of the wings represents her fragmentation which is caused by the separation process she never went through with her mother, resulting in mal-development that has plagued her ever since.

Nina returns to the dressing room and discovers the body she stabbed has disappeared. At this moment she emerges from her psychosis, reconnecting with reality and understanding that she did not stab another dancer but her own mirror image – and in stabbing her mirror image she has, of course, stabbed herself. This newfound clarity signifies not only her emergence from psychosis but the realisation that she is neither her White Swan imago or her fearsome Black Swan doppelganger: she is Nina Sayers who lives in the real world, in a physical body that is separate from her reflection image and from her mother.

Nina manages to dance the final scene, but upon landing her last jump, she reveals her abdominal wound and whispers the words: 'I was perfect'. One reading of this statement is that this is simply a long overdue acknowledgement of her own ability as a dancer and her acceptability as an individual. Up to this point Nina was still heavily reliant on the reassurance of the mirror imago and yet had been prevented from entering the Symbolic by Erica. Resultantly she never properly used the term 'I' in reference to the self and had not claimed full ownership of herself as separate from others (and in particular her mother). The use of the term 'I' at this moment suggests her psychotic break actually assisted her in moving into the realm of the Symbolic where she can use language to distinguish her self for the first time. However, an alternative reading is that the words 'I was perfect' are actually an indication of Nina's understanding, not of her perfection as a dancer and individual, but that her identity as a subject who is both fragmented Black Swan and imago White Swan is a normal and genuine state of the human condition; that clarity, truth and even 'perfection' can be found in combinations, inconsistencies and imperfections.

### **Conclusion: The Agency of the Reflection**

The mirror phase has long been acknowledged as an important stage in the development of the subject. Lacan in particular theorised that recognising one's reflection was a crucial moment in the psychological progression of the infant. Engaging with the mirror and recognising the reflection indicates the infant subject understands the self as a separate person from the mother and as a person with physical autonomy. Although I acknowledge the importance of this psychoanalytic work and concur that the subject initially conceptualises itself through image, I also argue that a prolonged and intense relationship with the reflection of one's image can be ultimately damaging. *Black Swan* suggests that for an infant the image is informative, but for an adult the image is destructive.

Beyond the early infancy years the mirror ceases to be a neutral zone that placidly reflects colour and movement. For people such as dancers, gymnasts and models who engage with the mirror for sustained periods of time, the reflection gains significantly more meaning. In these instances the reflection first becomes a confirmation of identity – a reassurance that the subject exists so long as the reflection is there. Secondly, the individual in these

aesthetic professions returns to that image again and again to solidify a sense of self. Eventually, the identity of these individuals comes to depend on the mirror image rather than be solidified by it. These professions are notorious for their demand of aesthetic perfection. Consequentially the ballerina (Nina in the case of *Black Swan*) is no longer able to turn to the image for confirmation of identity – she turns to the mirror instead for confirmation of perfection; but neither confirmation of identity or of perfection can be reliably found in the mirror.

This analysis sought to formally identify the link between the image and psychosis in *Black Swan*. The psychoanalytic reading of this text revealed that the mirror wields more power than usually attributed to it; the mirror is not benign and the reflection has an agency of its own. Those whose identity relies on the mirror image become tormented by the desire to first make the image flawless and then to embody the image and the perfection that comes with it at all times. The attempt to embody and sustain perfection is impossible although the sheer drive in doing it can cause immense emotional, psychological and physical stress.

Despite the Black Swan initially appearing in the mirror image as malevolent and representative of her psychological disorder, this film suggests that the greater damage is inflicted on Nina, not through the haunting psychosis of the Black Swan, but through the taunting perfectionism of the White Swan and *untruth* of the imago reflection. This finding appears unique within the current literature about the film which generally focuses on the Black Swan's negative positioning as a symbol of disease, inequality and Otherness (Marston 695-711; Sandino 305-317), horrific indicator of madness and distress (Fisher & Jacobs 58-62; Clover 7-9; Bignall 121-138; Smith, Austrich, Brown & Steding 97-101), or sign of repressed female sexuality within the patriarchy (Subramanian & Lagerwey 1-20; Corpus 157-160). These readings of *Black Swan* tend to avoid acknowledging the obsessive striving for perfectionism (presented onscreen by the mirror imago and the ethereal White Swan) as an aspect of Nina's identity, which is just as dangerous, damaging and influential in the subject's diegetic trajectory through psychosis.

While in the instance of *Black Swan*, Nina faces several confrontations with other characters; it is the relationship with her reflection that takes centre-stage in this film. Arguably this is because the relationship with her reflection is informed and manipulated by all those other issues (such as her intense relationship with her mother, her rivalry with other dancers and her emerging sexual desires). Nina's declining psychological health is appropriately depicted through that mirror image and the harder she tries to *be* her imago through the embodiment of perfection, the further into psychological disorder she progresses. In the end the most horrific fear for Nina, the grotesque emergence of the Black Swan, is actually the event that breaks the cycle of perfectionist delusion and allows her to identify as something other than an image.



## Notes

1. Lacan's terms are based on Freud's original terms that are *verdrangung* (displacement), *verwerfung* (rejection) and *verleugnung* (denial).

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