

Mind Travel of the Black Swan

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ABSTRACT--*Psychoanalytic theory and film studies have been agents of mutual influence from the time of birth of both disciplines. Psychoanalysis acts as a tool for an in- depth study of movies dealing with human subjects and minds. Movies portraying conflicts and dilemmas within individuals' minds often prove worthy of psychoanalytical studies in turn providing insight into the functioning of the arte facts of human minds and giving new meanings to the pieces of art. This paper entitled "Mind Travel of the Black Swan", aims to provide a psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approach to the movie Black Swan as a literary text on the basis of relevant findings about human mind put forward by major theorists, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Jacques Lacan. Cinema takes hold of the viewer's analytical mind into a bizarre yet real world of subjective experience with deep running psychological conflicts. The collaborative and integrative study of psychoanalysis and film contribute to the growth of knowledge in both the areas of study. The study reflects how the modern digital society adopts and integrates the scattered information in digital media such as cinema to a whole different level of perception with the aid of theory and criticism. The paper opens a portal into the various psychoanalytic readings on the primary text with the aid of the strong theoretical framework of knowledge in film studies and psychoanalysis, aiming to enable further theoretical studies on the medium of cinema and the complex working of human minds.*

Keywords--*Cinema, Digital Media, Film Studies, Theory*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema and Psychoanalysis share a common historical, social, and cultural background, both greatly influenced by science and modernism, resulting in them to have naturally grown to take themselves to the noble seats of artistic exploration of human life. The meaning of any art form is interpreted by the viewers' reality based on their individual socio-cultural experiences which has made cinema undergo much stylistic and intrinsic change in its acting techniques and subject treatments. Hence a meaningful subjective experience, cinema has a deep cognitive influence on its viewers. Psychological approaches have been formulated on the strange functioning of the enigmatic human mind to account for the diverse actions, behaviours and personalities of different individuals, which can be applied inquisitively on the study of a medium like cinema having a unique parallel structure with human life.

The birth of cinema offered a collective sense of the uncanny as Freud (2003) called it. It refers to how the images on screen were to be familiar and strange, alive and yet lifeless, real but illusionary. The psychoanalyst Andrea Sabbadini (2014) pointed out that film speaks a language of the unconscious and also provides alternative perspectives on the world, thus sharing with psychoanalysis a similar language. Psychoanalysis has its major focus on the significance of desire in an individual, the subconscious, subjectivity, and sexuality which have often been

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commonly dealt with intrinsic details in movies. Psychoanalytic film theory explores the language of the unconscious, of the repressed, and the hidden as embodied in a film text.

Psychoanalytic criticisms constitute mainly of concepts by Freud, Jung, and Lacan. Freud's classical psychoanalysis emphasizing on the unconscious and human sexual drive comprises of the concepts of division of mind; division of human psyche; psychosexual stages of development; ego defence mechanisms; his Dream work; transference and counter- transference of feelings. His concepts such as of the unconscious, the return of the repressed, oedipal drama, narcissism, castration fear, hysteria, etc. have been directly applied in the making of films. Jung's Analytical Psychology focused on a psychic energy that is channelled into different areas of life of an individual rather than just sexuality. His major concepts include archetypes and collective unconscious; self-actualization as a result of individuation; Shadow; Animus; and wise old man/ woman. Lacan's concepts include the stages of personality development through the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real; the Mirror stage, the Phallus and Lack. Lacan also explained the concepts of the Other and the Self.

Aronofsky's *Black Swan* provides an array of images that captures the mind of the audience into a world of inquisitive psychological musings. Under the pressure of performing the role of the Black Swan, Nina finds herself slowly slipping into the deep taverns of insanity. An over bearing mother, her conflicting sensuality, and the dark intrigue embodied by the Black Swan persona within her makes her experience exhausting, making it a rich entity for psychoanalytic exploration.

Psychoanalysis unveils ways in which cinema and its elements have been shaped by the unconscious. "Psychoanalysis possesses the means of opening doors otherwise tightly closed" (Jung, 1975, p. 304). No other approach than this has helped as efficiently in exploring the secret corners of the human soul by searching for the meaning behind people's actions, dreams, unintentional phrases and personality traits.

II. OBJECTIVES

- To attempt to unfold the workings of the human mind and the meanings behind the actions they lead to, by critically drawing out and evaluating the psychoanalytic perspectives in the film *Black Swan*, based on developing a theoretical illustration.
- To instigate a new level of insightful perception, by prompting an introspective analysis of the behaviour and dialogue of the characters in an attempt to interpret traces of their own unconscious.
- To trace the minute instances of the consistent evolving and interdependent co- existence of cinema and psychoanalytic theory, through a close observation of the primary film text.

III. HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of this research paper states that psychoanalytic theory and criticism and the artistic substance of cinema are salient entities for the solid growth and understanding of one another. The theoretical aid in psychoanalysis provides an in- depth insight into the composite workings of the minds of the characters, thereby elevating the perception of the medium of cinema.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is to study the relevant concepts theorized by major psychoanalytic theorists Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Jacques Lacan as illustrated in the movie *Black Swan*. The movie is analysed from multi-dimensional psychoanalytic viewpoints facilitating a deep study of the psychological multiplex within the protagonist linking psychoanalysis and cinema.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Psychoanalysis have been widely used to interpret movies and analyse the characters' states of minds within them like in the cases of *Psycho*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Persona*, *Fight Club*, *Shame*, *The Piano Teacher*. The early applications of psychoanalysis on cinema concentrated on unmasking the latent or hidden meanings behind images that unfolded in the screen before merely considering the film as a representation of fantasy. The subjective position of the viewer was thus enabled to be led to a more effective and critically analytic space.

VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

Psychoanalysis is “a theory of the human mind, a therapy for mental distress, an instrument of research” (Ward and Zarate, 2011, p. 1), and a “method of investigation” (Grunbaum, 1984, p. 132). *Black Swan* looks into the artist Nina's obsessive striving for perfection in her art and further sliding into the world of insanity in the tumultuous pursuit to embody Black Swan. Prompted to explore her inner dark self to play the Black Swan, Nina is challenged to deal with the reality of her multiple selves. Her trauma gradually slips her into psychosis making her delusional, leaving her baffled and confused in an utter chaos. In this psychotic spree, Nina pushes herself through exploring her darker self finally reaching self-discovery. The embodiment of both the Swans in the Swan Queen, and the delusionary embodiment of Lily in Nina reflect the inner turmoil Nina undergoes while trying to explore her dual self within.

Nina effectively illustrates the Freudian id, ego, and super-ego. Her super-ego had been so strong that she finds it so hard to bring her repressed material of the id to consciousness. She is given an assignment to touch herself, exploring her repressed inner desires to awaken her id. She finds her super- ego punishing her with guilt when she declines the cake her mother gives and immediately succumbs to pleasing her. Id surfaces in her psyche during the transformation into the Black Swan when her fearful psychotic experiences engage her in impulsive violent actions. Nina turns opposing in nature, lies, disobeys, and violently fights with her mother reflecting the gradual triumph of id over the safe, graceful super- ego. Losing her psyche to the Black Swan, she herself becomes an embodiment of her id. Thus, Black Swan becomes a symbol of id and White Swan, that of super- ego. Lily represents the free- spirited id; Erica represents the overly punitive super- ego; Nina the fragile ego trying hard to negotiate the needs of her id and super- ego and work out a balance. “Jung himself said, “Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”” (Guin, 1979, p. 64). When it finally comes out, her repressed id and hidden self is sinister and powerful and gets manifested in the form of fantasies and neurotic symptoms. Her psychotic illogical delusions are a way of primary process thinking to find partial fulfilment of her unconscious eccentric wishes, fears, and desires according to Freud's theory.

Nina seems to be fixated in an early stage of her psychosexual development. She is too naive and innocent for her age, speaks softly with a childlike voice to her mother, and exhibits an unnatural attachment to her childhood objects, which are signs of fixation in the oral stage. She further tends to throw away these objects later in an attempt to transform to the Black Swan. She seems to be trapped in her latency stage since she displays characteristics such as an increased interest in people of the same sex and redirection of her libido to her art. She may be interpreted to be fixated in the phallic stage as well, since her mother excessively and incessantly gratifies her needs, accounting for her shy nature and preference of homosexual desires. The maturing Nina expresses resentment towards Erica who prevents her from sexual activity. Nina blames her mother for allowing her to be castrated, finds fault in her mother for being oppressive. Obsessed with her feet since it is a symbol of power, she faces a disturbing castration anxiety when her toes are injured. Another instance is when she misses a step in performing for the audition when Lily enters the room slamming the door carelessly which further led to fear of being replaced by Lily.

“It is not just the configuration of the drives themselves which make character, but the systems of defences which are organized to control them” (Ward & Zarate, 2011, p. 111). Her obsession for her art could be an escape mechanism for her to project her emotions and feelings to the character she embodies in her performance. Nina’s sexuality is repressed and she uses Sublimation, which is in effect libido in a desexualized form, to channelize this energy into her art. In her attempt to turn into the Black Swan, the most common defence mechanism she uses is Denial of reality, so much so that she slips into psychosis. She makes use of the coping mechanism of Projection of her turmoil and feelings onto others like Lily and Beth. She suppresses her unacceptable feelings. She employs Fantasy through her delusions as an activity for imagined satisfactions. Her masochistic hallucinations are often a suffering-hero form of fantasy evoking self-pity and some others, conquering-hero dreams. Nina finds her self-worth by Identification with Beth. Nina uses Emotional Insulation towards Erica when she realizes the damage she has been doing to her.

Freud’s concept of transference can be traced when Nina transfers her feelings from Erica to Leroy and Lily after her relationship with Erika starts getting strained. There is counter-transference of feelings from Leroy to Nina while still urging her to explore her unconscious.

“Every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning” (Freud, 2010, p. 35). The movie opens with an intriguing dream sequence which reflects Nina’s fantasies, her broken multiple self and ambitious spirit. Nina’s hallucinations can be interpreted according to Freud’s dream work as images with underlying significant latent content revealing unconscious drives. When she hallucinates about the sexual act between Lily and Leroy, she projects her own sexual feelings towards Leroy on Lily. In a hallucinating scene where she peels off her finger skin, Nina’s inner castration anxiety is visible from fear of losing her role to Lily. The images featured women and sadomasochistic behaviour pointing to her homosexual and sadomasochistic sexual tendencies.

Black Swan twirls around with the complex Jungian concepts of the Shadow, Animus, Wise old woman and the self-actualization of the protagonist. Nina has difficulty in bringing her unconscious into her conscious. The known yet unknown material, according to Jung, is brought into the consciousness through dreams, which in Nina’s case can take the form of dark psychotic hallucinations. For her it is the future aspiration, her dream to be the Swan Queen that determines the behaviour of the individual, Nina.

Nina finds herself to be an archetype of her perfectionist mother. She draws out the idea of her fate if she turns out to be like her. This makes her want to differ from Erica allowing herself to transform. Nina finds an individual archetype in Beth and realizes the fate that might await her when she learns the experiences of Beth. She shares her psychological pattern with these characters thus forming a collective unconscious. Nina also envisions the wise old woman concept in Beth. Jung sees such a figure as a symbolic perception of the self, here, of Nina. The movie also shows the concept of death of the hero when the protagonist dies in an attempt to grow.

Nina is challenged when she has to explore her inner dark self by letting go of control over her emotions and behaviour. This inner dark self here would in fact be her Shadow according to Carl Jung. She is urged to leave her Puella behind and explore her Shadow. Leroy encourages her to be strong and an adult sexual being through self-discovery. The shadow comes across as the ultimate test for self-actualization through individuation. Nina has to confront, overcome, and integrate the Shadow into her own personality in a balanced manner. When she battles Lily, she is battling her own inner self for psychic dominance. However, we find Nina in a delusional fit stabbing Lily or the Black Swan, a projection of her own Shadow, thus in turn stabbing a part of her own psyche, Shadow. If Nina's dark unconscious is her Shadow, then Lily whom Nina projects these feelings onto can also be interpreted as her Shadow. This explains why Nina disowns the qualities of Lily, feels threatened by her and distrusts her intentions. Lily embodies the destructive aspect of Shadow. Nina's inability to be aware of her Shadow and incorporate it into her Self makes her project it onto Lily like Jung had warned.

Leroy is Nina's Animus, the unconscious masculine component in the self since it is the connection that he urges her to discover her sexual identity and the wholeness of her Self. Her negative experiences in the past suggests her difficulty to recognize her animus but her transformation into a bolder self as the Black Swan which demanded more self-discovery helps her engage with her animus.

Nina is denied space for internal exploration and this may have been a reason for her obsession with her career of dance belonging to the physical realm. She remains with the undifferentiated psyche and as one who has not undergone individuation and seems to embody an incomplete fused identity. Further, it is when her role demands that she explores her inner self by breaking away from the clutches of her mother in an attempt of self-discovery. Yet, since she had not had a timely proceeding towards self-knowledge, neurotic symptoms of psychosis engulf her, paralleling with Jung's findings.

Black Swan can be viewed through the theoretical lens of Lacan starting from the predominant motif of mirrors used in the movie to symbolize the conflicting self of Nina. Nina first sees her ideal image the first time she looks at the mirror in the movie. It makes her realize what she desires as an individual ballet dancer who plays the Swan Queen separate from the image attached to her mother. The fragmentation of her ideal self is portrayed through self-mutilating images she sees as delusions in the mirror. She takes up the personas of Erica, Lily, and Beth to be her ideal images. She also greatly identifies with Beth whom she considers a perfect symbol of womanhood as viewed from her child state. It is this perfection that Nina tries to master herself. Her pursuit of perfection is thus a battle with her own ego to meet the ideal I. In the scene in which Beth angrily tells Nina "I'm not perfect. I'm nothing." (01: 18: 52, Beth, *Black Swan*), Nina is seen to be psychotically slipping into her delusions when she sees Beth stabbing herself, in turn showing fragmentation of the ideal self. When Nina finally achieves perfection through death by stabbing herself like Beth as per her delusions, she achieves similarity with her Ideal I. Lily is also the other of Nina, whom she identifies with. Initially she feels alienated with her, followed

by an identification that turns into a competitive urge. The relationship they share is one of aggressiveness and eroticism and a product of narcissism ranging from an obsessive self-love to obsessive self-hatred. The White Swan represents the symbolic order while the Black Swan represents the real order. Her transformation from the perfect White Swan into the perfect Black Swan represents her personal development from the Symbolic to the Real order.

The dream image, similar to a mirror image that Nina sees in the beginning of the movie features her playing the role of the Swan Queen and reflects her ideal image. In this sense, Nina identifies with her mother who sees Nina as an extension of her narcissistic self. Later the disturbed relationship between them indicates fragmentation of this image. When Nina first sees Lily, it is through a mirror image in which she would have found it hard to distinguish herself from Lily if she had not been wearing white and Lily black. It is she whom Nina wants to be like in order to be the Black Swan. The mirrors lend a view of Nina's dissociative or changing selves. The images of Nina reflect not what she actually is but what she wants to be, a whole of her own dark self. When she has delusions in mirror images, it shows her lack of control over the images she sees. Nina has no control over the moving images of self she identifies with. Nina comes across as a character pursuing the acquisition of her subjectivity. When Nina uses a mirror shard to kill her Black Swan rival she envisions in Lily, she is in effect shattering her own mirror image and further killing herself with it.

Lacan's concept of phallus which shows a position of power finds realization in Leroy, when the dancers stop their lessons and remove part of their clothing to look attractive for him. He is a phallic symbol when he chooses the dancers to perform the role by tapping them on the shoulder while they are performing. Nina's longing for Leroy is her desire for phallus due to the lack of a father figure. Black Swan is also a sign of power.

Lacan suggested that all desire is linked to a Lack. Nina discovers her homosexual tendency from her delusion in which she has an encounter with Lily. Nina harbours a fear towards a metaphorical castration, an idea of losing power in the case of Lily replacing her role. Nina feels the Lack of a perfect womanhood she idealized in Beth and uses the power attached to Beth's stolen lipstick in an attempt to seduce the director.

Nina shows characteristic symptoms of disorders like obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, dissociative identity disorder, bulimia, anorexia nervosa, narcissistic personality disorder, and borderline personality disorder. She is seen to be dealing with hallucinations, sleep problems accompanied by nightmares, delusions, bizarre cognition, sadomasochism, etc. She experiences excessive reality anxiety by anticipating undesirable events leading to Paranoid Psychosis with paranoid thoughts leading to the visual hallucinations and the ultimate delusion of physical metamorphosis into the Black Swan, in which she stabs herself. At the end of the battle between the selves, it is the Black Swan which triumphs, reinforcing the Freudian idea that the repressed material has to be explored and overcome for psychological growth. It shows a realization of Lacanian mirror stage and illustrates the Jungian concept of self-actualization through individuation. The movie keenly looks into fears regarding loss of identity, disfigurement, and loss of self through the subjective and detailed exploration of insanity.

VII. CONCLUSION

Black Swan, tapping the reality of the protagonist Nina Sayers in it, has provided an interesting kaleidoscopic vision of psychological distortions offering an authentic illustration of the psychological concepts proposed by the psychoanalytic theorists. It paves way to a deep insight into the psychological diversity, the hidden recesses of the mind, and the depths of unique subjective experiences of an individual in the face of chaotic psychological dilemma and trauma. The movie employs the technique of mysteriously mingling fantasy with reality raising questions of dissociated selves and distorted personalities.

The psychodynamic study helps validate the probable causes of her troubled and eventful descent into insanity. It makes possible a more efficient way to look into and understand the depths of mental and behavioural workings of the characters within a movie, especially, Nina in *Black Swan*. It looks into how a series of anxiety inducing events triggered the repression and suppression of her personality for a long time leading to a range of psychological problems in her that culminated in paranoid psychosis. It helps to understand the unique nature of her psychotic delusions and hallucinations which throw light on the intertwined figments of her inner psyche.

The unconscious aspects revealed in the psychoanalysis of a film could be those derived from the film maker, the character, the audience and the discourse of a film. Films have thus been seen to be manifestations of the inner workings of the mind, especially those pertaining to dreams, imaginations, and neurotic symptoms. This kind of an approach focuses the characters in the film to be manifestations of subjective human interactive experiences. The audiences' unconscious is also prompted in analysing the behaviour and dialogue of the characters in an attempt to interpret traces of their own unconscious.

Psychoanalysis and cinema both look into profound truths regarding the condition of human life and also provide in themselves two effective languages in order to describe them. Psychoanalysis helps to look into and interpret the internal and emotional conflicts engendered by the numerous vicissitudes the characters live through within a movie. Cinema thus naturally proves to be an apt medium for application of Psychoanalysis. Hence the consistent and significant impact and influence that they have on each other in instrumental in further knowledge development in both the areas of study.

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