
Black Swan: a Film Review and Interpretation

Black Swan Film Analysis

Black Swan is an artistic psychological thriller film directed by Darren Aronofsky in 2010, starring Natalia Portman and Mila Kunis. This story in this film is told from the perspective of Nina, a young and very committed ballerina determined to succeed in the world of dance. However, when she was given the role of the swan queen in the ballet company's new production, the pressure and competition she faces and her exploration of her darker side eventually led her to lose grip on reality and descend into insanity. This paper will analyse the use of mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, and editing in Black Swan.

The opening scene of the film starts with the original soundtrack of Swan Lake playing as background music and black feathers appearing on screen. Then the sound effect of wind blowing and an echoing laugh comes in as the film title manifests on screen. The same Tchaikovsky soundtrack plays throughout the film, but the sound effects that gave the classical music an odd twist already set the mood of the film as suspenseful and eerie. The first shot we see is a long shot of the protagonist Nina, who is wearing a pure white ballet dress. The audience cannot see her face yet since her back is facing the camera, but she is highlighted with a side spotlight that illuminates one side of her figure. The entire setting has a smoky quality to it, and the single light source protruding the otherwise jet black space creates a highly dramatic effect, suggesting that this is a dream or fantasy.

Afterwards, the camera moves closer to a medium close-up shot of her dancing feet. This technique is also repeated multiple times within the film to draw us into Nina's personal space, because as a dancer her feet are a very intimate and important part of her. Most of the shots except for the close-ups on her feet are eye level; the camera is likely handheld throughout this whole scene (as well as all other dancing scenes involving Nina) because it circles her and follows her movements as if it is dancing with her, which allows the audience to experience the exhilaration she feels while dancing. At about 2:28, she descends to the ground and the audience sees her face for the first time while the backlight creates strong shadows on her face. Then, out of the shadows behind her emerges a faceless predatory figure that starts to follow her and make threatening movements. With a sudden special effect, the faceless figure eventually took shape as a monster that grabs Nina and manipulates her movements. As she struggles to escape, she dances towards the light sources moving further away from the camera as the scene gradually fades to black, consuming the white swan.

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This opening scene is very significant because it establishes the black versus white symbolism that is used repeatedly in this film, and it also foreshadows how the film storyline will develop. The fact that Nina is dressed in white and looks fragile symbolises her innocence and emotional vulnerability. Nina is also completely surrounded by darkness besides that single light source, which implies that there is danger, fear, and impurity lurking in her life, waiting to eventually swallow her. The appearance of the monster could symbolise the frightening turn her life is about to take, which leaves her helpless and destroys her.

The theme of light and dark colours is explored by the juxtaposition of Nina and Lily. As we can see through moments where Nina's face suddenly appears on Lily's body, Lily is supposed to represent the "shadow self", or the dark alter ego of Nina. In general, white, grey, or pastel costume means that a character is virtuous, while black, red, or dark shades means that a character is evil or calculating. Lily, whom Nina perceives as a rival, is always dressed in black. While Nina wears minimal makeup while she is not on stage and dress in light colours, not only are Lily's clothes black, but her makeup, hair and skin are all darker than Nina's. This depiction shows that Lily is a more mature, independent, and sensual character than Nina. However, during Nina's transition, we can see that her choice of clothing become more similar to what Lily wears.

Colours are also used to portray Nina's transition and progression as a character. At the beginning when Nina just woke up, she was wearing a baby-pink nightgown, while everything including her bed sheets, the grapefruit she ate for breakfast, the furnitures, and naturalistic light coming in from the window carries a pink powdery hue. Later, Nina also appears on the train dressed in light grey sweatpants and a pale pink and fluffy coat, while everyone else on the train and on the street is dressed in black. Then, as she slowly transitions, Nina goes from wearing all white at the start of the film, to starting to wear dark red lipstick, and gradually she starts to wear more greys, then dark greys, until finally when she performs as the black swan dressed in all black. This progressive change of colours on Nina's costume and makeup represents her change in personality, as she goes from being a pure and meek girl into the paranoid, insane, forward and independent black swan.

Even though both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are present in this film, the internal diegetic sounds are more significant in shaping the main character. Internal diegetic sounds were used when during the club scene at around 52:10; the dance music sounds muffled and all the voices sounds faraway to show the audience how the drugs and alcohol are influencing Nina. Later on, when Nina thought she brought Lily home, their dialogues are also internal sounds that only Nina can hear. The same internal diegetic sounds become more frequent as Nina's mental state deteriorates. At about 1:07:07 when she saw the pictures on her mother's wall, the loud whispering that seem to come from the pictures is actually within her mind. Then at the climax of the film around 1:16:35 when Nina makes her transformation in to the black swan, the

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continuous sound effect of wings flapping, feathers rustling, and wind blowing are only heard by Nina as imaginary black feathers and wings grow out of her body. It's a bass-heavy, almost ambient sound effect which is not very distinct at first, but if the viewers watch it with headphones on or in a very quiet space, that sound would give them chills down the spine. The internal diegetic sounds allow insights into Nina's deranged mind so that the audience can experience her emotions of extreme paranoia, fear, and exaltation from her perspective.

The setting of the film is carefully constructed to represent Nina's life and personality. As we can see from the first establishing shot of Nina's room at around 14:11, her room looks like the kind of room a ten year old little girl would have, with pink floral wallpaper and bedsheets, dolls, stuffed animals, lace lampshades, and cream-coloured furnitures. In that specific scene she is also treated like a little girl by her mother, having her mother brush her hair, tuck her in, and play a soothing lullaby. This setting thus represents Nina's innocence and the fact that the mature woman inside of her is being suppressed and constrained by external forces. Another element that is noteworthy is the use of mirrors in many settings of the film. There are large mirrors in Nina's apartment which she practices to everyday, mirrors in the theatre's dressing and fitting rooms, mirrors in the practice rooms, and mirrors on the train. In most mirror scenes, we can see figures of Nina reflected by the mirrors so the audience might get the illusion of seeing multiple faces of hers; in one scene when Nina is having her fitting, one of her mirror images even gains independence and starts to act without her. Therefore, it can be inferred that mirrors represent the Nina's duality and her split personality, and how the two opposing sides of her are now fighting each other. The mirrors also draw emphasis Nina's unreasonable obsession with looking and acting perfect.

The editing style of this film is very conventional for the thriller/horror movie genre. The pace in this film tends to fasten as the scene intensifies and suspense builds, which is achieved by rapid cuts from one shot to another. For example, when Lily is first seen as a character, the camera first follows her off the train with a swift pan, then the scene quickly cut to the back of Nina's head, then a cut to the front of her head, then again makes a jump cut to another shot of the back of her head. This does not only show that Nina is rushing to get to the studio and hint that Lily is an important character, but it also builds up the tense feeling that a crucial event will occur, which is the dressing room scene when Lily suddenly appears. Additionally, this technique is also used during Nina's sexual fantasy scene with Lily. The scene rapidly cuts from Nina's face to Lily's face then to their hands touching each other then finally speeding towards a mini climax of a POV shot from Nina's perspective where she is smothered by her evil doppelgänger. It can be inferred that when the cutting happens faster and the duration of each shot becomes shorter, a significant event will happen.

There are certain unusual shots and framing techniques used in this film. At around 9:03, Nina was framed separately by placing the wall behind her, blocking her from being in the same

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picture as the other dancers; with the sudden silence as background and Nina practicing ballet hand gestures alone, this framing shows that she is isolated and is getting lost in her own world. There are also numerous close-up shots of the face and body parts like hands and feet. Nina's face is often shown at large so that her emotions are emphasised. For example when she made a mistake dancing the white swan on stage, her extremely terrified expression as she was lifted into the air is shown as a close-up. At 13:43 when she was dancing in her own room, her feet are shot as a close-up and edited in to slow motion so that the strength and delicacy of each turn are emphasised. There is also an element of shock in this scene since right after the slow motion, she almost twists her ankle as the whole scene speeds up again.

Additionally, the camera usually follows Nina or shows her point of view, but there are some different shots. For instance at around 1:13:10 when Nina is being lifted into the air by her partner, her body and facial expressions are captured in the same place within the frame while her surroundings blur with movement because she is spinning in the air; the camera must have been mounted on to her to achieve this effect. Furthermore, at around 1:04:40 when Nina is running away, the entire frame is off balance and bounces along with her frantically movements to show the audience the speed and intensity of her movements and to give a chaotic mood to this scene.

Other than the technical aspects, the cultural implications of this film are also thought provoking. Although not explicitly shown, it is implied that even before her mental state deteriorated, Nina already has an eating disorder and a tendency to engage in self-harm behaviours. Nina only eats half a grapefruit and one egg for breakfast, refuse to even take one bite of cake, and purges what she ate in the bathroom. Moreover, her mother's alarmed expression what she saw the scratch marks on Nina's back means that she knows Nina has a tendency to scratch and hurt herself on purpose. In the competitive world of ballet, it is important for dancers to look very skinny and lean in order for them to look their best on stage. There has been incidents where female ballet dancers have died from anorexia. The beauty standard in this industry could be what drove Nina towards her obsession with body image and perfection. The outside world may consider Nina a young and accomplished dancer, yet only a few can see beneath the glamour and perfection to realise what she gave in exchange for her success.

In conclusion, even though many people would think of this film as disturbing or scary, I like it because all elements in this film are used in a meaningful and aesthetically pleasing way. It is clear that all costumes, colours, camera movements, and editing are carefully placed in order to construct meaning. By showing the dreadful alongside with the beautiful, Black Swan is striking even in its darkest moments. Instead of being overcome by the fear, the viewers become fascinated by the beautiful aspects that they forget the violent or psychotic ideas behind it.

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