
Pi, Requiem for a Dream and Black Swan: Obsession in Madness

The American Dream: An idea that every US citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative (*OED*). Anyone willing to put in the work can achieve their dreams, but what if these dreams are impossible to achieve. Where is the line between determination and obsession?

Darren Aronofsky incorporates this paradigm into several of his films, and each film serves a separate agenda. *Black Swan* makes a commentary on the competitive world of ballet through gendered lenses. As the black and white Swan, Nina must embody purity and seduction simultaneously. *Pi* deals with genius and madness as well as the unfathomable relation between mathematics and religion. *Requiem for a Dream* follows the lives of four Brooklynites dealing with the downfalls of addiction as they struggle to achieve their dreams.

So, what do a perfectly imperfect ballerina, a sober drug addict, and a mathematician who proves the existence of God through math all have in common? They are all impossible. It would be hardly rash to say that the protagonists didn't stand a chance. These characters are obsessed with becoming something they never could be in the first place. Darren Aronofsky links madness to obsession in his films *Black Swan*, *Requiem for a Dream* and *Pi*. The subjective lenses of the characters as well as the techniques of cinematic style contribute to the audience's sense of madness. Aronofsky portrays the protagonist's internal battle through concrete and abstract characteristics of madness. Aronofsky's films associate obsession concretely by characterizing protagonists with traits of paranoia and incorporating their point of view to show delusions. Obsession is also shown in abstraction through imagery, music and cinematography. Even further, the imagery in the films brings the audience's own sanity and perceptions into question. The three films contain parallels that specify the concept of what society thinks of as abnormal obsessive behavior. Contextually, these films interpret the downfalls of obsession within American culture. These modes that connect madness to obsession aren't problematic but incredibly relevant. They address several cultural problems that are pertinent now more than ever. I shall break down his films *Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, and *Black Swan*, comparatively, to address the association of madness and obsession.

In *Pi*, Max has the delusion that he is a new age messiah and the only human capable of understanding God. His delusions lead to paranoia, albeit it is warranted in parts of the film. His mentor and friend, Sol, ridicules Max's number theories. "When your mind becomes obsessed with anything, it will filter everything else out and find examples of that thing everywhere" (*Pi*).

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For example, Max concludes that “we’re built from spirals, living within a giant spiral, is it possible that all human behavior... is in the form of a spiral” (*Pi*). He sees spirals in the Stock Market, coffee, smoke, and even the Torah. Poetic? Yes. Valid? Probably not. Like Sol said, Max’s obsession with patterns causes his spiral delusion.

Max's search for patterns contributes to his intense journey from isolation and obsessiveness to paranoia and insanity (Kulezic-Wilson 20). His paranoia is presented through his actions such as locking his door and looking out his peep hole. Paranoia is presented in a similar form in Sara Goldfarb in *Requiem for a Dream*. As Max’s delusions worsen as he continues to search for numbers, Sara’s delusions increase as she continues to misuse her dieting pills. The source of her fantasies stems from a dream of fame. “It’s a reason to get up in the morning. It’s a reason to lose weight, to fit in the red dress... it makes tomorrow all right” (*Requiem for a Dream*). The ‘reason’ is her application to appear on a reality show hosted by Tappy Tibbons. In her fictional world, she has a purpose that she lacked in reality. However, it is her obsession with fame that leads her to abuse drugs. This causes her extreme paranoia; she is tormented by the two major forces in her life: the television and the refrigerator. After taking too many pills one night, Sara imagines herself to be in Tappy’s show. She sees everyone mocking her, yelling “Feed me Sara” as her refrigerator comes to life (*Requiem for a Dream*).

In *Black Swan*, obsessive behavior is seen as paranoia and delusions in both Nina and her oppressive mother. Both women have an unnatural obsession with Nina’s perfection. The mother blames her own underachievement as a ballet dancer on having Nina. On one hand she can live through Nina, on the other hand Nina is a rival that cannot do better than she did (Fisher & Jacobs 58). Her mother infantilizes her to preserve her innocence, in a way preventing her from embracing the dark and sexual role of the black swan. Nina is obsessed with her own perfection. Ironically, Nina’s flawless technique is her downfall. “I see you obsess over getting each move exactly right, but I never see you lose yourself” critiques her instructor Leroy (*Black Swan*). A combination of exhausting practice, poor diet, stress and pressure lead to Nina’s delusions and paranoia. Nina’s paranoia is reflected onto other women, Lily in particular. Nina complained to Leroy that “she’s [Lily] trying to replace me” (*Black Swan*). Nina’s paranoia is unwarranted and continues to manifest itself as more violent. Her delusions peak during her fight with Lily. Nina sees her as a reflection of herself, and stabs her other self with a shard of glass only to realize her reflection is Lily. Of course, even this is a delusion. Lily never died, Nina stabbed herself (*Black Swan*). Symbolically, Nina has killed the white swan inside of her. “It’s my turn” is not a reference to Nina, but the black swan inside of her (*Black Swan*). Her obsession is now fulfilled as she completes the final change into the black swan (seen as both a physiological and a psychological change).

Self-harm and suicide are also prominent connections between obsession and madness in Aronofsky’s films. While it is most obvious in *Black Swan* and *Pi*, it can also be seen in the self-

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destruction of drug use in *Requiem for a Dream*. In *Black Swan*, self-harm is gendered toward adolescent women. Nina's mother recognizes Nina "has been scratching again" and attributes the resurgence of this "disgusting habit" to the stress of ballet (*Black Swan*). Although her mother is crazed and obsessive in her own right, she has a point. It was Nina's obsession with ballet that caused her scratch herself till she bled, her obsession with appearance that led to an eating disorder, and her obsession with perfection willed her to continue her performance despite her injuries, resulting in her death. Her final words were "It was perfect" (*Black Swan*). Obsession caused Nina to put her dream before her life, a choice we also see in *Pi*.

"When I was a little kid my mother told me not to stare into the sun. So once, when I was six, I did (*Pi*). This is Max's earliest recollections of how his curiosity came back to hurt him. In the film, Max's curiosity of mathematics causes him to neglect his own hygiene and health (which is poor to start with). "You [Max] can't go out like that... You need a mom" (*Pi*). The audience sees Max's mania and poor social skills through his interactions with others. The difference between Max's self-harm and Nina's is that Max targets his brain as insufficient while Nina targets her body. There is abstract imagery of Max prodding his detached brain, commonly resulting in a bright white light and a high pitched modulation (*Pi*). At the end of the film, Max literally drills his own brain out, signifying the end of his obsession and his acceptance that the human mind cannot comprehend all the patterns in the universe.

In *Requiem for a Dream*, the characters harm themselves through the use of drugs, quite often denying the consequences of their actions. In an argument, Harry lectures his mother "what is the big deal? Those pills will kill you before you get on [TV]" (*Requiem for a Dream*). Sara responds, "I'm somebody now Harry" (*Requiem for a Dream*). The drug side-effects are apparent, but Sara is willing to ignore them because they are helping her negative self-image as well as her social status with her friends. Harry's concern is completely hypocritical. Drug obsession is just as much of a problem among him and his friends. The previous conversation also indicates that he knows how drugs can affect health yet chooses to do them anyway. Although Harry, Tyrone, and Marion want to make money selling drugs and sober up, they are constantly pressuring each other to continue using. In this way, addiction holds the same meaning as obsession. Tyrone suggests Harry and he should "take a little taste so we know how much to cut" and Marion argues that they "should dip in now... Tyrone is going to score in the morning" (*Requiem for a Dream*). Statements like these indicate that they have convinced themselves they aren't actually addicted; this is similar to Sara's self-denial about her addiction.

Aside from mental disorders, obsession and madness are linked through ambition and dreams in the films. Dream imagery exists in all the films. Dreams are seen as both physical wants of the characters and well as mental representations during sleep. In some instances, it is hard to discern what is a dream and what is a delusion. Both *Black Swan* and *Requiem for a Dream*

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have dream sequences or references. In *Requiem for a Dream*, Harry sees an ethereal Marion wearing a red dress and standing on a pier in Coney Island (*Requiem for a Dream*). In *Black Swan*, Nina said that she “had the most amazing dream. I was dancing the White Swan” (*Black Swan*). In *Pi*, Max doesn’t have dreams, but he does have these vision-states where he places himself in a contrast of all white. These dreams represent unattainable clarity and purity, much like the physical desires of the characters.

“To help actualize their [Tyrone, Harry and Marion] dreams of owning a business, getting off the streets and securing an apartment, they turn to purchasing, cutting, and selling heroine. The ironic rationalization they offer is that if they can save enough money from selling dope they will be able to actualize a world void of drugs. Their obsession with drug use is based on the notion that tomorrow they will give it up” (Moreno 221). The problem with this dream: it is unrealistic. How could a character achieve their dream of sobriety and success if they are selling drugs to get there? For Nina to embrace her role as the black and white swan, she has to be a perfect balance of purity and seduction. “Nina’s default position is that of the white swan: prim, uptight, prissy... she has perfect technique but no feeling, no passion” (Fischer & Jacob 59). No doubt, it appears impossible for a woman to balance these two polar opposite personas at one time. The concept of being perfectly imperfect is also seen in *Pi*. To know God is far too complicated for any human to comprehend- much less discover Him in a number sequence. Max can only find truth in death and, not surprisingly, the truth is Max doesn’t know the answer. In the last scene- after Max committed suicide- his neighbor asks him to calculate “255 times 183”, and Max responds “I don’t know. What is it?” (*Pi*).

Obsession is presented in abstract means in the films- in music for example. “The rhythm of visual and sonic repetitions and interactions, audiovisual “phrasing,” the music of Max’s voice-over, the external rhythm of hip-hop editing and its kinetic drive generated by the internal rhythm of the camera work, techno-music, diegetic and nondiegetic sound effects” (Kulezic-Wilson 32). Aronofsky pairs cinematograph with his music and the ongoing action in the films to create a sense of heightened paranoia, all in the attempt to bring the viewer to feel what the character is feeling. The music is also amplified when Max is experiencing mathematical revelation, and the sound often flows in high wave frequencies when Max suffers from migraines. The hip-hop rhythm in *Pi* and the scores from the other two films evoke a feeling of obsession. It queues the audience in and creates confusion and discomfort. Summarily, the score from *Requiem for a Dream*, *Lux Aeterna*, -the only song used in the film- is played at times of moral crisis. *Black Swan* uses ballet-based piano scores to show Nina’s anxiety and stress. (It is not a surprise that these scores all act in the same way because they were all written by the same composer, Clint Mansell).

Abnormal and disturbing cinematography always accompanies the music and the rising action in the films. Many of the reoccurring patterns in the cinematography reflect the obsession that

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the characters have. In all three of the films, the eye is a symbol of their obsession. Harry, Marion and Tyrone experience eye dilation when they get high. Nina's eyes turn bright red when she transforms into the black swan. Additionally, the pattern of drug use accompanied by sound effects are very similar between *Pi* and *Requiem for a Dream*. When the characters take drugs, it is shown as repetitive, with multiple different shots accompanying each action. This repetition is also present in mundane tasks in both films.

Aronofsky uses all these cinematic elements to create a link between the audience and the character. Each film is highly subjective. The audience can see the protagonist's dreams, desires and delusions. Because of this, the audience's own sanity comes into question. Repetitive elements, music and actions create a horrifically obsessive atmosphere. We are presented with every little detail of mundanity and every gruesome feature of madness. Aronofsky is not simply linking obsession to madness, but he is proving to us that they are one in the same.

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