

## Black Swan Study Notes



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**Directed by:** Darren Aronofsky

**Certificate:** 15

**Running time:** 108 mins

**Release date:** 21 January 2011

### Synopsis:

Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman) is a ballet dancer who, pushed by her domineering mother, has worked tirelessly to achieve perfection throughout her professional career. Nina sees off the competition to win the lead in a New York production of Swan Lake. The dual role of The Swan is notoriously difficult as it requires the dancer to portray both the delicate, beautiful White Swan as well as the voracious and sensual Black Swan. Nina is comfortable as the White Swan, but finds she does not have the 'dark side' required to nail the part of the Black Swan. Tempted and challenged by both her mentor Thomas (Vincent Cassel) and her rival Lily (Mila Kunis), Nina begins to unravel psychologically as the pressure mounts and her personal boundaries are broken...

## Before viewing: the work of Darren Aronofsky

Research the films and career of Darren Aronofsky. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

- PROTAGONISTS – the main characters in Aronofsky films often go on self-destructive journeys at the expense of their relationships, their social standing and sometimes their lives
- PERFECTION – in each of Aronofsky's four previous feature films, the protagonists are trying to capture or experience perfection
- PLOT DEVICE – it could be argued that the genre and setting of his films isn't that important; essentially they all have the same plot device: a quest to find perfection
- Does *Black Swan* continue the Aronofsky trend?

## After viewing: representation

Aronofsky's New York is often oppressive and industrial, with his characters often seen in confined, stultifying spaces even when outside.

- How does Aronofsky's representation of New York in *Black Swan* (and his other films) compare with the works of other New York filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Abel Ferrara, Woody Allen and Spike Lee?

Feminist critics have noted that female characters in film often conform to reductive stereotypes such as 'virgins, vamps, victims, suffering mothers, child women and sex kittens'.

- How are the following female characters represented in *Black Swan*:
  - Nina
  - Lily (Nina's rival)
  - Erica (Nina's Mother)
  - Beth (Nina's predecessor)?
- Do any of these characters suit any of the stereotypes listed above?
- In which other films have you seen these kinds of characters?

## Genre and Theory

As well as identifying similarities between *Black Swan* and the 1948 ballet melodrama *The Red Shoes*, it has been said that *Black Swan* is influenced by two horror sub-genres: *body horror* and *giallo*. David Cronenberg and Dario Argento are masters of these respective cinematic movements.

- Research these other sub-genres and directors. What thematic and generic similarities or influences can you find?
- Watch the trailer and look at the special edition DVD cover of Argento's *Suspiria* (1977). To what extent do you think this film was an influence on *Black Swan*?
- Film can be interpreted through psychoanalytic theory. How relevant are Freud's Oedipal theory and Lacan's mirror phase to a reading of *Black Swan*? Look up these theories if you are not already familiar with them.

## Black Swan: The Wrestler 2?

It has been noted that there are a number of similarities between *Black Swan* and Aronofsky's previous film *The Wrestler* (2008, starring Mickey Rourke) and that their milieu (the world of ballet and wrestling respectively) are incidental.

- Thinking about how they are depicted in Aronofsky's films, how are the worlds of ballet and wrestling comparable?
- Natalie Portman is in virtually every scene of *Black Swan*, as Mickey Rourke is in *The Wrestler*. Did you feel the camera captured Natalie Portman's performance in a unique way?
- How are the characters' deteriorations manifested?

### Activity

Draw a straight line across an A3 piece of sugar paper and work in small groups. Sketch a narrative timeline across the page and make a note of every plot detail, confrontation, twist and development you can think of that occurs from the beginning through to the end of *Black Swan*. Do the same for *The Wrestler*; if none of you have seen it, find a synopsis online or in 'Sight & Sound'. Compare the narratives of the two films.

### Activity

Until recently, Aronofsky was going to 'go mainstream' and direct a *Wolverine* sequel (he has since backed out of the project). Imagine how that might have looked! Film a trailer or a sequence from an imagined *Wolverine* project in the style of Aronofsky. Alternatively, draw out a narrative timeline and sketch out the plot.

Written by Gareth C Evans