
CHAPTER 4

DISCIPLINING *BLACK SWAN*, ANIMALIZING AMBITION

ARIEL OSTERWEIS

Illuminated by a hazy spotlight on an otherwise darkened proscenium stage, a lone ballerina appears in a long diaphanous white tutu. Her right arm traces a downward *port de bras* as Tchaikovsky's unmistakable score to *Swan Lake* haunts the scene. A male dancer approaches the ballerina, thrusting her around in a jaggedly circular pattern, black feathers sprouting from his every surface. A portrait of serenity suddenly transforms into a whirling site of terror and manipulation. Preceded by faint sounds of judgmental laughter (other dancers in the wings? the soloist's alter-ego?), the feathered perpetrator rotates around the ballerina's periphery, in an oppositional centrifugal-centripetal relationship with the camera, an agent of alternating surveillance and penetration. He then releases the ballerina into a state of rapture. She brushes her hand along her cheek, revealing a face at once pained and ecstatic (Fig. 4.1). Back turned, arms rippling like avian wings, the ballerina *bouffées* away from us into the distant, waning spotlight.

"I had the craziest dream last night," utters a frail-voiced Nina Sayers, cracking her neck and toes in a bedroom painted an infantilizing pink (Fig. 4.2). While stretching in front of a mirror in the Manhattan apartment she shares with her mother, Nina continues, "I was dancing the white swan. It was different choreography. It was more like the Bolshoi's. It was the prologue, when Rothbart casts a spell." Nina's mother fails to respond and we hear breakfast being prepared—a dream fallen on deaf ears. As the first scene of *Black Swan* (2010) cuts abruptly from the stage to Nina's room, we detect director Darren Aronofsky's interest in drawing out his protagonist's confusion between dreams and reality. We are introduced to the duality of Odette/Odile, the white and black swans of the classical story ballet, *Swan Lake*. Aronofsky focuses on this duality not to portray a strict opposition, but to propose that one persona must subsume the other, that a performer's ambition is marked by the parasitical encounter of daily rigor and the "dream"¹ of stardom. As such, Aronofsky purposefully conflates the dream state with the dream that drives ambition. Nina dreams of landing the role of Odette/Odile. Day in and day out, rigorous repetition and rehearsal feeds off the dream, one that reflects back at the dancer her anxieties in all their mutated forms, disfigured, bleeding, animalistic.



FIGURE 4.1 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), during opening scene onstage.



FIGURE 4.2 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), in Nina's bedroom.

TECHNIQUE AND EMOTION

A.O. Scott begins his December 30, 2010 article for the *New York Times* with the following: "The subject of *Black Swan*—a leading candidate for the most misunderstood film of 2010—is the relationship, in art, between technique and emotion."² Scott notes,

Ballet, the specific art form in question, is shown to require endless practice and grueling physical discipline. Bodies, in particular the bodies of young women, are stretched and twisted into unnatural postures, and the cost of the fleeting, breathtaking grace they attain is reckoned in close-ups of battered, bloody feet and tendons pulled almost to the snapping point. The toe shoes that are among the principal tools of this torment also seem to be surrogates and scapegoats; they are scraped,

mutilated and disfigured by the dancers in a symbolic re-enactment of the violence they perform upon themselves in their ruthless pursuit of perfection.³

Like the fairy tale ballet, the film avoids realism and lingers in hyperbole, even the grotesque. Of significance is the way the film relies upon technical precision to invoke the dismantling effects of technique itself, demonstrating how the pursuit of virtuosity narrates a story of the attainment, surpassing, and failure of technique. The camera supports this pursuit of virtuosity through an array of film techniques that are equal to the virtuosic displays of the dancers—close-ups, tracking point-of-view shots, accelerated sequences, purposefully unsteady shots, and special effects. By virtue of this technical equivocation between the apparatus and the dancer's body, *Black Swan* attempts to meet the challenge of adapting a story ballet whose historical trajectory has been defined by the evolution of technique itself.

By paying particular attention to the role of the dancing body in *Black Swan*, this chapter interrogates the status of virtuosity and performance in a film that insists on the horror of transformation. Aronofsky exploits the body as a canvas for the psychological pressure of ambition, portraying the pursuit of perfection as a continual struggle between technique and ecstasy, control and release. Nina's quest for perfection is defined by a transformation from the innocence of aspiration (breathy, fleeting, idealistic) to the cunning of ambition (pointed, uncompromising, cruel). Initially equating perfection with the fulfillment of technique, Nina goes on to harness technique in pursuit of the imperfect perfection of ecstasy. Nina's preoccupation becomes less rational and more carnal; withdrawing from reason and explanation, perfection enters the realm of excess. It is in that ecstatic excess—an excess that threatens the integrity of the choreography—that we can locate the crux of virtuosity, personified by Odette/Odile. Embodied by Nina (Natalie Portman) and Lily (Mila Kunis), self and *other* perform a necessarily entangled pas de deux, one in which the seemingly perfect image of the other simultaneously haunts and motivates the dancer, a figure for whom psychological control diminishes as artistic control accrues (Fig. 4.3).

For all of Aronofsky's purported disloyalty to the reality of the ballet profession in *Black Swan*, the film remains true to *Swan Lake's* significance in dance history as the full-length work that announced the modern mark of female virtuosity in ballet from the late nineteenth century onward: the *fouetté* turn. Aronofsky unleashes the *fouetté* turn to perform a blurring between selves, Odette and Odile. This blurring marks both psychic confusion and an occupational precipice, recurring throughout the film in a particular relationship to the camera's orbit. The camera implicates us in its own hurried, erratic mode of surveillance and desire for contact with its subject matter. Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov's revival of *Swan Lake* for the Mariinsky Theatre in 1895 (after Tchaikovsky's 1875–1876 score) featured Italian ballerina Pierina Legnani as Odette/Odile, the princess who undergoes transformation into a swan. It was in Petipa's production that the climactic trope of thirty-two *fouetté* turns that punctuates many a *grand pas de deux* became a signifier of female achievement in twentieth century ballet.⁴ Aronofsky's Odette/Odile is Nina, played by Portman, who won an academy award for



FIGURE 4.3 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), dressing room mirrors.

her performance. Ambition permeates *Black Swan* on multiple levels: the film itself has been hailed an “ambitious achievement,” Portman’s acting and ballet training for *Black Swan* epitomizes Hollywood ambition, Nina’s character is haunted by ambition’s alienating effects, and Odette/Odile embodies nineteenth-century ballet’s technical ambition. All these permutations of ambition operate corporeally, both literally and metaphorically: the “body” of the film within Aronofsky’s “body” of work, bodily training, and the continual threat of “other” bodies penetrating or sprouting from one’s own.

Significantly, in the history of Western concert performance, virtuosity emerges through the trope of the soloist, further exploited via capitalist ideology’s reliance on commodity exchange and the cult of individualism. In other words, audiences flock to witness their favorite performer (ballerina) stand out from the group (*corps de ballet*), and it is impossible to extricate that performer’s exceptional qualities from the economic fact of ticket sales. As a term that became popular through the advent of print journalism, virtuosity is a quality unknown to performance schemas that lie outside of systems of judgment and criticism. Virtuosity relies on the masculinist ambition (as opposed to feminized aspiration) driving the capitalist workplace, and in *Black Swan* ambition finds itself painfully grafted onto the female dancer. Aronofsky exhibits this sense of grafting on the surface of the skin, reaching its apex with the sprouting of wings in the ballet’s final scene. Just as Nina is haunted by her own ambition, she finds herself in a hierarchical realm defined by tiers of scrutiny: Nina is subordinate to the judgment of her mother and the artistic director, Thomas Leroy (played by Vincent Cassell), and Thomas is subordinate to the whims and funding prerogatives of the ballet company’s board of directors (Fig. 4.4).

Black Swan portrays artistic ambition through Nina’s—and Odette/Odile’s—erratic transformation from human to animal. *Black Swan* alludes to the *Swan Lake*’s libretto, its themes of duality, love, deception, paranoia, and transformation. Aronofsky draws out the tension between technique’s mechanical, disciplining function and the unrefined,



FIGURE 4.4 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Thomas and Nina seduction in studio.

animalistic characteristics of ecstasy. In doing so, he recognizes the idea that technique is often thought to provide formal tools with which an artist can express carnal emotion. Nina's artistic director, Thomas, commands, "Seduce us; attack it" and reiterates "Lose yourself" throughout the film. An early scene features Nina tentatively attempting to seduce her director Thomas after a less than successful audition for the role of Odette/Odile. Having released her hair from her profession's prescribed taut ballet bun, Nina enters Thomas' black and white office wearing fresh lipstick. She utters, "I practiced the coda last night and I finished." Thomas' response reemphasizes the importance of passion (over labor) in the role of Odile: "Honestly, I don't care about your technique. You should know that by now." After he tells Nina he has chosen another dancer (Veronica) for the role of Odette/Odile, Nina tries to exit only to have the door slammed in her face. "That's it?" challenges Thomas, "You're not going to try to change my mind? You must have thought it was possible. Otherwise what are you doing here all dolled up?" Nina responds, "I came to ask for the part." "The truth is," Thomas continues,

When I look at you, all I see is the white swan. Yes you're beautiful, fearful, fragile. Ideal casting. But the black swan, it's a hard fucking job to dance both. . . . I see you obsessed getting each and every move perfectly right but I never see you lose yourself. Ever. All the discipline for what?

Nina says, "I just want to be perfect," and Thomas reminds her in the hyperbolically authoritarian tone Aronofsky cites from lowbrow film genres, "Perfection is not just about control. It's also about letting go." Then Thomas grabs Nina and kisses her only



FIGURE 4.5 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina's bloody hangnail.

to be received with a bite. Thomas is shocked, responding, "That fuckin' hurt!" Nina's newfound impulse to cause pain marks a crucial shift in her artistry, from a technically proficient dancer to one with the potential to incite feeling.

Outwardly directed pain, however, is merely a precursor to the amplification of Nina's enactments of self-inflicted pain, the endpoint of ballet's logic of refinement. As subordinate to the ballet master's rule, the ballerina's discipline is taken to the extreme, portrayed in *Black Swan* as corporeal masochism: human body parts are mangled and removed, and what remains are wounds from which the animalistic emerges. Nina compulsively scratches the skin on her back, yanks off her toenails, and rips her hangnails until her fingers bleed (Fig. 4.5). In ballet training, technique is learned within an ideology of perfecting an imperfect body. Dancers are corrected, meaning they are expected to incrementally implement corrections from their instructor with each reiteration of a movement combination. Nina's obsession with technique is one in which the trope of the correction intensifies from correcting movements to correcting flesh. Just as the dancer must begin class each day by executing *pliés* before moving onto more complex material, sometimes Nina's wounds magically disappear, as if to invite compulsive returns, repeated acts of mutilation in the name of refinement. The muscular impulse of extended, rippling, wing-like arms in the swan's *port de bras* emerges from the shoulder blades, but Nina returns to the site with obsessive-compulsive scratching, eventually drawing blood, inscribing a masochistic stigmata (Fig. 4.6). Less of a scarring and more of an open wound, this inscription becomes the fissure from which the black swan's feathers sprout.

The most significant aspects of Nina's bodily mutilations are that they are self-inflicted and born of repetition. The ballet profession requires unending repetition of exercises, classes, and rehearsals over many years, and Nina's back scratching is a mutated substitution for and supplement to that practice. Nina's masochism stimulates transformation (from human to swan), and, as opposed to injury's hindering effects, parallels



FIGURE 4.6 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina's back scratch.

technique's function of improving ability. Nina's body is both disciplined and disciplining, each *fouetté* turn a repetition that demands control as it takes the body further and further out of control. That Nina grows larger-than-life black feathered wings during the culminating *fouetté* turn sequence of *Swan Lake* in the final scene of *Black Swan* is significant, marking the point at which the pinnacle of her technical achievement coincides with raw animalistic attributes associated with the ecstatic.

In *Black Swan*, ballet's corporeal practice evacuates as it supplements, and Odette/Odile defeats herself in the name of art. Throughout the film, Nina and her own "other" evoke the struggle of the artist to achieve balance between the human capability to master mechanical technique and the untamed animalistic emotion necessary to sustain ambition and evoke passion onstage. Aronofsky has stated, "I'm always very interested in performance . . . and this story is about that, which gives it . . . a clear connection to *The Wrestler* (2008)."⁵ While *Black Swan* traces the pursuit of virtuosity in the early life of an aspiring artist, in *The Wrestler*, Aronofsky's main protagonist tries to hold onto and resuscitate the virtuosity he once possessed, from the vantage point of the latter end of a physically demanding career, one that also (but differently) straddles the artist-athlete divide. What Aronofsky understands is performance's demand for reiteration, rehearsal, and repetition, that a career in performance requires what scholars such as Richard Schechner and Judith Butler have long identified as the theoretical term *performance's* reenactments, its continuous *doing*. In other words, one is not born a virtuoso, which Aronofsky illustrates at the level of both practice and theory. Virtuosity requires repetition and achievement that lies in excess of the fulfillment of the composition.

In terms of virtuosity, *Black Swan* creates a parallel between the cinematic apparatus (the full schematic technicity of cinema, including camerawork) and the dancer's bodily technique, an alternating concealment and exposure of the mechanical. As Thomas tells Nina, if the criteria of judgment were based on nothing more than technique, she would be without peer. But he ultimately asks her to allow emotion to dictate her technique.

This can be seen as synecdochic of the problem the film poses at an analytical level and one of the potential sources of misunderstanding, for in just the same way that Nina must break free from the constraints of technique and draw upon the power of emotion, so too does Aronofsky's film insist that the spectator rely upon emotion as a point of access to the film's technique. What emerges is a palpable tension between cinematic/mediated mechanics and those executed by the human body. Both through its subject matter and its filmic apparatus, *Black Swan* fragments, mutilates, and transforms the human body in pursuit of perfection, mirroring the dialectic of ambition's temporality as that which is characterized by future-oriented desires and goals that are continually interrupted by setbacks. Tugging at the forward motion of ambition's sights, its imagining of success, is the threat and occurrence of failure. Failure takes time—time away from momentum and time to reassemble the shattered fragments ejected from linear temporality.

BODY GENRES

In *Black Swan*, intersecting temporalities manifest themselves corporeally, through bodily transformation and mutation. Aronofsky has referred to *Black Swan* as a werewolf movie, and the film points to other genres and modes, such as the psychological thriller, horror, melodrama, camp, and the backstage musical. As such, Aronofsky deploys lowbrow aesthetics to explore the pursuit of a highbrow art form. *Black Swan* is most readily associated with *The Red Shoes* (1948) in terms of its supposed glimpse into the world of ballet and the trope of female ambition's ill effects. Nevertheless, whereas a love interest is seen as detrimental to a ballerina's career in *The Red Shoes*, the ballet master in *Black Swan* encourages Nina to pursue erotic adventure in order to attain sexual maturity. While *Black Swan* does not display sex acts as explicitly as hardcore pornography, Aronofsky's film certainly amounts to an amalgamation of elements of film scholar Linda Williams's multiple genres and modes of filmic excess, namely, pornography, melodrama, and horror. Due to the withholding of visible penetration and overtly displayed genitals, Nina and Lily's bedroom scene classifies as soft-core (Fig. 4.7). The scene's importance lies in the fact that it is a fantasy, a dream ultimately alluding to Nina's own dual Odette/Odile-like persona. According to film critic Terrence Rafferty, "There are remarkably few horror movies about the terror and violence of making art, but *Black Swan* is in that tiny company."⁶ Referring to these three as "body genres" (and Williams has since claimed melodrama to be a mode as opposed to a genre, per se),⁷ Williams presents their "pertinent features of bodily excess":

There is the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. . . . the focus on what could probably best be called a form of ecstasy. . . . In each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain. . . . So the bodies of women have tended to function, ever since the eighteenth century origins of these



FIGURE 4.7 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Lily and Nina lesbian fantasy.



FIGURE 4.8 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina's orgasm.

genres in the Marquis de Sade, Gothic fiction, and the novels of Richardson, as both the *moved* and the *moving*.⁸

The subject matter of *Black Swan* is most indisputably the *moving* body, however hyperbolized it might be. And, according to Williams, body genres depend not only the moving female body, but also on various temporal structures in alternation, such as "too late," "too early," and "right on time." *Black Swan* exercises the limits of a temporality of ambition, trying to accomplish as much movement as possible within a career known for its brevity and obsession with youth (Fig. 4.8).

Nina's primary focus is to acquire mastery over her body, regardless of what it may be doing at any given moment in the narrative. As a werewolf—or wereswan—film that unabashedly conjures multiple body genres, *Black Swan* animalizes ambition through the coming-of-age transformation of a young woman as opposed to a teen-aged boy. By re-gendering the werewolf trope, Aronofsky reverses the "horror" of the

process of becoming-animal: whereas the male werewolf is perceived as a threat to those around him, injuring or destroying those in his midst, the female wereswan of *Black Swan* that is Odette-becoming-Odile is seen as a threat to herself. Others must get out of the werewolf's way, but the wereswan must get out of her own way, must "lose herself." Of course, the nocturnal mischief of the werewolf/swan presents us with another duality, a temporal binary internal to—and complicating—the temporality of ambition. As Scott observes, the film elaborates on Odette/Odile's competing Apollonian and Dionysian poles. Aronofsky's ballerina, both human and animal, strains the limits of the body-mind binary while reversing conventional notions of good and evil. Human by day and swan by night, Odette/Odile ultimately reveals the instability of epistemological binary constructions in the first place.

REVERSIBILITY

As far as binary constructions go, no trope is more symbolic of ballet's haunting duality than that of the mirror. Subway windows double as mirrors as Nina applies lipstick on her way to morning ballet class. When Nina is auditioning for the role of Odette/Odile, the studio mirror is as much a site of reflection as it is one of distortion (Fig. 4.9). After a series of *piqué* turns and *bouffées*, the camera rotates around Nina, then focuses on Thomas's face as Nina appears dancing in the mirror. Aronofsky seems to suggest that the dressing room mirror is a site of aspiration's memory, hosting images of generations



FIGURE 4.9 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina in studio mirror.

of ballerinas making up their faces before performances, succumbing to ambition's corrupting effects. Breaking glass is audible in the hallway as Nina approaches aging dancer Beth's departing tirade. Upon Beth's retirement, Nina raids the dancer's dressing room for theatrical ephemera (used lipstick, nail file), tokens containing the promise of the transference of stardom from one generation to another. The mirror in *Black Swan* functions both conceptually and visually: the dual character Odette/Odile is both always mirroring herself and is mirrored by Nina's offstage persona/s, and actual mirrors figure heavily in the film's visual landscape. Nina's reflection sometimes manifests itself as her own image and at other times as her doppelgänger, Lily. Furthermore, Nina and Lily "mirror" the duality of Odette/Odile's character, a classic example of the figure of the doppelgänger, the evil other. In German, doppelgänger is comprised of the two words meaning "double" and "walker." Thus, Lily is Nina's haunting double walker (Fig. 4.10).

Through the mirror, we are privy to reflections, breaking glass, distortion, and images of self-scrutiny. The mirror has long served as the literal and figurative tool of "reflection" inherent to ballet training. As a tool, the mirror is indicative of the training process, in which the rational and emotional still interact, for it is not until the ballerina sets foot onstage that she can rely on so-called "muscle memory" and let go of the deliberate phrasing of the studio for the relative emotional abandon of performance. While the reliability of the glass mirror is forfeited onstage, we are privy to multiple scenes of the glass-like substance, rosin, being crushed underfoot, and rosin provides increased traction for the ballerina in otherwise slippery satin *pointe* shoes. In *Black Swan*, episodes of breaking glass and crushed rosin coincide with developments in character, as Nina's persona is continually fractured and reformed in her quest of the role of Odette/Odile.

Aronofsky's trope of the mirror resonates with film scholar Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological concept of the reversibility of experience in the cinema and the availability of the *cinesthetic subject*. In arguing that the film and its viewer enter into a



FIGURE 4.10 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina and her double in subway station.

co-constitutive relationship with each other, Sobchack departs from the mirror's simply reflective characteristic to suggest that

All the bodies in the film experience—those on-screen and off-screen (and possibly that of the screen itself)—are potentially subversive bodies. They have the capacity to function both figuratively and literally . . . each exists in a figure-ground reversibility with the others.⁹

After Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack proposes a phenomenology of cinematic experience, imparting the idea that we sense film haptically, with all our senses at our disposal. To consider such a full-bodied cinematic experience is to undermine the regime of visibility. Aronofsky (inadvertently or otherwise) engages the very conflict between the mirror's mere reflection and reversibility's active exchange by forcing form to grapple with content. In fittingly Odette/Odile fashion, Aronofsky's directorial style is one in which intentionally complex cinematic technique exaggerates its subject matter, including images of actual mirrors. Thus, if mirrors ordinarily reflect the dancer's image, Aronofsky's distorted, fragmented portrayal of mirrors through cinematic techniques forces in the "viewer" a reversible experience in which she comes into phenomenological exchange with the film itself.

Importantly, "live" ballet performance does not necessarily possess the tools to make available such reversible experience, as the ballet audience member sits at a fixed distance from the stage, often unable to discern facial detail and other such "close-ups" of the dancing bodies. Paradoxically, the traditional proscenium stage may not offer the reversibility Sobchack identifies in film, and therefore it is important to point out that (for this and many other reasons) a production of *Swan Lake* could certainly not claim to possess the same levels of horror, melodrama, or heightened sexuality as *Black Swan*. One simple distinction between "viewing" experiences of classical ballet and contemporary film is that, for the most part, the dancers comprise the moving bodies in a ballet setting, whereas the camera often acts as the significant moving "body" in film, dictating much of the directionality of the "viewer's" gaze and sensibility. Additionally, the experience of film is further heightened sensorially when one takes into consideration the added elements of very deliberate sonic, musical, and editorial choices, ones that are unallowable or impossible in a classical ballet context.

Returning to the framework of Williams's body genres, we find that the "excesses" created by horror, melodrama, and pornography are nearly impossible without the technical facility of the camera and its related components. Despite—and precisely because of—its recorded nature, film is able to generate synesthetically heightened sensations of experience. It is not necessarily the *content* of *Black Swan* (elements such as plot, subject matter, or acting) that creates such heightened sensation for the viewer; rather, heightened sensation is created through *form* and formal qualities born of the film's apparatus, its machinery. More specifically, it is through technical elements of special effects, close-ups, distorted sound (animalistic wings amplified), and excerpts of Tchaikovsky's music that create such intensification of synesthesia. Heightened synesthesia is not necessarily inherent to film (and therefore always more possible in film than live dance), but

film has the capacity to mechanically/technically intensify elements that will inevitably generate amplified sensation for the viewer. Sobchack's *cinesthetic subject* is a combination of "cinema," "synaesthesia," and "coenesthesia," the latter two pointing to the idea that the arousal of one sense can instigate perception in another. Cinesthesia resonates with, yet departs from, dance studies' preferred term, *kinesthesia*, the idea of one's sensual awareness of one's own muscular movement. Whereas cinesthesia is involuntary, kinesthesia is self-aware. Nina scrutinizes herself in the mirror in spaces both domestic and professional, as she practices at home in a folding mirror, and rehearses in the studio in front of mirrored walls. Her own transformation from self-conscious human to involuntary swan is paralleled by her transformation from kinesthetic to cinesthetic subject. As such, Aronofsky takes us on a tour of the possibilities of our own subjective sensory-perceptive experiences of ballet and film.

Black Swan amplifies the fact that film's technical and technological components ultimately *mirror* the dancer's relationship to technique. Thus, Aronofsky draws a parallel—through the device of mirrors themselves throughout *Black Swan*—between filmic technique and balletic technique. The editor and camera thus parallel the dancer. Herein lies the theme of *virtuosity* as that which takes place in film through the cinematic apparatus and in dance through the dancer's live corporeal execution of difficult movements, especially in repetition, as in the execution of thirty-two *fouetté* turns. The fact that a body double was hired to dance many of Portman's passages is a particularly fitting (if paradoxical) example of the way film can rely on a double to assist an actor in depicting a role invested in the theme of the double itself.

Elaborating on the ecstatic nature of body genres, Williams alludes to "contemporary meanings" of ecstasy that "suggest components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture."¹⁰ She goes on to locate visual and aural attributes of such rapture as evoking a lack of control through bodily spasms and unarticulated sounds. In a fitting parallel, the drug Ecstasy figures in the film, as Lily drops an Ecstasy pill into Nina's cocktail during the rare night of debauchery that ends with Nina's fantasy lesbian romp with black-winged Lily. In *Black Swan* we become privy to Nina's flirtation with rapture through sensual (though not especially revealing) scenes of masturbation and sex, as well as the centrifugal sound of ominous bird wings preparing for flight layered over Tchaikovsky's score (Fig. 4.11). Albeit perversely, rapture is also approached through acts of abjection—vomiting, stabbing, toenail-breaking, and hangnail-ripping. These self-inflicted bodily mutilations incrementally lead Nina to what Thomas identifies as the aesthetically ideal loss of control. Nina's culminating sequence of *piqué* turns leading into *fouetté* turns whips her around and around into a near-frenzy that approaches a state of rapture, save the mechanism of technique that allows her to arrive at such feats in the first place. We finally perceive Nina's rapture in her slow-motion downward fall to a mattress on the ground in the final moment of the ballet. That this fatal climax takes place backstage underscores Aronofsky's paramount interest in the psyche of the performer, that which lies behind the façade of artistry. In this instance she is not in control of her movements through bodily technique, and she lands on her back, blood oozing outward from her center (Fig. 4.12). After Thomas runs to her and asks, "What



FIGURE 4.11 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), Nina grows black wings in final solo.



FIGURE 4.12 Screen Capture of *Black Swan*, Director Darren Aronofsky (2010), final scene; Nina utters, "I was perfect."

did you do?" she utters, "I felt it. Perfect. I was perfect." We are left to cinesthetically perceive Nina's inevitable death, her arrival at rapture, an arrival that might not be detected through unmediated channels of the live and mechanical.

In *Black Swan*, youthful aspiration becomes competitive ambition (ultimately between the self and its own other). Nina's ambition proves both necessary and detrimental; her final performance results in a display of perfection as both success and death. Nina's trajectory to becoming a swan is a metamorphosis in which each additional feather externalizes her psychological struggle as well as the disintegration of rational human composure. As a symbol of flight, her wings represent the simultaneous embodiment of perfection, on the one hand, and ambition's unfortunate repercussions, on the other: Nina's wings never lift her into the air, and soon vanish like ballet's ever-fleeting feats.

NOTES

1. I intentionally intersperse the colloquial sense of “dream,” as in a wish or fantasy.
2. A.O. Scott, “Natalie Portman Embraces Monster and Victim,” Dec 30, 2010.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Legnant is known to be the first ballerina to execute thirty-two *fouetté* turns in a row.
5. Aronofsky in Rafferty.
6. Rafferty.
7. Williams, *Playing the Race Card*.
8. Williams, “Film Bodies,” 4.
9. Sobchack, 9.
10. Williams, “Film Bodies,” 4.

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