

# Splitting Into Life: The Self-Subject Construction of The Movie "Black Swan" Under The "Gaze" Theory

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**Abstract:** Darren Aronofsky's film "Black Swan" puts abstract personality expressions into the narrative of dance, and the protagonist Nina realizes self-configuration in multiple gazes. Starting from the mirror world of the film, this paper explores how the ballet dancer Nina forms the subject gaze of otherness and integrates the body image of fragments into the whole form of self. In the process of realizing self-identification, Nina formed a circular psychological structure, and the position difference of gaze determines the level of Nina's self-structure formation. Based on Lacan's "mirror" structure theory, this paper uses Lacan's "gaze" theory to interpret film language, and analyzes Nina's self-subject from the perspective of "patriarchal endorsement" mother, Nina's subject and Thomas's desire vision.

## 1. Introduction

The film "Black Swan" starring Natalie Portman chased the ballet queen, in the competition of "realizing perfection", the protagonist's personality fission and alienation occur. In Nina's mirror world, a unified image of mother, male, and rival is gradually synthesized. She is always experiencing the reality of inner replication. Through the instrumental-like gaze, she produces the real subject in the division, forms the self in the social relationship, and goes to the end result of death.

The creation of personality and the formation of the subject in "Black Swan" can be interpreted and explained through Lacan's "gaze" theory. Lacan's "staring" theory reveals the splitting of the subject, emphasizing that staring comes from a part of the subject, i.e. from a certain point of the subject. The growth of the subject is the process of self-confirmation, which exists in the mechanism of desire behind the gaze of the "other". The subject is involved in the vortex of vision, and finally lost in the desire of the eyes of the other. Classic interpretations of The "Black Swan" often explore the inner world of the protagonist from the perspective of psychoanalysis. This paper will explain the reason and premise of Nina's subject formation from the occurrence process of "gaze", dissect the "anxiety" of her survival into the influence of desire in the subject configuration process, and observe how Nina becomes the "self" in social relations from the perspective of "existence" and "presence" of others.

## 2. The mother's gaze from "the voice of paternity"

Nina and her mother are in a kind of abnormal belonging connection. In her mother's sight, Nina does not even follow the logic of identity, but belongs to the substitute structure of her mother's personality. Therefore, there is neither identity nor rupture between Nina and her mother, which Derrida calls "topological relationship". In such a topological structure, Nina is like a snail's extended tentacle, and her eyes separate from the thick protective shell to explore its relationship with the world alone. The eyeball is not merely the carrier of viewing, but also the body of "perception". When it encounters cold and injury, it subconsciously hides in the protective shell. In the seemingly unbreakable shell wrapped, is the mother curled up in the original. In Lacan's "mirror structure" theory, the mother plays an important role in the formation of the infant's self. In front of the mirror, infants are not able to accurately know their own existence. Only when they see themselves in the mirror and make corresponding actions can they have their first psychological cognition of themselves. Self-awareness comes primarily from the separation of the baby from its mother -- from an organ of the mother to an individual.

In Nina's family structure, the father is still absent, and the whole family is in order under the control of the mother. Therefore, Nina's family structure is centered on her mother's right to speak. Dai Jinhua once argued in his paper that "the language of desire in the film narrative and the disappearance of the characters' desire vision, the characters on the screen appear to be in a non-gendered state." [1] When the mother transferred her own desires to her daughter, the goal of independent life as an individual would immediately fade away and gradually disappear, and the possible personality would be projected onto Nina. My mother once gave up her ballet dream for marriage and committed her body and spirit to her family. She made an active choice when she was young to attach herself to her father -- the male identity. My mother once gave up her ballet dream for marriage and committed her body and spirit to her family. She made an active choice when she was young to attach herself to her father -- the masculine identity. From the perspective of the mother's psychological attribution, her management and control of the family are based on male ideology, so the mother's gaze towards Nina has male scrutiny.

Gaze precedes the act of "seeing." The acts of gaze does not take place on the eyeball, which is only the support of vision. What really matters is the "attention" that exists outside the eye, and such "attention" is the "discovery" of spirituality. In Nina's ballet career, the most glorious dream is to become the focus and core of the whole dance performance, to become the "white swan" in her mother's expectation, to become the "little princess" in Thomas's heart, or even to directly become the continuation of Beth as the "Swan Queen". No matter what kind of identity symbol Nina desires most, her core desire is always "to be seen". As a ballet dancer, this art form is based on the sight. The whole process of learning, training, rehearsal and performance is conceived and choreographed from the audience's view. So the logic behind Nina's White Swan appeal to "I just want to be perfect" is that the result of her practice needs to be the way she expects others to look at her. "Gaze becomes the medium through which I identify with others." Nina's artistic expression is a two-way street, and the audience's acceptance is an integral part of it.

### **3. Nina's gaze as the subject**

#### **3.1 Gaze at the mirror image of self**

As a special medium, mirror image is the most direct way for the subject to be seen herself. In the film, mirror image directly becomes the entrance for Nina to observe the world. Nina's ballet is based on imitation and practice. She stands opposite to her teacher, who uses body language to convey details and feelings one by one, and constructs Nina's dance imagination. In Nina's consciousness, the ultimate goal of "perfection" is the complete reproduction of the authority of the teacher -- a certain dance, that is, the restoration of a certain performance prototype. So Nina will repeat the exercises based on the observed movements to achieve the goal of restoring the memory. In this process of "restoration", Nina needs to realize the overlap between the image of herself and the image of her teacher through the mirror. Only in the act of imitation can we approach the realization of our own needs. As a ballerina, mirror training has become an unavoidable fixture. If the birth of Nina's self is placed at the beginning of ballet, the mirror is Nina's spiritual space, and the mirror is the carrier of the overlap between reality and spirit. "The image in the mirror seems to be the entrance to a visible time" [2].

#### **3.2 The gaze of Lily and Beth**

In Nina's eyes, Beth is the existence of a dance "prototype" and identity template. In the performance of ballet, the basic footwork and techniques remain unchanged, and different protagonists perform the same classic drama. Beth, once the swan queen, still can't resist the passing of nature -- the dancers who play the lead roles will become old, loose skin, stiff limbs, and less attractive. In the law of ballet, the only way to fight basic human biology is to replace the protagonist. Similar to the star system in Hollywood, it brings visual freshness through the difference of the leading roles under the framework of basic types. Under such a competitive mechanism, the main criteria for ballet casting are "proximity" and "plasticity". From the beginning, ballet sets up the prototype of the leading role, which contains various symbols belonging to the drama and individual, in line with the psychological expectations of

the director, the audience and other dancers. Therefore, in the subsequent casting process of ballet, there are less personal colors, and more protagonists who are modeled as swans according to the prototype. Nina is a continuation of Beth, and the two are a community of destiny. Nina looked up at a mature identity structure, generating infinite yearning for identity, symbolically disassembling the identity, and then automatically piecing together her own life experience, trying to form a visible "success" and "perfection". In the process of pursuit, Nina still followed the mirror growth structure, trying to imitate outside, the pursuit of patterns, and get the same status as Beth. So Nina stole Beth's lipstick and combed herself in Beth's dressing room until Nina took Beth's place at the cocktail party. Under the public's attention, Nina realized the purpose of the imagination stage -- to replace Beth and become the successor of Beth's identity.

#### **4. Thomas' desire vision**

##### **4.1 The director's gaze on the artwork**

If the ballet Swan Lake builds an artistic illusion world, Thomas, as the artistic director, expresses his innermost desire and exploration in such illusion, and places his life experience and fantasy. With dance drama as the carrier, Swan Lake's repertoire really has the subjective emotional expression is the dancer played by white swan and "Black Swan", and the dancer's human body is the main way to express the artistic emotion of the creator. One of Thomas's frequent requests for Nina is to "lose yourself" -- to show emotion and get carried away. In Thomas's eyes, Nina is beautiful, broken and paranoid, but never truly emotional. And emotion, trauma and impossibility are symbolized lagging participation and lag, these are the reality. Art itself is a kind of seduction and taming of the gaze, sharing not harmony and happiness, but desire and want. Creators release their desires in the fantasy space of art and seek a kind of original lack of sex -- pleasure. In Swan Lake, Thomas pursues the form of "black swan". Therefore, Thomas's gaze towards Nina has an imagination of artistic space, and leads to the change of the attributes of this work of art, approaching people's longing for the vitality of art work.

##### **4.2 Gaze over the relationship**

The second gaze takes place on the basis of a delicate sexual relationship. In Hegel's view, "The state of sex is the medium through which the subject can acquire a sense of a particular genus." If Nina just stands on the relationship between students and teachers, workers and bosses, such vision does not have a purpose, but is just a kind of receiving and receiving information. With the generation of "staring" relationship, the female body being watched gradually loses the consciousness of vigorous expression. Female dancers in the context of the greater other present a kind of broken body features, toe is toe, face is face, arm is arm, different parts of the body have formed different desire symbols. The fragmented symbols form a "pure representation". Women are no longer a complete whole, but become a landscape, and the attributes of women's bodies become ornamental. The alienation of the female dance body reflects the aesthetic preference of the creative subject and the receiving subject of the dance, the implied desire of body consumption and the dilemma of dance body expression under the influence[3]. When the audience is not present, Nina still learns to see herself through the eyes of the audience, although the audience leaves, but the gaze stays forever.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In Nina's life, with ballet as her spiritual anchor, the balance of life tilted back and forth depending on whether she reached the top of the stage. As the subject of desire, Nina's "Black Swan" reality is wrapped in the coat of a white swan. Under the black wings, the subject shows a longing eye to tear. The essence of the "Black Swan" is the release of a primal desire, just like the winged Nina, for perfection, for success, for attention and affection, for the approval of the person she loves. Nina in front of the mirror as the starting point of observation, from the moment her eyes gaze at the mirror, she began to gradually recognize her own appearance. In Sangori's vision, Nina seems to be out of the "primal chaos" of the baby, staggering, toddling.

Darren Aronofsky has a strong sense of feminism in his film. In Nina's mirror image and imagination stage, the feminine self is not formed spontaneously but shaped in the multiple gaze with Nina as the subject. In the male gaze dominated by Thomas, the gaze of the greater other, and the gaze of supplementing personality. Nina seems to be close to and have no self at all. The director hides Nina's most real and latent desires in the surreal time and space of the stage and dreams. The special environment of the stage determines that the dancer starts staring at the empty darkness. Without the mirror and dark auditorium, the dancer makes a relatively free presentation in the face of the confirmed self-identity. When Nina struggled with the split and unity of her own identity, she finally touched her wings and touched her blood. She showed the claws of the "Black Swan" and extended them to all those who oppressed, threatened and hurt her. The "Black Swan" faces his own desires and uncontrollably erupts a cry from the depths of his soul. It was under the dark wings that she saw herself as she really was. In her anxious search, Nina finally realized the "perfection" she was pursuing, which was actually more infinite state of oppression to Nina. Desire, perfection, social identity, these status-like words represent an essential nothingness. What Nina pursues is nothing more than the most harmonious state of life, which is like a classical ballet and the unity of individuals. She forms the state of self in her gaze, but completely ends the possibility of the subject in the state of self. This is a tragic sigh, Nina who wants to break out of the cage of power can only end up with self-destruction.

### **Acknowledgements**

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