

## **Black Swan, Natalie Portman and the Mystical Tragedy of Perfection**

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Black Swan is a perfect movie. Intellectually provocative. Emotionally engaging. Sensual. Heart breaking. It is a movie that stays with you for a very, very long time after the credits rise. And for me, it is a movie that serves as a reminder of why I chose to become a filmmaker in the first place. To make art that tears through the barriers of social propriety and speaks truths that the heart needs to hear.

From the first frame, you are swept into the dark and brooding world masterfully crafted by Darren Aronofsky, a director who is at the height of his talent. In an era of digital filmmaking and explosive special effects, Aronofsky shows us again the simple power of old-fashioned grainy film and muted lighting to pull us into another reality. One that reflects the dark shadows of our own minds, the fear that comes from looking into places within our souls that we have locked away and refused to face.

Black Swan follows the journey of Nina, a ballerina played with aching honesty by Natalie Portman. Nina longs to rise to the top of her ballet company and is given the opportunity of a lifetime when the artistic director (Vincent Cassel) casts her as the lead in his new production of Swan Lake. Nina's role requires her to master two personas – that of the White Swan, a pristine and angelic presence, as well as her nemesis, the Black Swan, a sensual temptress who steals the heart of the White Swan's lover. The role of the virginal White Swan is easier for the repressed and emotionally controlled Nina. It is the Black Swan that presents Nina her greatest challenge – to break free of her inner walls and embrace the intense power within her. As Nina struggles with the demands of the two roles, the darkness within her own psyche is unleashed as she becomes increasingly convinced that Lily, a new dancer in the company played by Mila Kunis, is maneuvering to take her place.

To be honest, I know nothing about ballet. Like many others who will see this film, I have never taken the time to appreciate the art form, dismissing it as the effete predilection of upper class snobs. Aronofsky is clearly aware of that prejudice, and the one moment he permits us to leave the closed and controlled world of the ballet company, he faces it head on.

The rebellious newcomer Lily convinces a hesitant Nina to go clubbing, and the two ballerinas meet handsome young men who are rather blunt when they find out about the girls' profession. "Sounds boring," says one of the guys harshly. His wingman, played by Sebastian Stan, who starred in my recent NBC television series Kings, is a little better at his game and manages to feign interest in ballet in the hopes of getting laid. But his face still says it all. Ballet is for uninteresting people leading uninteresting lives.

As Aronofsky shows us over two hours of (literally) nail-biting tension and suspense, he is dead wrong.

Black Swan is full of so many surprises that I hesitate to give more details of the film's plot for fear of lessening its impact. But I will say that, at its heart, the movie is about the quest for perfection. Nina's obsession with being perfect — the perfect ballerina, the perfect daughter, the perfect Swan — lead her down an increasingly dark path in which her sanity is threatened and the drums of tragedy thunder with increasing dread.

It is a journey that many of us can understand. It is the terrible price of ambition. Anyone who has ever sought to better herself or himself knows that with each success comes a hunger for more. Each victory becomes less fulfilling, as it simply points out how many more battles must still be fought. The farther we climb up the mountain of our hopes and dreams, the more infuriatingly distant the peak becomes. We desperately seek to transcend our limitations, only to find that in our quixotic quest for an illusory perfection we are actually rushing toward an abyss of self-hatred and self-destruction.

As a Sufi mystic, I sense the sacred drive behind that madness for perfection. Sufism, the mystical heart of Islam, teaches that we were all originally one with God in a realm beyond time and space. Our souls were created and lived in a state of divine perfection, where all things were possible, where there were no limitations, just boundless potentialities. And yet our souls chose to leave that state of infinite bliss and enter into the material world, with all of its limitations, suffering and pain. Why? Because perfection was itself a lonely prison.

With everything available to us, we were satiated to the point of despair. No joy of growth, no thrill of overcoming challenges, no way to taste the pleasure of victory over daunting obstacles. It was a state that my brothers in the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah call the "bread of shame." That which is earned too easily has no value. And if one is flooded with gifts without ever experiencing the dignity of earning them through hard work, the gifts become sour and ugly. When all things are available without effort, then nothing has any value.

And so our souls made a fateful decision: to relinquish our inherent divine abilities to manifest instantaneously and to take form in a material world that was bound by limitation. A cold world that is often hostile and presents dangers to our physical, emotional and spiritual lives every day. It is a world where suffering and failure are the norm, and one must struggle every day to get by. It is the world of limitation we see around us and within us at every moment.

And yet the Sufis say we chose to come to this valley of tears for a reason. Not to stagnate or wallow in our miseries. But to remember who we actually are, who we always have been — divine souls that are capable of transcending all limitations and manifesting everything our hearts desire. And that longing to rediscover the majesty of our souls, that desire to re-experience oneness with God, is what causes us to lift ourselves above the muck and grime of life and master our circumstances. The quest for perfection is at its core a quest to return to God, our source.

But it is a quest that is fraught with many dangers, the greatest being delusion and obsession. Delusion in not seeing where we really are in the journey, and obsession in trying to force ourselves faster than we are ready or able to go. The quest for mastery is a journey that we each must take, but by definition it is the riskiest of all ventures. For in the process of seeking perfection, we are constantly reminded of how we fall short. And unless we can accept that chasm between our ideal and our reality, we can be driven into the depths of despair.

In Islam, there is a belief that all souls must cross over a bridge to Paradise, a bridge that sits right over the gaping maw of the Fire. The bridge is razor thin and one's actions in life determine whether a soul can cross the tightrope of eternity safely, or whether the soul trips and falls into the abyss.

For Sufis, the lesson of this sober image is that, in seeking to return to Heaven, we must risk falling into Hell.

That dangerous journey into the heart of perfection is the journey of Black Swan. And it is a journey that is perfectly (if I may use that word) embodied by the remarkable Natalie Portman.

Portman brings Nina to life with heart-wrenching authenticity. Her hopes, dreams, foibles and insecurities are our own. And her terrifying descent into her personal hell makes us face our own inner demons with brutal honesty. There is a widespread belief that Portman will win the Academy Award for best actress for this role. If so, it may be because in this film we finally get a chance to see who she really is on many levels she has hidden from us before.

As I watched the film, I was struck with a strange sensation that this movie was perfectly cast, because I suspect that Portman understands Nina's painful quest for perfection far more than she has ever been willing to share with the world.

To the public, Natalie Portman lives a charmed life. A movie star since she debuted at the age of 13 in *The Professional*, Portman went on to graduate from Harvard. Unlike other child stars, she managed to maintain a dignified and private life, excelling in school even as she became part of history's most valuable film franchise *Star Wars*, playing the doomed wife of Darth Vader. Portman earned her first Oscar nomination for *Closer* before she turned 25. And she has dedicated herself to humanitarian causes, including supporting micro-financing opportunities for women in poor countries. Publicly, Portman has the persona of a saint. The image of the perfect girl who can do no wrong.

And yet I have never believed that public persona represented her deeper truth. The challenges of being thrust into the limelight at such a tender age must have weighed deeply on Portman. The added pressure of being held up by the public as an icon of perfection, of not being allowed to be flawed and human like everyone else, is unimaginable. It is a tribute to her inner strength that she has maintained her dignity in a world that sets up idols on a pedestal and then gleefully waits for them to destroy themselves. And yet I have no doubt that there are moments when this

talented young woman has wanted to break free of the expectations around her, to free herself from the myth of “Natalie Portman” and write her own destiny as a real, living human being, warts and all.

I believe that inner struggle is what we are privileged to watch in *Black Swan*. The struggle of a young woman facing the demons of perfection, of confronting the expectations of her family, peers and mentors. In my experience in Hollywood, I have found that many actors use their craft as a means of hiding who they really are from the world as well as from themselves. In taking on this role, Natalie Portman has done the most intimate and risky thing for an actor: revealing naked truths that may very well reflect the deepest core of her own being.

*Black Swan* is a tragedy because it reveals the tragedy of the human condition. The tragedy of longing to return to a home that we ran away from and that is now always just one step ahead of us, like the end of a rainbow. We are children of the Sun, and like Icarus, we long to fly back to our origins. But the melting wings of human frailty bring us always crashing back to earth.

So if perfection is not possible, attainable or even desirable, what is the purpose of our lives?

To answer that, like any good Sufi, I will share a story.

An American woman who embraced Sufism went on a journey to the Muslim world to find a shaykh, a mystical teacher who could guide her on her spiritual path. She told the shaykh that she sought the perfection that came from unity with God. The shaykh nodded and told her that her first step on the journey would come once she mastered a simple earthly task, such as grooming a horse. He took her to the stable and gave her a brush. The woman diligently spent hours carefully brushing the mane and coat of the shaykh’s favorite horse.

At the end of the day, the shaykh returned and she showed him her work. He frowned and pointed out how many tiny hairs were still out place. Looking closer, the woman realized he was right. She vowed to do better the next day. After spending many more hours carefully and lovingly caressing the horse with the brush, she showed the shaykh her work. He shook his head, frustrated. Yet again he pointed out tiny flaws in the horse’s coat. She really needed to do better.

This went on day after day, and the woman began to despair. Every day she showed the shaykh her work, and every day he found it imperfect. After several months, when the shaykh yet again dismissed her brushing as inadequate, the woman exploded in fury.

“Dammit! It’s good enough!”

The shaykh turned to her with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

“You have finally passed the test.”

Thank you Darren Aronofsky for gifting the world with your remarkable film Black Swan. And thank you, Natalie Portman, for the courage to show us the truth in your performance. Perfection is an illusion.

As we Sufis say: “There is great beauty in the idea of the rose. There is greater beauty in the rose as it actually appears, with all of its flaws.”

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