



**FM 7006**

**MA Film Studies**

**Cinema of Suffering: Darren Aronofsky's Image of the Female Experience**

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## Introduction

*“In other words, pain fulfils a central role in the experience of Aronofsky’s films, which renders their affective dynamics particularly complex” (Laine, 2015, pg. 16).*

While many directors are predominantly focused on telling the narratives of men, Darren Aronofsky finds himself much more interested in that of women. His work demonstrates a lens that is focused on exploring the female experience and the perspectives of women and through this lens, the audience becomes subject to exactly how he envisions this experience. This dissertation will discuss Aronofsky’s image of the female experience and how he depicts it through several of his films, including *Requiem for Dream* (2001), *The Wrestler* (2008), *Black Swan* (2010), and *mother!* (2017).

Aronofsky has become known as somewhat of an auteur during his 20+ years of directing; he has a very controlled and recognizable directing style that is unique and identifiable, and that is often compared to the works of other auteurs, such as Lars Von Trier, David Cronenberg and Quentin Tarantino. The term “auteur” is often thrown around when discussing directors and their work, but what are the qualities of an auteur, and how do they differ from that of a simple director? At its core, an auteur supplies a film with vision and specific direction. Film critic Andrew Sarris coined the phrase *auteur theory* in the 1960s and was hugely instrumental in leading the discussions that have taught us all we know about the auteur. Simply put, the auteur is known as the sole author of the film. Sarris writes,

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose (Sarris, 1968, pg. 30).

This “attitude” would then suggest that, while a film is made up of many different elements, the auteur is responsible for the reception of the film, whether positive or negative. “It is this combination of high technical skill and artistry that makes an auteur” (Tredge, 2013, pg. 7).

After all, auteur is French for author, which has the same connotations as the word author. This translation evokes the image that the director is equivalent to the author of a book, in that despite a collective effort of work, the author is the sole creator and primary voice behind the work. Sarris writes, “The strong director imposes his own personality on a film; the weak director allows the personalities of others to run rampant... The auteur theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression” (Sarris, 1968, pg. 31). This quotation is to say that despite a “gravitational pull of the mass of movies,” an auteur is able to reject the mainstream standards of mass media and stay true to their style and aesthetic so as to convey their own individual film identity. Indeed, this dissertation will analyse Aronofsky’s status as auteur and his essential qualities as a director that thrust him into this category.

Auteurs are often tied to specific directing styles, aesthetics, themes, etc, or generally any tactics that make their work particularly recognizable. Aronofsky can be quite experimental with his work, both in terms of the ideas, cinematography, and mise-en-scène, often deeming his films avant garde. His work is often considered surreal and disturbing due to both the visual aspects of his films, as well the subject matter. However, despite the aspects of his work that make it experimental, Aronofsky is still considered a mainstream filmmaker. While his films have generally been considered successes and have often seen Oscar nominations/wins, audiences sometimes feel confused or disturbed by the experimental, avant garde qualities of his work. That said, he is consistently able to fill seats by casting well-known A-listers in his films, such as Jennifer Lawrence, Natalie Portman, Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, and many more. Indeed, his decision to cast well-known actors has allowed him to share these avant garde ideas with a mainstream audience that may have never been exposed to films of this degree before.

Amongst many of the facets of Aronofsky's work that make it unique and discernable include one of the most significant modes of identification: the suffering of women both on screen and off screen. Indeed, overtime, Aronofsky's work has become synonymous with the suffering and plight of women, from the actresses preparing for their roles, to the characters he writes. Within the diegesis, this thematic use of suffering and pain can also be known as "cinema of the senses" or "cinema of the body" which can be understood as "a carnal understanding of cinema, [in which] emphasis is placed on the lived experience and sensation, while vision and cognition are often understood in terms of affect and embodiment" which Tarja Laine discusses in her work, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky* (2015, pg. 1). Aronofsky heavily relies upon this body cinema in his films in order to convey the extent of the female suffering and the female experience as a whole. However, while the term "body" cinema might imply perhaps just physical restraints, Aronofsky continues the suffering of his characters into the mental, emotional, and psychological realms as well. According to Laine,

As far as the body is concerned, Aronofsky is a very special filmmaker. His are full of tension-filled conflicts between body and mind, bodily (self-) injuries and cognitive disorders. There are combinations of bodily experience and technology as 'extensions of man' involving computers, televisions and microscopes, but also conflicts between psychological expression and bodily performance (wrestling, ballet). He is fond of cinematic techniques that aim at sensorial and bodily engagement (Laine, pg. 2).

This "body and mind conflict" of his characters demonstrates just one facet of Aronofsky's status as auteur. Indeed, the actresses involved in his work are also subject to his thematic interest in suffering and pain. Many of the actresses that work with Aronofsky have been put through incredibly arduous physical, mental, and emotional battles in order to prepare for their roles and adopt the emotions and mental states of the characters they are playing. For example, Natalie Portman as Nina in *Black Swan* underwent intense ballet training in order to portray the identity of the obsessive, competitive ballerina she was playing. She was admired for her dedication to the role and praised for her intense diet and workout plans that caused her to lose a significant amount of weight for the role. Her dedication to the role and "uncanny empathy" (Dolan, 2013,

pg. 79) are what made her as successful as she was. The suffering that went along with preparing for it demonstrates just one example of the suffering that is inherently linked to Aronofsky's characters and auteurship. This dissertation will later on explore in more detail the extent of Portman's suffering in preparation for her role as Nina, as it was particularly well-known and discussed, and was a huge factor in Portman's Oscar win. However, it is not just Portman who has suffered in order to prepare for an intensive role. Various lead actresses in Aronofsky's films have undergone very similar physical, emotional, and mental trauma in order to adopt the identities of characters who are experiencing the same kind of body and mind suffering on screen; indeed, this dissertation will further discuss the suffering that seems to be inherently linked to the actors of Aronofsky's psychological thrillers. I will explore Elaine Scarry's philosophy of pain in order to contextualize the physical and psychological suffering that is found in Aronofsky's films.

Furthermore, the abuse that these characters endure is often what catapults Aronofsky's films into the genre of the psychological thriller, as the thrills come not only from the bodily abuse that occurs, but the mental and emotional battles that they endure. The psychological thriller is a unique subgenre of film that teeters on the edge of conventional thriller, but differentiates itself through content that evokes discussions pertaining to psychological matters, or matters of the mind. Defining this genre is not easily done, as it is quite nuanced and can look different in many different cases. The standard thriller genre is more common and more familiar; many of the highest grossing films of all time fall under the thriller category, including *Titanic* at \$1,221,536,331, *Jurassic World* at \$1,671,000, and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* at \$1,123,800 (IMDb, 2018); audiences tend to be much more comfortable watching thrillers, as, while they often vary in overall mood and tone, they are typically quite action-packed and easy to digest and understand (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009, pg. 26).<sup>1</sup>

The psychological thriller can be more difficult to identify. "The very existence of the term *psychological thriller* testifies that psychology has seeped into cinema. Almost everyone has heard of this term, yet few can define it" (Packer, 2007, pg. 85). Packer describes in her book, *Movies and the Modern Psyche*, that psychological thrillers used to be synonymous with Hitchcock films and films about "psycho killers", and that while this subgenre has shifted over the years, it will always encapsulate the "motif of madness". Interestingly, despite the fact that the genre has vaguely existed for decades, it is still difficult to create a concrete definition for it. Packer suggests searching for a more *cinematic* definition, rather than simply looking to a dictionary. And indeed, this dissertation will explore this definition in much more detail.

Aronofsky tackles the psychological thriller subgenre by focusing heavily on the psychological aspects of suffering. His films are never excessively violent or gorey; they are not incredibly fast-paced or heart-pounding; to the contrary, his films are often described as "slow burning" in that they can take time to develop and eventually lead to any scares (Packer, pg. 85). What truly makes his films thrilling *are* these specific elements that make them so different to standard

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<sup>1</sup> A Hitchcock reader

thrillers - audiences are never sure what to expect. Aronofsky emphasizes a sort of Man versus Self <sup>2</sup> theme (which can develop into other “conflict themes” such as Man versus Man, which will be discussed later in this dissertation) in his films that often portray a character battling with their own psyche, their paranoia and skewed perspectives of the world often being more of a threat than any external factors. Aronofsky’s work depicts the delicate and complex nature of the mental state, and his characters are often victims of wavering mental health. For example, Nina is shown in a constant state of paranoia and fear as a result of her obsession with becoming the perfect ballerina, which ultimately leads to her suicide at the end of the film; the wife (who is nameless) in *mother!* (2017) is also constantly paranoid and in doubt of what she is seeing and the intentions of the other characters. While Aronofsky does scatter in scenes of violence and gore, most of the thrills come from a place of paranoia and fear that the audience contracts from the characters on the screen.

One of the biggest differences between the conventional thriller genre and the more nuanced psychological thriller subgenre lies in the audiences’ relationship with the characters and events on screen. Indeed, audiences’ reactions to what is happening on the screen is often tied to the characters’ reactions. Therefore, when our protagonist is scared or confused or paranoid, the audience often will mimic those same feelings. A sense of suspense in thrillers tends to derive from the audience having access to information and being aware of something that the character is not yet aware of, demonstrating a sort of cinematic “dramatic irony” that is often found in literature. What differentiates a psychological thriller from a standard thriller, however, can come from when both the audience *and* the protagonist lack information about the transpiring events. When this lack of information is reflected in the decisions or actions of the protagonist, the audience can feel confused as well and mimic the emotions and thoughts of the character. Psychological thrillers thrive on causing confusion and creating doubt, therefore reflecting this confusion and doubt in the protagonist, subsequently thrilling the audience in the overall sense of disorientation. It is usually not until the end of the film that these conundrums are solved and begin to make sense. Indeed, when you limit the audience’s availability of knowledge, confusion most likely will occur. Additionally, since psychological thrillers often deal with the mental states of the protagonist, quite often these mental states are questioned and wavering. In cinema, the audience gains a lot of the information of the film from the protagonist, which can create a thrilling sense of disorientation and confusion when it is unclear whether the audience can trust the mental state of that protagonist. This then makes the audience subject to an unreliable narrator, which occurs when we cannot trust the information that we are receiving from our protagonist. Overall, the psychological thriller subgenre thrives from creating diegetic disorientation, and subsequently feeding that disorientation to the audience as a way to thrill and amuse them.

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<sup>2</sup> This is an example of the general idea and theme of “Conflict” that appears in literature and film. In addition to Man versus Self, there is Man versus Nature, Man versus Man, and Man versus Society. Semantically, but nevertheless importantly, the idea of “man” being the default gender of the character in conflict is challenged through Aronofsky’s interest in telling the stories on women and showcasing narratives surrounding their conflicts.

Furthermore, this dissertation will further explore the extent of the suffering of Aronofsky's actresses, and the extent to which the on-screen suffering leads to off-screen suffering, and vice versa. In addition, this work will seek to analyse what kind of suffering the male actors in both Aronofsky's films and the films of other directors are enduring, and how it compares to that of the female suffering. What are the differences we are seeing between actress and actor suffering, and does this suffering elicit certain stigmas? Are men admired in a different fashion for the suffering that comes from a certain method acting, while women are conversely *expected* to endure a degree of suffering for their roles? This dissertation aims to answer the previously mentioned questions through the textual analysis of several of Aronofsky's works; in addition, Aronofsky will be situated into the work of other auteurs with similar work and his portrayal and utilization of the female will be contextualized.

While Aronofsky's films have often been praised for their portrayal of women, they have also been criticized for the extent of the suffering that has been involved, and simply whether or not Aronofsky has been able to successfully write female characters from his perspective as a heterosexual cis-man. Some critics and theorists believe that Aronofsky has built his status as auteur off the backs of making women suffer, and subsequently conveying that suffering on screen, vieling his female-centric narratives in fake feminism. Dr. Amber Jacobs views Aronofsky's work as particularly exploitative to the females involved in his work. In a critical analysis of *Black Swan*, Jacobs writes,

Certainly *Black Swan* reproduces the terms of the Western male imaginary... Woman as passive sexualized object. Woman as a mere muse lacking a subject position or desire and entirely constructed via male fantasy... Nina is a creature of this psychosexual structure and the film's ballet milieu presents it in an obscenely exaggerated form. Under the patriarchal conditions *Black Swan* replicates, women's attempts to achieve subjectivity invariably result in madness, breakdown, self-destructivity, and premature death (Fischer and Jacobs, 2011, pg. 59).

Additionally, if we are to analyse the extent of Aronofsky's work as feminist, we must first contextualize it through an application of several feminist film theorists. Starting off, Laura Mulvey's work in feminist film theory can be applied to Aronofsky's work and subsequently used to explore how Aronofsky represents the female experience and the image of women on screen. Mulvey's work is particularly relevant in the discussion of Aronofsky's work, as she is especially interested in the use of psychoanalytic theory in exploring cinematic analysis. She is perhaps best known for her theories on the male gaze and fetishistic scopophilia in her book, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989). These two ideas explore the perceived image of women by men in films, and the pleasure that is inherently linked to looking and watching. Mulvey writes,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual

and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey, 1989, pg. 19).

As an order of contrast, feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane's piece entitled *Film and The Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator*, discusses the *woman's gaze*. In this piece, Doane is particularly interested in the idea that "The woman's relation to the camera and the scopic regime is quite different from that of the male" (Doane, 1982, pg. 76). Doane beautifully describes the essence of the male gaze, and even mentions Mulvey's work in doing so when she writes,

Spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging - framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3-dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control (Doane, 1982, pg. 76).

This dissertation will explore Aronofsky's films in order to assess if his image of the female experience is problematic, admirable, or perhaps a mix of both. This exploration into the work of feminist film theorists will not only shed light on Aronofsky's work in the realm of feminism, but it will also allow for women to offer their perspectives on a man's portrayal of these female driven stories; it is important to note that stories pertaining to women do not inherently make them feminist.

In addition, this dissertation will discuss the elements of Aronofsky's directorial style that deem him an auteur, specifically focusing on his utilisation of the theme of suffering both on screen and off screen. This thematic suffering will be contextualised and the overall meaning behind it will be explored, ultimately revealing what Aronofsky's emphasis on suffering tells us about cinema and society as a whole.

## Chapter 1: A Deconstruction of the Psychological Thriller

Before analyzing the films that fall into the psychological thriller genre, it is essential to first deconstruct and define it.

What does a psychological thriller look like? What content can the audience expect to see in these films? And, could the average filmgoer identify a psychological thriller if they were watching one? I would argue that due to the very niche particularities of the genre, they may not be able to do so. At its core, the psychological thriller deals with the unstable and often delusional state of minds of one or more of the characters in the film. Just as psychology deals with matters of the mind, the psychological thriller addresses these issues, but the entertainment value comes from a place of thrilling audiences into being scared of these issues. The thrills stem from a fear that comes from a lack of control related to the psyche. While the default for a character might be overall psychological well-being (or their mental health might not even be a question), the thrills can come from when we question the state of a character's mental health and are subsequently afraid of what could happen as a result of this.

Psychological thrillers are heavily reliant upon the actions and motivations of the characters. The audience can learn a lot about the genre of the film just from how characters are written. Christopher Pittard explains in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* that the genre strongly emphasizes the importance of characterization. "Character and characterization are prominent, often delving deeper into characters' mentalities than other genres. Psychological novels are known as stories of the 'inner person.' Some stories employ stream of consciousness, interior monologues, and flashbacks to illustrate characters' mentalities" (Pittard, 2012, pg. 531). And indeed, the psyche in question is usually that of either the protagonist or the antagonist.

### The Protagonist

What is the mental state of the protagonist of the film? Have they been identified as having any sort of psychological disorder? If we go into the film being aware of the mental state of the protagonist, we can subsequently view their decision making with an altered lens that then might justify to us why they act the way that they do. Has the protagonist's mental state *not* been identified? That might then imply that it is either not a factor in the narrative, or we are not meant to know about their mental state yet, as it will eventually become apparent to us. For example, Nina in *Black Swan* starts off the film seeming completely normal and psychologically healthy. It is not until further into the film that we begin to question her mental state, and eventually learn that her paranoia and psychosis are results of her mother's suffocating parenting style, as well as Nina's obsession with becoming the perfect ballerina. We now have a much more clear image as to why Nina acted the way she did, as her decisions were a result of her wavering mental health. In addition, her hallucinations leave the audience unsure of what is real and what is not. Since the story is told from Nina's perspective, the world of the film is seen through a lens of Nina's reality. However, psychological thrillers often involve an *altered lens* of reality if the story is told through the perspective of a character whose reality is unreliable. We

do not learn until the end of the film that much of what we thought was reality, and many of the events that took place, did not actually occur, and were instead hallucinations as a result of Nina's paranoia and neurosis. These scenes of paranoia will be analysed and discussed in more detail further in this dissertation.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Antagonist**

The antagonist of a psychological thriller is almost always a victim of psychological issues, their villainous actions often the result of their mental health. However, a villain *with* psychological issues does not necessarily guarantee a psychological thriller. For example, one of the most common tropes of any horror or thriller movie is the existence of the "psycho killer."<sup>4</sup> Films with a psycho killer typically "involve a violent psychopath stalking and murdering people, usually with bladed tools" (Petridis, 2014, pg. 76). The psycho killer usually has a relatively clear motive for committing their murders, such as revenge or jealousy or some sort of determined psychological disorder. However, despite the fact that the actions of this antagonist deal with matters of the psyche, it typically would not be a character found in a psychological thriller. Indeed, the psycho killer is most often found in horror or "slasher films" which are quite different than the psychological thriller. Horror films deal much more often with matters of the body, whereas psychological thrillers focus more heavily on matters of the mind, with bodily matters simply becoming a symptom of the victimization of the psyche.

The topic of the psycho killer creates an interesting discussion, and further depicts the nuances of the psychological thriller. A character that exhibits psychological disorders does not necessarily make a psychological thriller; indeed, it is the manner in which the psychological disorder is addressed that makes a psychological thriller.

## **Alfred Hitchcock**

While the average filmgoer may struggle to identify the psychological thriller, they would certainly be more likely to be able to name an Alfred Hitchcock film. Hitchcock has been deemed one of the most influential film directors of all time and is known as "the Master of Suspense". His films often deal with mysteries surrounding psychopathic characters and events,

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<sup>3</sup> Other examples of films that depict themes of paranoia and mental health that ultimately work against the audience include David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). Since the story is told through the perspective of Edward Norton's character (an unnamed narrator), the diegesis is then through his forced perspective and the audience, by default, experiences the world through his perspective. However, in this case, our narrator is unreliable due to his schizophrenia/ Dissociative Identity Disorder. Therefore, a character we were made to believe exists does not actually exist, and the entire perspective of the film transforms as a result of discovering this.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of films with psycho killers/criminals whose mental states are addressed include Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2016), Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Within the context of these films, we learn that the reason these crimes are committed is indicated or alluded to being a result of mental or psychological issues.

leaving the audience thrilled and thoroughly in suspense. Some of his most famous psychological thrillers include *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Psycho* (1960). Through the mise-en-scène, acting, cinematography, music, and sequencing, Hitchcock emphasizes psychology in his films and perpetuates and manipulates the theme of “psychosis, neurosis, and perversion” (Bellour, 2009, pg. 353). His films are incredibly important in the discussion of the deconstruction of this genre, as they paint the picture of the essence of the psychological thriller.

Like Aronofsky, Hitchcock is an auteur whose directing style is completely unique and totally recognizable. Hitchcock, himself, beautifully describes his perspective on director as auteur. He writes, “Film directors live with their pictures while they are being made. They are their babies just as much as an author’s novel is the offspring of his imagination. And that seems to make it all the more certain that when moving pictures are really artistic they will be created entirely by one man” (Douchet, 2009, pg. 2).

### **Controversy within the genre**

This dissertation does not mean to imply that a wavering mental health is inherently linked to violence or inability to control one’s actions. This discussion is based solely on cinema that dramatizes the image of mental health and psychology in order to create an interesting film, which can certainly be problematic in its own way. For example, M. Night Shyamalan’s 2016 film, *Split*, has received scrutiny for dramatizing and misrepresenting the image of dissociative identity disorder, or DID. Michael Nedelman writes about the misrepresentation of psychological disorders in films, and specifically focuses on Shyamalan’s problematic depiction of someone with DID. In his article entitled *What Shyamalan's 'Split' gets wrong about dissociative identity disorder*, Nedelman writes, “Many films and TV shows feature characters with dissociative identity disorder. Mental health advocates have criticized many of them for sensationalizing a diagnosis, often in horror movies and thrillers, that affects many people” (Nedelman, 2017). Critics argue that psychological disorders are rarely depicted in media, so when mainstream films misrepresent them and perpetuate negative stereotypes, this representation subsequently does much more harm than good.

*Time To Change*, an organization and movement that focuses on the representation of mental health, and whose slogan reads “let’s end mental health discrimination,” addresses the stigmas and negative stereotypes of mental health that are often depicted in media. In their film report on the representation of mental health in mainstream media entitled *Screen Madness*, they discuss the four most prominent depictions of mental health in films since the 1940s.

## Four stereotypes of people with mental health problems in mainstream cinema

Comedy	
They Might Be Giants (1971) High Anxiety (1977) Caligari's Cure (1983) Lovesick (1983) Critical Condition (1986) Fat Guy Goes Nutzoid (1986) Beyond Therapy (1987) Couch Trip (1988) Dream Team (1989) Crazy People (1990)	Loose Cannons (1990) Another You (1991) Mr Jones (1993) Shine (1996) Trigger Happy (1996) As Good As It Gets (1997) Analyse This (1999) Me, Myself and Irene (2000) Analyse That (2002) Wristcutters, A Love Story (2006)
Faking & Indulgent	
Shock Corridor (1963) Sex and the Single Girl (1964) Brainstorm (1965) King Lear (1971, 1999) One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)	Hannah and her Sisters (1986) Final Analysis (1992) Hamlet (1996, 2000) Primal Fear (1996) Happiness (1998)
Pity	
Now Voyager (1942) Bedlam (1946) Leave Her To Heaven (1946) Possessed (1947) The Snake Pit (1948) The Cobweb (1955) Bigger Than Life (1956) Suddenly Last Summer (1959)	Splendour in the Grass (1961) One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) Ordinary People (1980) Frances (1982) Angel at My Table (1990) Mad Love (1995) Shine (1996) What Dreams May Come (1998)
Violence	
<b>(1) Psychosis as violence</b> White Heat (1949) Repulsion (1965) Taxi Driver (1975) The Shining (1980) Full Metal Jacket (1987) Misery (1990) Clean Shaven (1993) Heavenly Creatures (1994) Butterfly Kiss (1995) Butcher Boy (1997) Disco Pigs (2002) Spider (2002) Asylum (2005) Murder Inside of Me (2005) Bug (2006)	<b>(2) Psychokiller films</b> Psycho (1960), 4 sequels, 1 remake Madhouse (1974) The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), 5 remakes Schizo (1976) Halloween (1978), 7 sequels, 1 remake Friday the Thirteenth (1980), 11 sequels Schizoid (1980) Nightmare on Elm Street (1984), 7 sequels The Stepfather (1987), 2 sequels / 2 remakes Silence of the Lambs (1991), 6 sequels / remakes Raising Cain (1992) Scream (1996), 2 sequels Identity (2003) Saw (2004), 4 sequels Wolf Creek (2005)

Indeed, it is clear that the discussion and representation of mental health in films is not new. Mental health is a represented theme that has been proven to entertain, but respectfully depicting this topic has rarely been a priority in mainstream media.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

Films that depict psychological disorders and psycho killers are often quite literal, creating thrills from an image that audiences tend to be much more familiar with, such as murderers with knives and “crazy” people committing acts of violence. Hitchcock’s films paint a much more recognizable picture of the psychological thriller, as his films were instrumental in creating an image altogether of this genre. Aronofsky’s work differs in this way, as it does not overtly advertise the genre in the way that Hitchcock does. Aronofsky’s take on psychological thrillers do not often deal with explicit psychological disorders or obvious antagonists; rather, they explore the image of a psychological battle with oneself. The fear, then, can come from a place

<sup>5</sup> These negative depictions of mental health are *especially* prominent in television. Some of these problematic depictions include *Criminal Minds* (2005), *Pretty Little Liars* (201), *13 Reasons Why* (2017), *Insatiable* (2018), and many more.

that is quite often exactly the opposite of a traditional psycho killer film; the source of the fear may be initially unknown, as the psychological battle is typically happening internally, the character fighting their own paranoia, fear, or confusion. Aronofsky's image of the psychological thriller often does not make the threat apparent to the audience, and keeps us guessing until the end of the film. Therefore, it is apparent that while there are many subgenres of the standard thriller genre, there are also many different elements of the psychological thriller that seemingly distribute these films into unique categories, due to their unique subject matter and representation of the psyche.

This description of the psychological thriller and an understanding of its place within the film industry will set a foundation for the next chapter, subsequently explaining and contextualizing the suffering that Aronofsky writes for his characters. While there are many kinds of suffering that will be discussed, one of the most prominent kinds is of the psyche, which on screen translates as paranoia, fear, hallucinations, etc., which even further makes sense of the space that Aronofsky's films inhabit within the psychological thriller genre.

## Chapter 2: Suffering of the Characters

When we talk about the theme of suffering in Aronofsky's films, what does this actually mean? What *kind* of suffering is involved? And, what does suffering look like on screen? This dissertation will seek to explore these questions in further detail.

Aronofsky's work deals with various different modes of suffering. As discussed in the previous chapter, with his films that fall into the psychological thriller genre, one or more characters are typically suffering as a result of matters of the psyche. Often they will experience paranoia, delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, moments of fear or confusion, and many more matters of the mind that are often addressed through the narrative, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, acting, etc. Additionally, matters of the psyche can either be mentioned explicitly, not mentioned at all, or alluded to. Psychological suffering can be a result of actual psychological issues that have been intentionally addressed or intentionally *unaddressed*, or they simply might not even play a role in the suffering, as the psychological harm is not a result of any issues of the psyche. This dissertation will elaborate on this point later on and in much more detail. Another manner of suffering can be physical, which is to say suffering of the body; this physical suffering - actual bodily pain - is typically more tangible and clear-cut (no pun intended). This bodily harm can be self inflicted or done onto the character by another character or an outside factor. Emotional suffering is another facet of Aronofsky's work which is incredibly common, and this typically involves lots of crying or emotionally raw scenes. Emotional suffering can often be the result of another kind of suffering, so psychological, physical, or otherwise. Overall, these three modes of suffering tend to be the more prevalent in Aronofsky's work, and they will all be discussed in greater detail in later paragraphs. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the works of several theorists in order to contextualize Aronofsky's work; in particular, the work of Jennifer M. Barker and Tarja Laine will be used in tangent to explore the theme of suffering in cinema, as well as the way in which Aronofsky utilizes this theme to convey meaning.

Aronofsky's reliance upon the theme of suffering in his films is relevant both on-screen and off-screen, and these two factors heavily influence one another. This thematic utilization of suffering is one of the main reasons Aronofsky's place in the film industry has catapulted from director to auteur, as it became a theme that was almost synonymous with his work due to its relatively extreme qualities. In addition, this suffering serves as a way for the filmgoer to create a certain mind and body connection to the film, a concept that Barker explores in her book, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and The Cinematic Experience*. At its core, cinema that emphasizes pain, suffering, or anything related to the body can be known as "cinema of the senses" or "cinema of the body", which strongly emphasizes the "lived experience and sensation" (Laine, 2015, pg.1). Laine's definition of the term reads, "a sensuous bodily event that offers the spectator the chance to participate in it by means of its affective-aesthetic system" (Laine, 2015, pg. 2). Her book, *Bodies in Pain*, focuses specifically on the way in which Aronofsky uses this body cinema in his films in order to "engage the spectator's lived body by means of their sheer corporeal film style." This niche aspect of film can also be known as "cinema of the brutal intimacy", which certainly sums up the sort of work that Aronofsky is interested in.

The cinema of brutal intimacy [is] characterized by ‘bold stylistic experimentation’ and ‘a fundamental lack of compromise in its engagement with the viewer’, demanding ‘a viscerally engaged experiential participant’. Cinema of the body exploits the ability of the filmic medium to induce vivid, truculent sensations and unsettling aesthetic experiences. Thus, one cannot help but shiver in involuntary terror and pain when witnessing the feverish climax of Darren Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). Here, graphic scenes of sexual abuse interweave with physical and emotional torment, accompanied by images of decaying flesh.... Repulsive to watch, yet impossible to avert one’s eyes from, this climax is perhaps the ultimate instance of cinema of the body (ibid).<sup>6</sup>

This brutal intimacy falls under the category of contemporary French cinema, which theorist and film critic Tim Palmer considers to be the “unfiltered” cinema (Miller, 2011) in his work, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. His work discusses New French Extremity, or *cinéma du corps* (cinema of the body), which involves work such as body cinema and exploitative cinema. It is quite a controversial sort of cinema and is often criticized for being “disturbing” and “extreme” (Quandt, 2018), often depicting graphic scenes of violence and sex.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to see how Aronofsky engages with this kind of cinema, and whether or not he is knowingly engaging with it is up for debate. The visceral qualities of his films demonstrate his work with body cinema and brutal intimacy, subsequently making it impossible not to compare his films to that of this contemporary, New French Extremity sort of cinema. This chapter will attempt to explore the ways in which Aronofsky’s work elicits images and moments that make his work inherently similar in nature to this area of cinema.

While Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) is certainly a more extreme example of the brutal intimacy that can be found in body cinema, it successfully demonstrates his ability to engage with the audience in a way that elicits “unsettling aesthetic experiences” and subsequently depictions of suffering, which is virtually at the core of *cinéma du corps* and contemporary New French Extremity cinema. Indeed, this unsettling experience will be explored in more detail in several other examples of Aronofsky’s work.

It is not just the existence of pain as a theme in his films that is significant, nor the suffering involved in preparing for these roles; rather, this dissertation emphasizes the relationship between the two, and how one affects the other. Laine explains that the actor’s physical performance allows for the audience to understand the character’s complexities and individual attributes. She quotes Vivian Sobchack and discusses that,

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<sup>6</sup> As cited in Tim Palmer’s *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*.

<sup>7</sup> Some examples of New French Extremity films include *Baise-Moi* (2000) which involves scenes of explicit rape and sex scenes as well as violence, and *Raw* (2016), which tells the story of a student forced to cannibalism, which was deemed so violent and grotesque that audience members had to “reach for the barf bag”(Gabbatt, 2016) and were running out of the theaters in disgust.

It is the actor's lived body that makes the character intelligible, because the character's 'inner' experience is only manifest through the actor's 'outer' performance... the performance of the actors is incorporated into the film's performance. This means that there is reciprocity among their bodily energy, affect, rhythm, valence and the very same attributes of the film's aesthetic system... In *Black Swan*, Portman's performance embodies a doubling rather than an enactment of character, reciprocated by the film's digital aesthetics, in which a human is doubled by an animal. This is enhanced by 'actorly transformation', a self-imposed alteration of the body, which not only lends greater fidelity to Portman's performance, but also draws an analogy between Portman and self-mutilating dancer Nina in the film (Laine, 2015, pg. 3; 17).



Furthermore, Laine cites Elaine Scarry's philosophies of pain and uses it to discuss the notion of "bodies in pain", an idea that Laine views as "one of the most important themes in [Aronofsky's] work" (Laine, 2015, pg. 14). The depiction and reception of pain on screen is something that Aronofsky's work deals with heavily, and specifically how this pain is understood by audiences is an idea that both Laine and Scarry explore in their respective works. Laine writes, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language... physical pain [brings] about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned... In pain the body 'speaks' through affect, not through language" (15). While pain being depicted in films can be difficult to understand or contextualize due to this lack of language, Laine explains that specifically within Aronofsky's work, the concept of pain is *active*, not passive. It feels as if the acts of violence or harm are being done onto the audience, which explains why it has such an incredibly visceral effect on the audience. "In the cinema of Aronofsky, pain is not merely registered or expressed, but is part of the active, emotional

intentionality of the films. This results in the spectator being confronted by particularly strong sensations, or, in Scarry's terms, by a 'feeling of being acted upon'" (Laine, 2015, pg. 16).

Within the works of Aronofsky, the theme of suffering is particularly consistent and can be found within most of his films. Whether mental, emotional, or physical pain, audiences can expect Aronofsky's stories to revolve around the plight of his characters, which certainly suits the psychological thriller genre well. One of the very simple ways in which Aronofsky depicts this theme of suffering and pain is through the incorporation of a juxtaposition between violence and ballet. Ballet is typically regarded as an incredibly elegant and beautiful artform, its iconography surrounding ballet slippers, tutus, and dancers with slender bodies. The music is classical and soft and it is accompanied by pristine and intricate choreography. Aronofsky uses these stereotypes and perceived images of ballet to his advantage, and juxtaposes them with unexpected yet deliberately violent and grotesque images. He often includes severe jump cuts between images that make these moments much more jarring and subsequently more effective. This then further emphasizes the themes of suffering and pain, as they seem even more severe in contrast to ballet, an art form that typically drastically opposes these harsh images.

Aronofsky begins creating this juxtaposition from the beginning of the film. The film starts within a dream of Nina's in which she is dancing the part of the White Swan, surrounded by darkness. Nina is dressed in her white leotard and tutu, truly embodying the image of a pristine ballerina. However, Nina's solo quickly shifts tone, as Rorhbart, the villain of the show, appears and transforms into a half-human half-swan character. "There is an ethereal quality to this scene, mostly due to its cold blue lighting... But there is also a sense of eeriness, a lurking dread seeping into the image from the dark edges of the frame... He transforms into a monstrous bird, while the scene turns into a frenzied whirlwind" (Liane, 2015, pg. 131). Despite the fact that this dream would seem more like a nightmare to the average person, Nina wakes up with a great smile on her face. She later comments about having had a great dream and having been able to dance the prologue in it. We learn a lot about Nina's *pull* to this darkness, rather than fear of it. Aronofsky begins to insert juxtaposing images of violence and ballet through a simple gesture of Nina waking up, swinging her feet to the side of the bed, and stretching by cracking the bones in her feet. He intentionally includes this scene and emphasizes the loud sounds of the cracking, which is quite unsettling to the viewer. "When Nina wakes up at the beginning of the film, we see a close-up of her feet loosening up emphatic cranks on the soundtrack" (Laine, 2015, pg. 132). Aronofsky seems to love his sound effects - an overemphasis of sound effects is an easy way to create a very effective visceral response. This quick and seemingly insignificant scene actually serves as a means of foreshadowing the rest of the film, and that there are more unsettling moments to come. "This same sense of lurking dread noticeable in the opening scene remains present throughout the film as a negative, sensuous undercurrent below the surface of events" (ibid).



Aronofsky seems quite interested in bodily mechanisms and physical conflicts, such as ballet or wrestling. He incorporates various scenes that show the behind-the-scenes of ballet, such as the choreography preparation, the costume fittings, the strict dieting and eating disorders that are often associated with ballet, and even an unscripted physical therapy scene of Portman's that Aronofsky decided to film and include in the film and use as a diegetic moment. These scenes are the often unseen - the ugly sides of ballet, as it were. And interestingly, there isn't anything particularly cinematic or fictional about these moments. Aronofsky deliberately chooses to incorporate these scenes because, not only do they give the audience a more candid look into the world of ballet, they emphasise the truly visceral moments that are inherently tied to ballet. Aronofsky seems particularly interested in mediums that show a direct conflict between body and mind, creating a tangible tension. Indeed, this interest is not expressed solely through the narrative, but through the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography.

[Aronofsky] is fond of cinematic techniques that aim at sensorial and bodily engagement. There are hip-hop montages with accompanying sound effects (scratching, sampling). He often uses extremely tight framing, lengthy follow shots, and SnorriCam. He also alternates between extreme close-ups and extreme long shots to create a sense of isolation... In *Black Swan* (2010), painted, photorealistic images of a baby bird's skin and quills has to be tracked digitally to an actress's arm, while a camera vividly rotated around her body during the climax of the film (Laine, 2015, pg. 2).

Jennifer M. Barker explores the link between film theory and the visceral qualities of cinema in her book, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. In it, she discusses the "meaningful, material link between mind and body" and the extent to which "exploring cinema's tactility thus opens up the possibility of cinema as an *intimate experience* and of our relationship with cinema as a *close connection*, rather than as a distant experience of observation" (Barker, 2009, pgs 1-2). When Barker discusses the idea of tactility, she describes it as an intimate mode of contact that involves expression and perception and a

physical and bodily commitment to a “relationship with the world”. Indeed, this sense of tactility can be understood and felt by the filmgoer if a film is able to successfully create a sense of tangibility, which Barker calls “cinematic tactility”. In her definition of cinematic tactility, she explains the importance of an interaction with the film haptically, kinaesthetically, and muscularly, ultimately making the content matter much more intimate, and allowing for the filmgoer to relate to the film and by creating a link between mind and body. This sort of cinema makes it feel as though there isn’t a screen in between the audience and the narrative, and that the filmgoer is directly experiencing what they are watching. Laine discusses a similar ideology, and explains that although the events happening in the film are not being experienced by the filmgoer, this does not mean that their experience of watching the events on screen are passive. She uses Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* as an example, and contextualizes this ideology with the infamous ending of the film, one of the most severe examples of suffering not only within Aronofsky’s films, but perhaps in all of modern cinema. Laine writes,

The overwhelming experience of watching *Requiem for a Dream* does not equate to passivity, since the spectator’s affect remains continually directed towards the film, or rather, it is bound up or formed in tandem with the film. A truly passive response would be a lethargic, apathetic one, insofar as lethargy and apathy are the opposites of activity and motion... Even being humiliated does not equal being passively at the mercy of this negative experience; rather, it is to be situated inside the film’s ‘force-field’ as a weakened, overwhelmed emotion agent (Laine, 2015, pg. 71).

And indeed, this analogy of watching particularly disturbing scenes of suffering feeling like the sensation of a force-field is quite accurate; the experience of watching an Aronofsky film, in particular, can often feel as though you cannot look away from the screen, as the desire to see what happens next overpowers the disturbing qualities of the film. There is a somewhat of a satisfaction and enjoyment of spectating, despite the extent of the suffering. When a filmgoer watches something disturbing or violent on screen, no matter how disturbing it is, there is always a degree of separation from the events on screen. If a film becomes too scary or too violent, the filmgoer can simply look away, and choose to return their gaze back to the screen when they are ready. Thus, the suffering witnessed in Aronofsky’s films will always have an entertainment value, as our voyeuristic tendencies encourage us to watch what is on the screen, but our mind and body connection to it can become so overwhelming and tactile that we can look away whenever need be.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon is the same idea behind why people love roller coasters or being scared. When for the sake of entertainment, scary or violent things will always involve a degree of separation because we know it is not real, and as real as it may seem, the value of entertainment will always be present. Even our biology support this phenomenon: “When a scary event happens, the brain releases a number of chemicals that set off the ‘fight or flight’ responses. Dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine are among those chemicals, people may experience as exhilarating, or even pleasurable... this person is then prepared to fight, flee... or just scream and laugh after a good scare” (Office of Public Affairs, 2017).

Baker explains that the reasons cinema has such a deep connection with the human body is because cinema was founded on images of the *body in motion*, as some of the first films were born out of amusement parks and showed roller coasters and various other physical attractions. The only similar artform that existed before cinema was photography, which obviously did not involve movement; cinema was the first artform that could create moving images, therefore films truly emphasized the ability of the medium to showcase things that could move. Baker writes, “The choice of subject matter of the earliest films underscores the fascination (of its makers and its audiences) with the body. Violence and sexuality, in the forms of boxing matches and titillating dance numbers, were extraordinarily represented in early exhibition programs” (Laine, 2009, pg. 132). This particular quotation struck me as quite interesting and very relevant to this dissertation. Indeed, Aronofsky’s work also reflects his interest in the moving body and mechanism, as depicted through many of his films, including *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*. These two films represent images of fighting and dancing, which Baker explains were the quintessential beginnings of the moving image and bodies in motion.

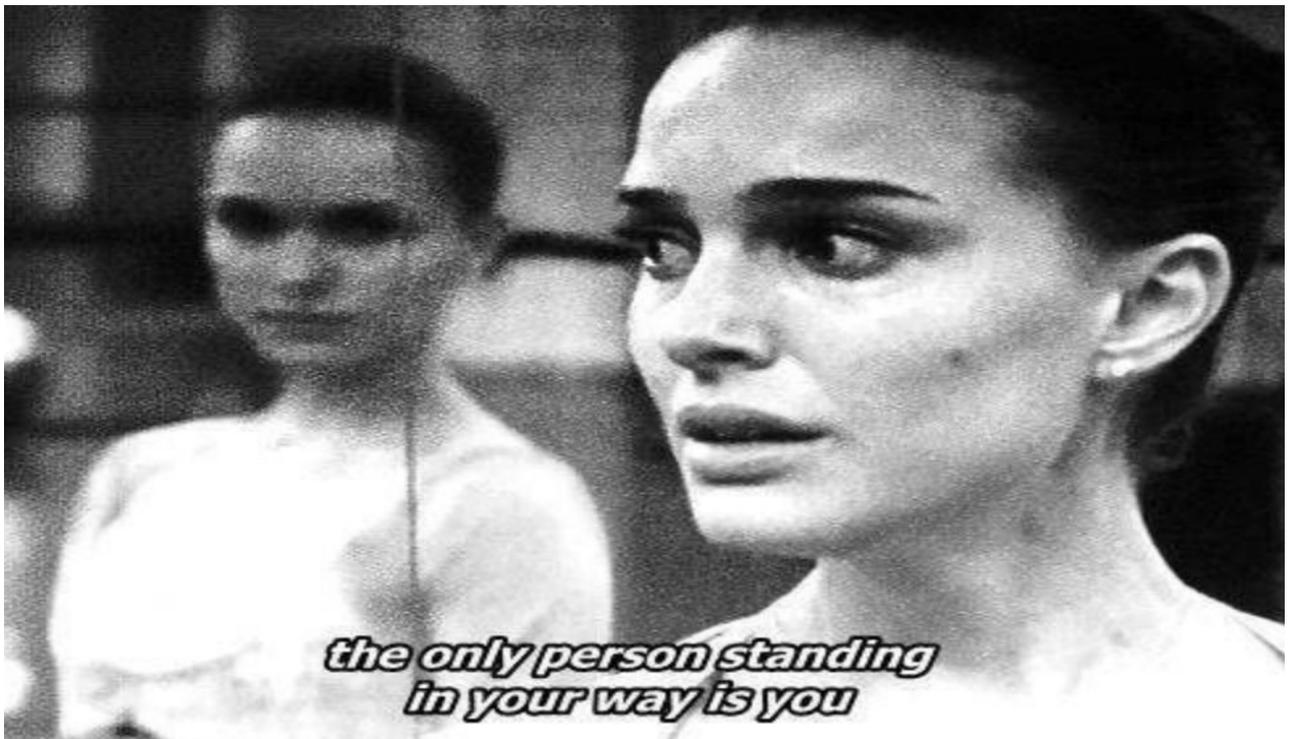


This tactility is not always a beautiful spectacle; the intimacy experienced is not necessarily a positive one. Tactility can simply elicit a sense of touch or a connection to the senses, which can certainly include violence or gore. Images of the body, blood, and skin can be seen throughout the entirety of *Black Swan*, strongly emphasizing the film’s visceral qualities. We learn from the beginning of the film that Nina has a habit of picking at the skin on her back, which seems to always be bleeding or scabbing whenever it is checked up on. She then develops a cut on her finger which she is constantly picking and pulling at, which even involves a scene in which Nina hallucinates that she completely pulls the skin up her finger. While dancing, she severely cracks one of her toenails (which, of course, the filmgoer cannot know for

certain if this injury is a hallucination or not.) In *The Wrestler*, the majority of the film explores the body in motion, and it gets quite violent as a result of the wrestling. We see scenes throughout the entire film of violence, blood, fighting, wounds, etc. Aronofsky does not shy away from showing these injuries in detail, even further conveying the body cinema and visceral qualities of the film. And, both films ends up in dramatic suicide, both involving the very similarly styled suicides as well: “The Wrestler and Black Swan end in a climax insinuating the death of the main character. However, both Randy in *The Wrestler* and Nina in *Black Swan* are driven to their respective final performances as acts of liberation and reconciliation of conflicting forces shaping their lives. They both accept their deaths as the final victory of their lives” (Skorin-Kapov, 2015, pg. xxvi). Therefore, it is clear that Aronofsky’s work highlights the body in motion and the visceral and tangible qualities of his films which ultimately create a link between mind and body, subsequently allowing for the audience to experience a sense of intimacy, tactility, and voyeuristic tendency to watch the events on screen empathetically.

Through both her dancing obsession as well as the suffocating parenting style of her mother, Nina’s hallucinations leave the audience guessing until the very last minute of the film what is real and what is not. Nina is an incredibly obsessive character, a trait that most of Aronofsky’s female protagonists share. “On a thematic level, Aronofsky’s films are also marked by his constant interest in severely obsessive characters. Their obsessions often lead to a sensuous and affective shutdown that disturbs the relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ words of these characters” (Laine, 2015, pg. 6). Despite her meek and shy outward persona, she is strong and dedicated to the art that she loves.

The use of conflict themes serves as another way to convey the suffering of the psyche. As mentioned previously, Aronofsky often relies upon the conflict of Man versus Self in order to portray the way in which psychological thrillers can involve characters battling with themselves, or their own psyche. However, Man versus Self can easily morph into other conflict themes, especially within the work of Aronofsky. For example, Man (or Woman) versus Man is very relevant in Aronofsky’s work. *Black Swan* manipulates this conflict theme interestingly through Nina’s constant paranoia and fear that Lily, her competitor dancer, is after her, for both her role and her life. There are scenes throughout the entire film of Nina and Lily being confused for one another or of the two morphing into one another, a theme that depicts the narrative found within *Swan Lake* itself, as Odette and Odile (our respective Nina and Lily) look identical and are meant to be confused for one another. This identical casting serves as a way to convey the idea that the Black Swan and the White Swan are ultimately the same person, as Odette represents the White Swan and Odile is the Black Swan. Therefore, Man versus Man and Man versus Self are virtually interchangeable within the narrative of *Black Swan*, as Nina is constantly switching between fighting with herself, fighting with Lily, or a mix of hallucinations that make it unclear as to who exactly she is fighting.



## Conclusion

This previous chapter discusses the ways in which Aronofsky explores the theme of suffering in his script and represents it as somewhat of its own entity and character as a whole. Through the manipulation of the mise-en-scène, cinematography, acting, and various other cinematic qualities, the characters within the narratives of Aronofsky's films are staunchly victimized by a

diegesis of suffering and pain. Whether psychological, physical, or otherwise, Aronofsky's films are propelled and moved by this suffering and, while at times difficult to watch, create a beautiful and compelling story that allow us to feel as though the barrier is removed between us and the screen. This influx of emotion can be a result of a cathartic and empathetic connection to the characters, or perhaps a visceral and aggressive repulsion from the images on the screen. Indeed, the next chapter will turn focus on the suffering that the actors must endure in order to prepare for their respective roles in the world of Aronofsky's realm of suffering.

### Chapter 3: Suffering of the Actors

*“It is the actor’s lived body that makes the character intelligible, because the character’s ‘inner’ experience is only manifest through the actor’s ‘outer’ performance” (Laine, 2015, pg. 3).*

The suffering within Aronofsky’s films is not simply limited to the diegesis or the cinematography; one of the characteristics of Aronofsky’s auteurship comes from the suffering that is often tied to the actresses’ preparation for the role. Because of the extent of the suffering and pain of the characters within Aronofsky’s films, the actresses often put themselves through incredibly demanding preparation, usually of physical, emotional, and/or mental means. However, despite the fact that virtually *all* of Aronofsky’s films involve themes of suffering, it is typically the women that suffer more dramatically in order to prepare for their roles and to be able to truly embody the suffering of their characters. Indeed, the women within his films are notoriously known for the arduous work that goes into their role preparation, which is one of the most significant elements of Aronofsky’s auteurship. Many directors have developed their auteurship exclusively through the notorious treatment of their actors and crew. While this mistreatment can be considered harsh, many people view it simply as a means to creating art.

Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most well-known examples of an auteur who significantly mistreated his actors, and has famously said that “all actors should be treated as cattle”. However, while both men and women have been known to be mistreated on set, actresses tend to be the ones who are targeted most frequently. For example, Hitchcock notoriously treated Tippi Hedren terribly, specifically during the making of *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964). “Hitchcock was an inwardly-tortured master manipulator who became a despot towards actresses like Tippi Hedren for whom he felt a simultaneous attraction and repulsion” (Garrett, 1999, pg. 78). Allegedly, on the set of *The Birds*, Hitchcock replaced the fake birds with live birds during scenes in which Hedren’s character was attacked, supposedly as a way to elicit a genuine reaction of fear from her. In her book, *Tippi: A Memoir* (2016), Hedren discusses the extent to which she felt that Hitchcock was “obsessed” with her, and what a horror it was working with him. She even claims she was sexually assaulted by Hitchcock on the set of *Marnie* and in several other occasions, but he was too much of a powerful force in the industry for her to tell anyone. “Studios were the power. And I was at the end of that, and there was absolutely nothing I could do legally whatsoever. There were no laws about this kind of a situation. If this had happened today, I would be a very rich woman” (Evans, 2016).

Stanley Kubrick has also been known for his mistreatment of his crew, often making actors redo entire scenes hundreds of times. Actress Vinessa Shaw speaks about her experience working with Kubrick and the excessive reshoots that were involved. She says, “I remember, one time, around three in the morning, I did my sixty-ninth take of a scene... and then I ended up doing twenty more” (Kagan, 1972, pg. 236). Most famously, Kubrick mistreated Mary Shelley in the making of *The Shining* (1980). In an interview with film critic Roger Ebert, Shelley spoke about her experience on the set of *The Shining* and working with Kubrick. She says,

Jack Nicholson's character had to be crazy and angry all the time. And in my character, I had to cry 12 hours a day, all day long, the last nine months straight, five or six days a week... During the day I would have been absolutely miserable. After all that work, hardly anyone even criticized my performance in it, even to mention it, it seemed like. The reviews were all about Kubrick like I wasn't there (Ebert, 1980).



While the mistreatment of actors is never commendable, some people argue that this treatment ultimately exists as a way to create art and elicit genuine reactions from the actors. There are many other directors whose mistreatment of their actors subsequently lead to incredibly moving performances, ultimately deeming said directors “artistic auteurs”; some of these directors include Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, Lars Von Trier, and Quentin Tarantino (Braudy, 1976). Directors of psychological thrillers are particularly known for this mistreatment, as their content usually warrants intense preparation as a result of the narrative and protagonists dealing with psychological issues. Indeed, on screen performance heavily affects off screen performance, and vice versa. Laine explores this relationship between on and off screen performance: she writes, “Acting and performance apart, it is the particular ‘hybrid’ quality of his films that has made Aronofsky famous. He blurs the line between fantasy and reality” (2015, pg. 3). This chapter will discuss the suffering that is often linked to his films and the process that his actresses have endured in order to prepare for these emotionally taxing characters.

While this dissertation seeks to argue that the suffering endured by women in Aronofsky's films is quite different than that of men's, and, in some cases, even more severe, it is not to say that women are the only ones to suffer at the hand of Aronofsky's work; his films predominantly surround themes of suffering, therefore most of the characters in his films endure pain as a

result, including the male characters. For example, Mickey Rourke in *The Wrestler* endured quite a physically arduous journey in order to prepare for this role as Randy “The Ram” Robinson, a mega-fit professional wrestler. In regards to his preparation for the role, Laine writes, “Rourke’s physical on-screen performance in *The Wrestler* (2009) becomes the vehicle for the protagonist’s masochistic exposure and self-deception in and through interaction with the cinematic aesthetic, e.g. the setting, the close-ups” (2015, pg. 3). *The Wrestler* is certainly no stranger to pain; suffering is a hugely significant theme in this film. The entire story surrounds the lives of wrestlers and the pain they endure for their work. Laine describes the film as being “masochistic” in nature, as pain is glorified and only the strongest of the bunch prevail. There is one particular scene where the (diegetic) audience literally demands pain from the wrestlers in the ring, chanting and screaming for it louder and louder; both the diegetic and nondiegetic audiences are, as Laine puts it, “positionally conscious of [their] own responsibility as spectators of pain” (2015, pg. 101).

In an MTV interview about the preparation that went into Mickey Rourke’s role as “The Ram”, Rourke speaks about the work and training that was involved. The interviewer asks Rourke to explain if he had known that he was getting himself into such a “raw” performance, to which Rourke explains that Aronofsky was a huge part of the process, and that he often pushed him into channeling his inner wrestler. He explains, “Every bone in my body vibrated. Darren would go, ‘Let’s do it again!’ I was like, “Give me five f---ing minutes to relax!’ Here’s a guy whose only exercise he ever did was lifting his fork to his mouth, and he’s going, ‘C’mon, Mickey, you’re only giving me 50 percent!’ That’s part of his thing, to push my buttons” (Horowitz, 2008). Rourke then goes on to discuss the physical training that was involved, and seems less than phased about the whole process. He explains that his trainer made him “pump iron and do cardio” and that it usually consisted of two hours of weight training, followed by two hours of wrestling practice. Rourke deemed this entire process the “easy stuff.” Indeed, despite the no doubt incredibly arduous and physically taxing training Rourke experienced in order to prepare for this role, he seemed incredibly unphased by it, and was overall praised for his ability to bulk up so quickly. The training process seemed quite standard to him, and it ultimately led to him being proudly fit and bulked up.

Rourke’s experience training for his role as “The Ram” is similar to Christian Bale’s preparation for his role in *The Machinist* (2004), yet not quite as severe. Bale apparently had to lose 62 pounds for the role, which was a huge topic of conversation when the film came out. This weight loss led to his character appearing incredibly emaciated, in order to perpetuate the character’s paranoia and delusion. When talking about his role preparation, Bale seems to exude incredible pride. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he says, “It’s an amazing experience doing that. When you’re so skinny that you can hardly walk up a flight of stairs ... you’re, like, this being of pure thought. It’s like you’ve abandoned your body... That’s the most Zen-like state I’ve ever been in my life. Two hours sleep, reading a book for 10 hours straight without stopping ... unbelievable. You couldn’t rile me up. No rollercoaster of emotions.... As soon as you start putting the food back in your stomach, the roller coaster comes back” (Carroll, 2018). While an experience like

this might sound traumatic to the average person, Bale talks about it like it was just another weight loss program; he is proud of the experience and the work he did to prepare for his role.



Bale's dramatic weight loss exists as an interesting contrast to Natalie Portman's weight loss for *Black Swan*. While Bale's body transformation seemed to be a difficult, yet relatively positive experience for him, Portman's was one that she says almost killed her. She claims that she was "barely eating" and "working 16 hour days" in order to lose the weight that was required to look like the emaciated ballerina that Aronofsky envisioned for the character; in the end, she lost nearly 20 pounds, which was quite a significant amount of Portman's already very slender body. During her preparation, she sustained many injuries, some of which she was forced to ignore and continue to dance on in order to proceed with filming. This interestingly overlaps with the diegetic injuries her character also endures and ignores so as to keep up her dancing. In an interview with NPR, Portman explains, "Real dancers dance with such incredible injuries that you wouldn't even believe. It's a nightmare for them to be replaced once they've made it to the top and they get these roles. [So] they will dance with a sprained ankle or torn plantar fascia or twisted necks just to make sure they can keep their moment" (NPR, 2010). Aronofsky's work has a way of melding with real life; There is almost an uncanny sense of discomfort for the audience when watching the suffering in Aronofsky's films, as it can be difficult to separate the diegetic from the nondiegetic suffering. While Nina was enduring pain and greatly suffering in order to keep her role as the Swan Queen, Portman was simultaneously enduring great pain in order to pursue her part as Nina, and was very aware of the fact that if she was not willing to put up with this level of suffering, someone else would. In addition, it was not only a physically strenuous experience for Portman; it also pushed her emotionally and mentally, due to the

psychological elements of the film. Portman told the Independent about the emotionally and mentally taxing experience of preparing for her role as Nina; she says, “It was the first time I understood how you could get so wrapped up in a role that it could sort of take you down” (Judd and Taylor, 2011).



Jennifer Lawrence claims that her role as the woman (who is nameless) in Aronofsky’s *mother!* (2017) was one of her most challenging roles yet.<sup>9</sup> The film tells the story of a couple dealing with a series of uninvited guests showing up at their home, subsequently challenging and questioning their relationship. However, this synopsis is arguably oversimplifying the film, as it was considered an incredibly confusing and hard to follow story as a result of the symbolism and avant garde allegories. Even some of the actors, themselves, struggle to explain to overall meaning of the film. *mother!* was harshly scrutinized for its confusing and disturbing content.<sup>10</sup> And while the film certainly does contain some incredibly interesting and meaningful moments, it is no secret that it follows the standard Aronofsky format in that there are various moments of the film that are incredibly hard to watch. Lawrence claims that this film pushed her more than she had ever been pushed in a film, which was a result of the difficult content matter, as well as Aronofsky’s abrasive and controlling directorial style. Lawrence says, “I never lose myself in a movie. [mother!] is the only time I’ve lost myself. I couldn’t tell my body that none of it was real. I

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that sections of this dissertation will be quite interview heavy as a result of Aronofsky’s films being on the newer side, and therefore there are not as many academic pieces written about them; this is particularly relevant in the case of *mother!* as it was released just last year, and therefore there is a significant lack of academic pieces written about it.

<sup>10</sup> The BBC called it “a pretentious mess”; The Telegraph called it “shocking”; Forbes called it an “utterly tasteless nightmare”.

kept on hyperventilating... I don't regret it. I'm happy I did it. If I had to do it again? If there was a *mother!* sequel? No. I wouldn't be able to do it again. I did it once and I gave it my all." (Female First, 2018). She then tells of a specific circumstance in which Aronofsky's directorial style specifically added to the tension and anxiety of filming. Lawrence explains, "I was in the medical unit with oxygen up my nose and [Darren]'s like, 'It was out of focus, we gotta do it again.' I was like, you are making me go to a place that you have never been. I just wanted to get out and finish it. It's scary not being able to control yourself" (Khosla, 2017). It is clear that Aronofsky tendency to write stories that involve the suffering of characters, particularly women, is one of his directorial qualities that makes him an auteur. He focuses on creating an artistic and beautiful film, and he uses his actors to achieve this, despite any blatant mistreatment. Aronofsky responds to this idea and attempts to defend himself when he explains that, "part of acting is finding emotions and finding places to go that are extreme because that's the stories we tell" (Female First, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

It seems that despite the difficult roles that men are meant to prepare for, the physical preparation in which they partake is an experience of pride for them; their psyche does not seem to be nearly as much of a factor as it is for women, especially within the work of Aronofsky. Conversely, women are expected to endure the physical aspects of role preparation as well as the mental and emotional. I believe that this is a result of the roles that men are chosen for typically demanding more physical acting that emotional or psychological, based on the narratives that surround these male characters. Even within Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, and the infamous final scene, Jared Leto and Marlon Wayans' characters endure incredibly traumatic bodily pain, whereas Jennifer Connelly and Ellen Burstyn characters not only endure physical trauma, but they are left to deal with the emotional and mental baggage of the trauma they endured. Indeed, these inconsistencies perpetuate the false narrative that men are the stronger of the sexes and are more able to handle physical stresses, whereas women are typically expected to endure mental or emotional stresses, which can typically have incredibly long lasting effects and are often harder to diagnose than a physical abrasion.

Society perpetuates the stereotype that men are meant to bulk up and be strong, whereas women are expected to lose weight and be as small as possible, subsequently taking up less space both physically and metaphorically. While the film industry has not created this stereotype, it often supports it by depicting it in mainstream media. In the context of society, "Girls are also taught to take up less space, to cross their legs, and to smile more often" (Martin, 1998, pg. 498). These bodily expectations of female actresses perpetuate the notion that women are meant to be looked at and gazed upon as spectacles, and that the appearance and physicality matter more than their wellbeing.

## Final Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to explore the way in which Darren Aronofsky's utilisation of the theme of suffering has revealed his image of the female experience in his films. This work has analysed the status of the auteur and the qualities that transform a mere director into an infamous auteur. Aronofsky's status as auteur has been explored and compared to other auteurs; through his controlled and recognizable directorial style and cinematographical choices; the challenging and arguably problematic ways in which he interacts with his actors; his thematic choices to the diegetic and non-diegetic suffering that is inherently linked to his work; Aronofsky has created his own niche within the film industry through his interaction with the mediums of film and art, ultimately working as a way to subsequently validate his title as auteur.

In order to fully understand Aronofsky's work, his standard film genre was analyzed so as to understand the space that his films typically inhabit within the film industry. The psychological thriller is not the most easily understood genre, and audiences can even struggle to identify it. However, this chapter dissected the genre and its space within the film industry, as well as qualities that make it more identifiable.

Finally, the core of this dissertation existed in the analysis of the way in which Aronofsky wrote the theme of suffering into his work, and the way his characters interacted with this theme. The excessive amount of suffering that is found within Aronofsky's work ultimately has deemed lots of the work - particularly his films within the psychological thriller genre - especially disturbing and difficult to watch, such as *Requiem for a Dream* and *mother!*. These rather experimental yet objectively mainstream films depict quite abstract ideas and imagery that leave viewers unsure of how to respond to what they are watching; these audience reactions subsequently work as a way to identify Aronofsky's authorship and set a tone for the kind of films he is known for. His cinematic utilization of a brutal intimacy style of film is reminiscent of a sort of *cinéma du corps* of contemporary French cinema, or more specifically, of the New French Extremity movement, relying on daring yet controversial content that illicit visceral reactions to the images on the screen. Moreover, the reason that Aronofsky's characters *do* illicit such strong reactions from the audience is a result of the actors who are playing said characters.

The suffering that Aronofsky seeks to represent can only be achieved by actors who are willing to put themselves through intense preparation, which is exactly what this dissertation has observed, through actors such as Natalie Portman and Jennifer Lawrence. While there is certainly a degree of suffering involved for the male actors in Aronofsky films - and male actors in the psychological thriller genre as a whole - this work has explored the extent to which the suffering experienced by the actresses is simply more drastic than that of the men. The research within this work argues that this gendered suffering is a result of gender norms enforced by society and encouraged by the film industry; while men are celebrated for bulking up and getting stronger, their physical experiences of role preparation being ones of pride, the experience of preparing for psychologically damaged characters is one that challenges these actresses to the point of unhealthy means, both on their bodies and psyches. Women are

encouraged - and expected - to lose weight, which is as a means to fulfill both societal norms of becoming aesthetically pleasing spectacles at which to gaze, but also as a means to take up as little space as possible, both physically and metaphorically. Overall, this dissertation has explored the extent to which this on-screen suffering leads to off-screen suffering, and *visa versa*.

### **Is Aronofsky's work feminist?**

This dissertation has sought to explore the overall meaning behind Aronofsky's work, both diegetically and non-diegetically; both in front of and behind the camera. As a result, it has become quite clear that Aronofsky is certainly interested in the writing and telling stories about women. That being said, the question stands: can Aronofsky's work be considered feminist?

When it comes to dissecting whether a film can be interpreted as feminist, there are various stages of criteria. First and foremost, and perhaps at the most basic level, we can use the Bechdel Test as a way to analyse the extent of a film's feminist qualities. "The Bechdel Test was named after the cartoonist Alison Bechdel who first thought it up in her comic strip *The Rule* in 1985" (Ghoshal, 2018). It demands three basic questions be asked:

- 1) Are there two or more women in the movie, and do they have names?
- 2) Do these women talk to each other?
- 3) If/when they do talk to each other, are they speaking about something other than a man?

These three questions are incredibly basic and straightforward, yet it is shocking how many films simply do not pass the test. However, some people consider this test quite limiting, and argue that it is not the most effective way of analysing a film's feminist qualities. In fact, even films that *do* pass the Bechdel Test test still might not be truly feminist, due to the incredibly low standards of a feminist films within the industry. However, based on this criteria, some of Aronofsky's films would pass The Bechdel Test, including *Black Swan* and *mother!*. Some of his films may include female characters, and they might even be main characters, but they typically do not pass the other criteria required.

Beyond the scope of the Bechdel Test, one could argue that Aronofsky's films with female protagonists could be considered feminist because the leading ladies are strong, passionate, devoted, and overall command a presence on screen. The women assert themselves, they make mistakes, and they are active agents in their own lives. Aronofsky is clearly quite interested in telling the stories of women, and this inherent interest in the female story could be viewed as feminist simply as a stand-alone factor. However, while his stories are certainly female focused, this is about the only kind of diversity Aronofsky can boast; his films are unfortunately incredibly white-centric and heterosexual. There has yet to be a female protagonist of color or of any other sexual orientation. This would imply that there is a serious lack of *intersectional* feminism within his films, which is to say that the only sort of feminism that seems to exist highlights straight, white, cis-women. This is problematic because his work is

then turning a blind eye to a much larger population of underrepresented minorities and marginalized communities. This lack of diversity does not mean that Aronofsky is necessarily homophobic, transphobic, racist, or intentionally underrepresenting any identification; rather, it is simply a dangerous trend that we are seeing in mainstream media that Aronofsky seems to be following by default, and it needs to be addressed. That being said, to speak further about these issues surrounding race, gender, and sexuality would be beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In order to tell the female-driven stories that Aronofsky seems so interested in, Aronofsky puts his leading ladies through a significant amount of pain and suffering. While I see this as a sign of strength and feminism, as his films portray facing adversity and fighting through the pain, it could also be argued that the extent to which Aronofsky puts these women through such suffering is in fact *not* feminist, but instead problematic. However, I see this perspective as being quite limiting; suffering on screen should not inherently be problematic. This suffering is much more meaningful than mere bodily pain. Aronofsky's work does not exist as a way to show women suffering as a means of fetishism or pleasure; there are many ways to depict suffering, such as the way in which *50 Shades of Grey* demonstrates a relationship of BDSM which was ultimately misinformed and problematic. The way in which Aronofsky engages with the theme of suffering is one that reveals higher meanings about the experience of being a woman, and the alienation that women often feel as a result of the suffering they experience. The depiction of women suffering can serve as a commentary on contemporary culture and how women inherently suffer as a result of bodily pains such as menstruation, childbirth, etc, but also pains that extend past the body, such as sexism, rape culture, unequal pay in the workplace, and so much more. Within the work of Aronofsky, the theme of suffering is manipulated so as to speak about the link between being a woman and the suffering that is inherently involved.

Film does not exist in a vat; it is not exempt from contemporary culture or society. Film is an active member and participant of modern culture and as such, its content will reflect what is relevant in the status quo. Whether intentional or not, Aronofsky's films reflect the experience of being a woman in a society of third wave feminism. For example, *Black Swan* and *mother!* both involve women experiencing paranoia and fear. Throughout the entirety of both films, these women make accusations and claims about their safety and about what they believe they are experiencing, and yet they are constantly dismissed, not believed, and are deemed crazy. This idea could be applied to lots of films within the psychological thriller genre, as any content dealing with matters of the psyche will consequently involve content including accusations and paranoia. This theme of women not being believed could certainly exist as a commentary about rape culture and the #MeToo movement. Women have historically suffered at the hand of rape culture and a society of victim blaming and not taking rape accusations seriously. It is so often that women make rape claims are not believed, and that men's words are believed more than that of women. This has become such a serious issue that it has developed into a worldwide movement called the #MeToo movement, in which sexual assault victims have used that hashtag as a way to come together in solidarity to bring attention to the epidemic of sexual assault and rape. Therefore, the theme of suffering and paranoia within Aronofsky's films could

be interpreted as an allegory for the inherent trauma that women endure as a result of rape culture and a society of dismissing and ignoring women.

Darren Aronofsky's films and directorial style depict innovative stories surrounding the experiences of being a woman, and the suffering that is intrinsic to this unique experience. His work demonstrates a lens that is focused on exploring the female experience and the perspectives of women. The way in which Aronofsky engages with the theme of suffering is one that reveals higher meanings about the experience of womanhood and as such, requires that his audience watch his films with an open mind and consider the overall complexity and hidden meaning of his work as a whole.

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