

Aronofsky's Take on Horror

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Darren Aronofsky's filmmaking career is filled with disturbing, impactful, and oftentimes horrific movies. Although his films are more often labeled as mystery or drama, there are plenty of horror elements infused into his works. The particular subgenre of horror that fits his movies best is referred to as psychological horror. Psychological horror films most notably focus on the human characters as monsters rather than as something supernatural or an alien invader. This subgenre typically includes main characters with trauma, difficult situations for them, and extremely visceral emotional reactions used to instill fear and unease in the viewer. The three Aronofsky films this paper will focus on have each of these three commonplace occurrences for psychological horror movies, with additional shared qualities that help to solidify the works into the genre. Aronofsky has spent his career perfecting the craft, using his Harvard education to create movies that will not only scare viewers but also leave a lasting impact. Specifically, his films *mother!*, *Black Swan*, and *Requiem for a Dream* use techniques like surrealism, paranoia, and downfall of narrator(s) to create unsettling and terrifying psychological horror films.

Each film has a very specific—and at times unreliable—because of their situations/trauma—narrator. In *mother!* our narrator is She, Nina in *Black Swan*, and a choice of one of the four characters for *Requiem for a Dream*. These four characters are Harry, his girlfriend Marion, his best friend Tyrone, and his mother Sara. Since we have these often-personal points of view, we are able to see the narrator in whatever light Aronofsky wants us to. We bear witness to the unraveling of the situation through the eyes of the narrator themselves. The fact that each character, no matter the film, is experiencing traumatic and/or psychological breakdowns points heavily to

psychological horror techniques. As the characters' lives and situations collapse and the viewers are witnessing their demise from the characters' perspective, it's as if the viewers themselves are experiencing these collapses also.

Psychological horror films make it a priority to give the audience an intimate view of the character(s) the film centers around. By using this personal perspective, we, as viewers, get to see the world through the eyes of the narrator. It doesn't matter that this narrator is often unreliable, what matters is that we get the close experience with their position in the situation of the film. The intimate view that psychological horror films employ also allows the audience to sympathize with the characters. We are often empathetic towards them, hoping against fate that they will begin making the right choices and end up prospering. A classic example is seen in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, where viewers are under the impression that Norman is a sweet and kind, even if a somewhat troubled, soul. Finally, using psychological horror makes the film as a whole seem more realistic and grounded in everyday life despite any surrealist imagery.

These three Aronofsky films have many common elements that assist in tying them together within the psychological horror genre. The first of these common elements is the utter destruction and downfall of the narrator. In both *mother!* and *Black Swan*, our narrators perish during the final scenes of their movies. No one dies in *Requiem for a Dream*, but each of the four main narrators loses important parts of themselves by the end. The somewhat-cliché phrase applies well to these characters: a part of them has died. It is also typical that the main character experiences this downfall due to their own actions. We see this in *mother!* when She isn't vocal to Him about all the guests in the house and doesn't let go of the perfectionist view of the house she's created. In *Black Swan* this element expresses itself through Nina becoming utterly obsessed with her role to the point that it

takes over her entire life. She wants control so badly that she loses control. In *Requiem for a Dream*, each character becomes consumed with their respective addictions until they lose the people they used to be and the relationships they used to have.

The destruction of these characters in all three movies comes from their own personal obsessions and their own drive to complete their goals. The narrators are so attached to their pursuits that they are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve these aims, which leads them to some dark and frightening places, seen in *Requiem for a Dream* in particular. These are characters who are blind to the consequences of whatever damage they create while they pursue their objectives—especially when the consequences directly affect themselves.

The second component shared by the three films is elements of surrealism. Surrealism, in its most basic definition, is art that reflects the logic of dreams. Everything involved in surrealism is representative and symbolic. Given that the plots are wildly different in context, the situations of surrealism will differ as well. The one similarity in each case of surrealism has to do with what triggers it to arise. Surrealism only becomes present when the character begins to lose their grip on reality. Surrealism pairs nicely with the first common element since the characters' pursuit of their individual goals gets so extreme that they lose sense of what's real and what's not. The idea of surrealism is especially anxiety-provoking when placed in a psychological horror film because everything else in the film seems so normal. The blending of what's real and what's a hallucination are where a lot of the horror in Aronofsky films comes into play. It's jarring and seems out-of-place, creating fear and unease in the viewers.

In *mother!* a particularly surrealistic scene plays out towards the end of the movie. In this drawn-out scene, She is walking

through her house (which seems to have grown larger than one could conceive), surrounded by absolute anarchy. There are wars, riots, bombs—almost every destructive force you could imagine. It seems as if it couldn't possibly be real, introducing some serious surrealism elements into a film that seemed *relatively* normal beforehand. *Black Swan* has more surrealism than either of our other films. It's more sprinkled throughout the film and arguably more frightening. The most notable element present in *Black Swan* comes from Nina constantly seeing her “dark” double everywhere she goes, whether it be on the street, in the subway, or in the bathtub. All the trouble with her dark double comes to a violent climax during the most surreal scene in the movie, where Nina assaults and kills this “double” of hers. Interestingly, during this scene, her double keeps switching faces with her perceived competition at the ballet company. Is one of these situations real? Does Nina actually murder someone? The blend between reality and the imaginary is very evident in this scene. Lastly, *Requiem for a Dream* gives us the most surrealism through the character of Harry's mother Sarah. Sarah has become obsessed with a television show and feels she needs to be thin in order to be a contestant on the show. She goes to the doctor and he passively prescribes her speed to help her lose weight. She, like many others who use methamphetamines, becomes addicted to the drug and begins hallucinating frequently and severely: food falls from the sky, the refrigerator tries to eat her, she imagines herself as a contestant on the show with more nightmarish qualities. The surrealism in *Requiem for a Dream* is absolutely the material of dreams.

The final common element between these three Aronofsky films is the use of paranoia that starts small and builds up throughout the movie, leading to a huge climactic ending. Paranoia is a huge factor in each of these movies. Fear and paranoia are in intimate conversation with one

another. These two sensations often play off each other, with fear increasing paranoia and paranoia increasing fear. Having a sense of fear or dread will never decrease feelings of paranoia, it will only make them worse. Since we have such a personal view of our characters in psychological horror films, seeing them be paranoid about situations will often lead to viewers having similar reactions themselves. These images and situations produce suspense. As mentioned about each movie, things start off rather normally until characters are driven to near insanity. Their paranoia about their various situations is often a driving factor for the increase of intensity as the stories progress. For our characters in particular, paranoia can come from not being able to achieve your goal or having someone else take your goal away from you. The climax of each movie either results in achievement or loss of desired goal, yet paranoia always assists in whichever outcome.

In *mother!*, She is extremely paranoid throughout the film about the condition of the home she's worked so hard to create. She goes above and beyond typical cleanliness and planning, spending a painstaking amount of time choosing the perfect paint and eliminating any bits of dirt or imperfection. The paranoia becomes increasingly obvious when the unwelcome guests begin to infiltrate her perfect home. Starting with the first guest, She is unable to be relaxed in any context and seems to constantly feel "off." A viewer at this point may see her unease as overkill, but it's crucial to keep in mind that She takes extreme pride in her home and standing by as a witness to its destruction is a heartbreaking experience.

Similar to the surrealistic elements, *Black Swan* has the most present paranoia with Nina's paranoia built directly into the plotline with her growing delusions. She's worked so hard to achieve the goal of becoming Swan Queen. When her topmost goal becomes threatened in her eyes by a newcomer

into the company, it seems normal to feel a bit competitive. Nina may start off this way, yet it escalates throughout the film until she becomes convinced that this other dancer is out to steal her role. She says things to the director like “It can’t be her, she’s after me!” She is so terrified of losing her part that she becomes deluded into thinking it will be “stolen” from her, has a complete psychotic breakdown, and ends up stabbing herself. Nina dies on stage right after her performance.

In *Requiem for a Dream*, it’s the loss of addictive drugs that brings on the paranoia. Each character becomes increasingly obsessed with their respective drugs and consumed with the fear that they won’t be able to attain them any longer. Addiction completely takes hold of these people, to the point where it’s all they can think about. The paranoia is the most present during a withdrawal scene where Harry and Marion are trying to find substances wherever they can. Both characters are seemingly manic and completely panicky about where they will get their next fix. An argument ensues. Harry provides Marion with the number of a shady, pimp-like dealer and heads out on a road trip to hopefully score drugs elsewhere. He leaves Marion to contact the dealer, leading to another of the most horrifying scenes from the entire film.

Darren Aronofsky has clearly proven himself to be not only a masterful storyteller, but also a masterful horror movie maker. He does this by using various elements such as the psychological horror genre, intimate views through the eyes of the character, and common elements like surrealism, paranoia, and tragedy spanning the films. His films are not typically seen as horror movies, but it is now clear that by using these different elements together in one movie they easily fall into the category. Even if these movies don’t make you jump out of your seat, they will deeply disturb and leave a lasting impact. There are no monsters here and that’s the scariest part.