

An atheist's guide to feminine jouissance

On *Black Swan* and the other satisfaction

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Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) is a film clearly concerned with the body and embodied experience: to take even the most superficial examples, before she steps out of bed in the morning, Nina cracks and flexes her feet; after an injury, a physiotherapist plunges her hand deep under Nina's ribs; and so on. As such, the prevailing doxa might suggest that (Lacanian) psychoanalysis would have little to say about *Black Swan*. Indeed, the philosophical turn in Film Studies seemed to be predicated, in part, precisely *on* that claim and the rejection of Lacan. Lacanian film theory has – just as Thomas Leroy says of *Swan Lake* – been *done to death*: every good film-philosopher knows what it involves and why it is fundamentally flawed. This may (or may not) be the case, but theorists such as Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan have demonstrated that there remains the possibility of a properly Lacanian film-philosophy that engages with the complexities of Lacan's own work and remains sensitive to the exigencies of the cinema: it is to such a project that this chapter aims to contribute by engaging film and theory in a mutually informing relationship.

We are all familiar with the one I might call “the good old Lacan of time immemorial”, the Lacan of the *mirror stage* and the *unconscious structured like a language*; but to this, we must add “another Lacan”, the Lacan who claims, for example, that “being is the jouissance of the body as such” and who presents new possibilities for embodied encounters in both psychoanalysis and the cinema (1998:

6). We should not, however, treat these two – the *Other Lacan* and the *Good Old Lacan* – as a binary pair between whom there can be no rapport; they exist on the continuum of his theoretical work and its development. But it must also be recognised that the concept of *jouissance* takes on an increasingly important role in Lacan’s thinking and occupies a central position in neo-Lacanian film-philosophy. As such, Néstor Braunstein observes that, in *Encore*, Lacan characterises *jouissance* as “substance”, and it is furthermore – Braunstein notes – “the ‘substance’ with which we work in psychoanalysis” (2003: 102).¹ And so we could, I suggest, even go a step further to consider “*jouissance*” as being the very *body* of Lacanian psychoanalysis itself.

With this in mind, *Black Swan* presents an opportunity to explore psychoanalysis and the body, and in doing so I will suggest ways of reading the film and approaching its staging of femininity through different modes of *enjoyment*. Furthermore, considering the film in terms of *jouissance* allows us – following Kate Ince’s exhortation that we “bring bodies back in” to psychoanalytic film criticism (2011) – to *bring Lacan back in* to a discourse on psychoanalysis and embodiment in the cinema. Like Thomas’s interpretation of *Swan Lake*, the film *Black Swan* can make Lacanian psychoanalysis *visceral* and *real* by compelling us to recognise the “*jouissance* of the body” once more. As such, this chapter will explore how the film takes us around the types of enjoyment described by Lacan’s Graph of Sexuation: on the masculine side, the dissatisfaction of phallic *jouissance* in Nina’s training regime, the image of a corresponding (infinitely satisfying) Other *jouissance* that is embodied by Lily and promoted by Thomas, and how this manifests itself as the masturbatory *jouissance* of Nina’s fantasies; and then, on the feminine side, the *jouissance*

immanent to embodied experience, the enjoyment Nina derives from dancing – and thus becoming – the Black Swan.

A libidinal economy of the phallus

My starting point is the contention that *Black Swan* presents Nina as caught within the closed circuit of phallic jouissance in what Lacan describes as masculine structure.

The usual proviso should be offered at this point: that these terms pertain to *logical*, rather than biological, categories and so the anatomical “sex” of subjects here is not necessarily what is at stake. Instead, my reading of *Black Swan* engages with the ways that subjects organise their enjoyment in either a “masculine” or a “feminine” way, and – for most of the film – Nina is very clearly the subject of phallic jouissance. She strives and strives, and she is pushed on and on by Thomas and by her peers. Her mother tells her that she is the most dedicated dancer in the company. The film emphasises, over and over, Nina’s commitment to her course and to her cause. And this cause is, of course, the Lacanian *objet a*: the object-cause of desire, the gravitational centre of the phallic orbit.

For Lacan, this is the path that characterises phallic jouissance, or the enjoyment of masculine structure. Masculinity, Lacan defines with two logical formulae – “all $x \in \Phi$ ” and “there is one $x \notin \Phi$ ” – that determine “man’s” set, and the mathemes that represent “his” jouissance: $\$ \rightarrow a$, the vector of fantasy, and the signifier (Φ) that supports it.² I have elsewhere examined the differing ontologies suggested by a Lacanian theory of sets, so here it will suffice to say that masculinity presents a sort of “closed set” (an All) that is determined by an Exception, which defines it from the outside.³ What is important here, in relation to my reading of *Black Swan*, is the kind of jouissance provided by such a structure and, crucially, the role of

fantasy. Man's enjoyment is that which is permitted to him – as a “castrated” subject, alienated in the Symbolic order – by the phallic function. Man is a set where the phallic function is valid (“all x Phi x ”) and so his *jouissance* is considered “phallic”: it is *jouissance* in the grip of the primacy of the phallus. However, there is also one for whom the phallic function is *not* valid. The other formula (“there is one x not Phi x ”) means that there is some x who is not subject to the phallic function, who refuses castration and thus delimits the All. This is the primal father who is able to *enjoy fully* (Lacan 1998: 79). Phallic *jouissance* is thus sustained by the fantasmatic ideal of a non-castrated Exception who has access to greater *jouissance*. Man *qua* castrated is haunted by the sense of another, better satisfaction that insists upon and through his *fantasy*.

And it is here that we return to Nina. Nina's libidinal economy is organised around this phallic phantasm, this ideal (and *unobtainable*) end.⁴ She certainly derives a satisfaction from her work but it is a paltry *jouissance* – to use Bruce Fink's term – compared with the full *jouissance* to which she aspires. For example, when she is prevented from finishing her practice dance for Thomas, Nina feels compelled, on returning home, to repeat the routine: to spin round and round, chasing the enjoyment that she thinks she *should* have. When it is denied to her again – as she painfully cracks her toe during the workout – Nina constructs a *fantasy* of reaching completion by lying to Thomas that she finished the routine. She is spurred on by the idea that if she can just achieve a flawless performance, then she can achieve this flawless, exceptional satisfaction that the phallic libidinal economy promises to her. She repeats throughout the film that she aims for *perfection*. She tells Thomas that all she wants is to be perfect: echoing Fink's characterisation of the other *jouissance*, access to which he describes as ‘the *fantasy* that we could attain such *perfect*, total, (...)’

spherical, satisfaction' (2004: 157). Nina's striving for perfection is thus a striving for the jouissance that would match her ideal and of which the phallic jouissance of her quotidian experience offers her only a glimpse, a fraction.

The fallibility of phallic jouissance

As Nina practises for her performance as the Swan Queen, she visibly strains every muscle and sinew in her body, pushing herself further and further as if she could touch or embrace this perfect jouissance physically. However, the crucial Lacanian insight here is that such satisfaction is, strictly speaking, impossible. This is because phallic jouissance relates to *objet a*, which keeps the subject in perpetual motion, searching always for what cannot be attained. It is therefore characterised by *failure* because, Lacan insists, 'The object is a failure. The essence of the object is failure' (1998: 58). And so, for Nina here the libidinal economy can function only in a permanent state of (dis)satisfaction. Nina has very clearly given up a certain portion of her enjoyment to the Other, to the phallic regime of the ballet (which is to say, she is subject to *castration*): she leads an ascetic life, focused solely on her dance (and therefore on the promise of a better jouissance). She is reduced to phallic jouissance, which is limited by that remainder which forever escapes her grasp (*objet a*), and for this reason there is no way in which the enjoyment available to her can make up for the sacrifice she has made, no way in which she can overcome the inadequacy of phallic jouissance.

Indeed, following Bruce Fink, we should try to hear "phallic" as "fallible", and thus to recognise the *fallibility of phallic jouissance* as an experience that must necessarily disappoint the subject (2004: 159). Nina scrutinises each gesture and pose of her choreography, giving the sense that she can only be satisfied by *perfectly*

embodying every step. Nina's aim, therefore, may well be a flawless jouissance but, enjoying through masculine structure, her object can only ever be *objet a* and so she is consigned continually to miss her target. Phallic jouissance does not measure up to Nina's expectations of enjoyment: this inadequacy is felt in relation to the supposed other jouissance, of *perfection*. Indeed, the gulf between the fallible and this infallible jouissance can be felt in the repeated insistence from Thomas that she go through her routine *again* and *again*. Here, the Lacanian ear should hear the call, "*encore*": the demand to repeat what Jane Gallop calls "the phallic performance" in order to reach *something more* (1982: 35). This excess, this encore, persists as an ideal for Nina that her own performance can lead to *another satisfaction*.

The other jouissance is the jouissance of the other

The other, better satisfaction posited by phallic jouissance finds its body in a figure of the Other. Phallic jouissance is haunted by the persistent sense that there is an Other who *really* enjoys. For Nina, this exceptional "one" is Lily: who lives life with an apparent passion and ease seemingly unavailable to Nina. Therefore, to paraphrase Žižek, what really bothers Nina about Lily is her *enjoyment*.⁵ Nina imputes to her an excessive jouissance: she appears like a stain of enjoyment in Nina's world. This is mostly clearly exemplified in the recurring motif of Lily's laughter, which – in Nina's mode – we can interpret as a bodily sign of her special enjoyment. For example, when Thomas introduces Nina at a party as his new prima ballerina, she accepts the applause but cutting through this is *Lily's laughter*. The camera shows Lily from Nina's point of view, her hand on the chest of her companion; she is laughing at his *bon mot*, oblivious to her surroundings. Her voice, her smile, her gesture – all signs of

her jouissance – thus impinge on Nina, diminishing *her* satisfaction at what should be the crowning moment of her career.

As Jacques-Alain Miller suggests, jouissance imputed to the Other is the source of antipathy: Nina's resentment of Lily (*qua* Other) is a "hatred of the particular way, of the Other's own way, of experiencing jouissance" (1994: 79). Indeed, this structure is built into the narrative of *Swan Lake* itself: Odette is perpetually haunted by that Other figure, Odile, the one who spoils her enjoyment, and has access to another, *better jouissance*. This schema is, in turn, worked into the narrative of *Black Swan* as the rivalry between Nina and Lily grows. For instance, after Nina oversleeps, she is forced to go through her preparation while watching Lily dance *her* part. Lily glides effortlessly through Nina's own choreography – her enjoyment clear to see – and Thomas responds with praise more enthusiastic than he gives to Nina. Lily's Black Swan seems to perform a jouissance that Nina cannot access, and so her resentment of Lily – *as enjoying Other* – grows. The phallic libidinal economy therefore gives rise to Other jouissance as its *beyond*, and, as is so often the case, *Black Swan* tends to figure this "beyond" as *Woman*.

Woman and God's jouissance

If, for Lacan, "Woman" does not exist, then the image Nina has of Lily constitutes her *as Woman, the one who really would exist*. This figure is promoted by Thomas throughout the film. He implores Nina to watch the way Lily moves: effortlessly, imprecisely. As if to emphasise this, Lily – all in black, her hair flowing freely, contrasting to Nina's tightly wound bun – spins too quickly and steps into her partner. They laugh. Nina studies her intently. Thomas thus encourages this perception of Lily as Woman, as enjoying Other and, moreover, pushes Nina to accept the role (as it is

clear he has done to Beth – his last prima ballerina – in the past). This position is his *little princess*: the one who can perform satisfaction satisfactorily for him. Indeed, Thomas even goes so far as to describe Beth to Nina as *perfect*: a letter touching Nina's own enjoyment and forcing the circulation of her libidinal economy.

Nina's jouissance is thus related to Thomas and to Beth. Here I will note that, while the usefulness of an outmoded term such as "frigidity" is questionable, my approach in this instance is determined by the film itself, which repeatedly labels Nina as frigid. It is important to recognise, moreover, that it is primarily *for Thomas* that Nina appears "frigid". Crucial therefore to Nina's relationship with him is Lacan's question of how frigidity can be "mobilized" (2007: 616). Geneviève Morel explains that, "any hope of a cure through lovemaking, which would imply that frigidity can be reduced to sexual frustration, would be futile ([what Lacan refers to as] 'the usual failure of the dedicated efforts of the most desired partner')" (2002: 87). Whether Thomas is, in fact, *the most desired partner* (or simply a rapist) is not necessarily clear, but what *is* clear is that his *dedicated efforts* – which is to say, his repeated attempts to push Nina into sexual action – bring about the *usual failure* in overcoming what appears to him as her "frigidity".

This is most apparent when Thomas takes Nina back to his apartment. Here, he quizzes her on her sexual history, and Nina's response is defensive and embarrassed; it seems that she cannot bear even to talk of "jouissance", such is her "frigidity". He pushes her, bullies her, but she persists in silence. This, first of all, resonates with the image of a woman's jouissance as Other jouissance, where Lacan suggests that women experience it, but cannot say anything about it.⁶ This is a defining feature of the phallic perspective on the Other (sex): the masculine subject imputes a special enjoyment to the Other and then insists that the Other must tell him

all about it! The fact that Nina will not – *cannot* – tell him spurs him into “therapeutic” action, as he prescribes his most potent “somatic” cure for her “frigidity”. He tells her, like some professor of jouissance, that he has “homework” for her: to go away and touch herself. That this “cure” will not work becomes clear through the repeated – *and failed* – attempts Nina makes to touch herself and so to “touch” this enjoyment, *which cannot be awoken simply on command*.

What is most notable about this scene is the sense that the jouissance involved in Thomas's conversation with Nina is *all his*. It is *Thomas* who “gets off” on talking about getting off; the whole scene is articulated around *his* enjoyment and his attempts to paint Nina with it too. And if we consider Thomas as Leroy/*le roi*/the King, then it is only a small step from here to the figure of *God*. He is the Father as Exception: as Lacan notes, “Christianity naturally ended up inventing a God such that he is the one who gets off (*jouit*)” (1998: 76). Masculine structure is, as Marcus Pound suggests, therefore *ontotheological* (2008: 109). In positing an Other jouissance, phallic jouissance insists upon a theology of being by conceptualising in the beyond a “Supreme Being” who enjoys (“there is one *x* not *Phi x*”). Therefore, it is Thomas that takes a masculine position, here and throughout the film, as the One who enjoys: a position situating him *as God*. But he is a God that awakens only himself, and so it is tempting to recast this apartment scene – *pace* Miller – as “Woman and God's Jouissance”.

Thomas thus puts himself in the place where, as Lacan suggests, “there is something we cannot enjoy. Call it the jouissance of God, with the meaning included in that of sexual jouissance” (2005: 61). And, moreover, Thomas attempts to constitute Nina as Woman, a partner to him in this jouissance, in a mode where the sexual relation *would* exist and they would both access full satisfaction together: he

and she taking exceptional places as God on one side and Woman on the “other”. Thomas thus advocates a sort of *pousse-à-la-femme* for Nina, pushing her towards “Woman”. And conversely, it seems that she comes to see him *as* God, the One with whom she must establish a special relationship in order to reach perfect *jouissance*. This puts us in the realm of the mystic.

The ecstasy of Saint Lily

For Lacan, it is the mystic who has access to a special *jouissance*. He remarks that materialist philosophers in his audience were surprised that “I situated a certain Other between man and woman that certainly seemed like the good old God of time immemorial” (1998: 68). He explains that, unlike the theologians, *he* cannot do without God *because he deals with the Other*. He informs his audience, “So today, I am going to show you in what sense the good old God exists” (ibid.). The God that exists is, as I have already suggested, the Supreme Being of the masculine ontotheology, and that Lacan discusses in relation to Woman and *jouissance beyond the phallus*. This passage from *Encore* is the source of the most devastating misreading of the theory of sexuation and must therefore – as Lacan himself notes – be approached with great caution.⁷ Crucially, he adds, “This Other (...) must have some relationship with what appears of the other sex” (ibid.: 69): the key to understanding Lacan here is to understand that he is discussing *what appears, from the masculine pole, of the other sex as “Other sex”*. That is to say, we must understand Lacan’s discussion of the mystic’s *jouissance* – even against some of his own declarations – as a manifestation of *masculine structure*: a conflation of the image of “Woman” with the position of the One. This is the key point for my approach to questions of God, Woman and *jouissance* through Lacan and *Black Swan*.

The theological dimension of Other jouissance resides in the fact that it persists at the level of *belief*: Nina believes that Beth had it, Lily has it, and that it can be reached through a relationship with "God". It is this dimension that Lacan emphasises when he notes, in relation to mysticism, "you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God", before adding, "I believe in the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra" (ibid.: 77). Approached in this way, I suggest, we can frame his discussion of the mystic as belief in *Woman's* enjoyment that exceeds the phallic realm. And it is this belief that Thomas uses to push Nina towards mystical experience. Indeed, *qua* "God", Thomas advocates the kind of mystical jouissance Lacan positions with the Other, and an experience that centres on *Lily*. He explains to Nina that perfection is not just about control, but also letting go, which can lead to *transcendence* (although, he adds, very few are capable). As Thomas's instructions make clear, the ontotheology of masculine structure in *Black Swan* means that we are dealing with the transcendent: *a going beyond*. Indeed, Lacan refers to the father function/God as that "*at least one* who transcends that which takes the phallic function" (2011: 106). And so we can say that "His" partner (Woman) is also one who transcends into Other jouissance. The very few who achieve this transcendence are therefore, in the Lacanian framework, *the mystics*.

Lacan's favoured example of this "Woman" is Teresa of Ávila, whose intensely orgasmic encounter with the Divine is rendered in Bernini's statue of *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Her enjoyment, he suggests, is the jouissance at "the God face" of the Other (1998: 77): the divine, Other jouissance. The mystical experience therefore suggests an enjoyment that transcends quotidian satisfaction; it points to what Lacan calls a *jouissance beyond the phallus* (and which, I insist, we must recognise as the Other jouissance, total satisfaction). And when we reach Lacan's

question – “Doesn’t this jouissance one experiences (...) put us on the path of existence?” (ibid.) – we can see that the *ecstasy* of the mystic’s jouissance means that she does not simply stand outside herself in enjoyment, but that her enjoyment – *qua* Other jouissance – makes *her* “stand out”, puts her in a position where she ex-sists in relation to the Symbolic: which is to say that – like God – *she insists from the outside*, in an extimate relation to the masculine set. In *Black Swan* this exceptional Woman – who has access to the ecstatic jouissance of the mystic – is embodied by Lily. Indeed, in Nina’s delusion-fantasy, where she sees her with Thomas backstage, Lily is quite literally *the one who fucks God*.

Moreover, this image of Lily *as* the mystic (as the one who enjoys with God, in ecstatic jouissance), and the compulsion of Nina towards this image, reaches its highest intensity when the pair visit a bar. Lily’s jouissance is plain to see: she bites hungrily into a burger, talks with her mouth full about sex and Thomas, and flirts with those around her. The contrast with Nina here is stark: dressed in light colours against Lily’s black, she gently nibbles at her food and refuses to engage in conversation about carnal matters. Lily tells her that she needs to relax and offers her a pill: that this is MDMA is signalled by Lily’s reference to the resultant high as *rolling*. Lily then utters the magic words for Nina: echoing Thomas, she tells her it will loosen her up and adding, crucially, that it will let her see the night sky. Lily thus offers Nina the opportunity for *transcendence*: for a chance to reach for the perfect satisfaction of mystical experience. Spurred on by Lily’s demonstration of *her* jouissance, Nina eventually acquiesces to Lily’s command. MDMA is, of course, better known as *ecstasy*, and the jouissance Lily offers to Nina therefore promises that mystical ex-stasis – that standing out, going beyond – which would make her Woman.

Sexual jouissance does not reach the Other

This point, at which Nina finally comes to enjoy as Lily does, should, moreover, be understood as the point at which Nina comes to enjoy *as she thinks the Other enjoys*.

For Lily's part, her jouissance relates to what Žižek calls "permissive biopolitics" (2013): a hedonism that fully submits to the superegoic injunction – uttered by the waiter who brings their food – to "Enjoy!", to consume more and more. As the *encore* here suggests, this is a libidinal economy no less caught in the phallic loop because the subject continually chases greater and greater jouissance. However, for Nina, the image she takes of Lily's hedonism is as a genuine picture of full satisfaction: Lily is the Woman who can teach her to enjoy. That this perspective is a *fantasy* becomes clear as the night develops.

For Lacan, "Jouissance, qua sexual, is phallic – in other words, it is not related to the Other as such" (1998: 9). This means that man, "who can believe he approaches [woman]", in fact approaches nothing but "the cause of his desire (...) designated object *a*" (ibid.: 72). As I have suggested, Lacan renders this on the Graph with the vector $\$ \rightarrow a$: the formula for fantasy. On the masculine side, there is no sexual relationship (i.e. man and woman do not form a complementary *whole*) because, in the sexual encounter, man encounters only the object that phallic jouissance puts in the place of the Other. He therefore misses his partner because all he reaches is the phantasm. Paradoxically, then, sexual jouissance – as phallic jouissance, which is concerned only with object *a* – should be considered an '*a*-sexual' form of enjoyment (ibid.: 127).

There can be no clearer indication of this autistic dimension of phallic jouissance than the sexual encounter between Nina and Lily, during which Lily transforms into Nina herself. When Nina broaches the topic with Lily the next

morning and discovers that Lily did not spend the night with her, Nina is struck by the realisation that her enjoyment was a *fantasy*: in which she never dealt with anything other than the object, ‘which takes the place of the missing partner’ (ibid.: 63). Furthermore, it is for this reason that Lacan refers to phallic jouissance as *masturbation*, which he describes as “the jouissance of the idiot” (ibid.: 81). This is not some moralistic pronouncement on the “solitary vice” but an etymological pun on the root of “idiot” in the Greek, *idios* (as pertaining to the *self*), that constitutes the phallic libidinal economy as a sexual *idios kosmos*. Phallic jouissance is a *solitary* jouissance (but by no means a *vice*) even *with* a “partner”, and the sex scene is therefore the most significantly *masturbatory* sequence in *Black Swan* overall. Here, the film lays bare the very structure of fantasy: rendered literally, as Nina having sex with herself. That this fantasy is of Lily – as she who has access to greater jouissance – reveals it, furthermore, to be the fundamental masculine fantasy of Woman as Exception, as enjoying Other.⁸

The atheism of feminine jouissance

If my discussion of *Black Swan* and jouissance so far has been fixed within the phallic field, then the question must be asked: What is *feminine jouissance*? Does *Black Swan* provide an answer? To address this question, we must turn, first of all, to feminine structure. As is the case for masculine structure, Lacan posits two formulae – “not-all x Phi x ” and “there is not one x not Phi x ” – that characterise ~~Woman~~ Woman’s set. Beneath these formulae are the mathemes for the jouissance derived from this structure. First, $\text{La} \rightarrow \Phi$, which suggests that phallic jouissance is (nonetheless) available to those who situate themselves on feminine side and, therefore, so too is the realm of *fantasy* (as I have already suggested is the case for Nina). And second, crucially, $\text{La} \rightarrow S(A$

barred). "~~La~~" corresponds, in English, to ~~Woman~~: written as "barred" to indicate that "she" does not support a universal (the "universal" quantifier is negated: "not-all x ").

This is because the feminine set does not situate itself in reference to an Exception ("there is not one x not Φx ") that would ground a universal set of "All". Taken together, these formulae produce instead a "not-all" (*pas-tout*): to be understood as an *open or indefinite* set.

While the not-all is one of Lacan's richest theoretical innovations, the key to approaching the Lacanian concept of a properly feminine jouissance is first to address the formula: "there is not one x not Φx ". It can be read as "there is not one x who is *not* subject to the phallic function", meaning that it is a negation of the "father function". This is to say that, as Lacan explains, the "there is not one x " is "is simply an indication of (...) the Signifier of the barred Other [*A barré*]" (2011: 104), and is equivalent to his statement that *there is no Other of the Other*. There is no exceptional One on the feminine side that would determine feminine jouissance or necessitate the creation of another, flawless jouissance because – for ~~Woman~~ – the Other does not have access to some special secret; it is always-already a *failure*.

We can now begin to critique the theism of masculine structure. Recalling Lacan's remarks in *Encore*: when touching upon the Other jouissance, it becomes clear that God is required. Indeed, Lacan suggests that, "It is insofar as her jouissance is radically Other that woman has more of a relationship to God" (1998: 83).

According to the terms of *masculine logic*: the Other sex requires God. Woman (*not* ~~Woman~~) as the representative of the Other jouissance is thus situated at the God face of the Other, and so *belief* in Woman's jouissance (as mystical enjoyment) is equivalent to belief in God. As I've suggested, phallic jouissance posits Other jouissance as an ineffable, unknowable beyond. However, what Lacan allows us to

see is that what is supposedly “beyond the phallus” – Nina’s perfect jouissance, Lily’s mystical ecstasy – is nothing but a fantasy projection of masculine structure. *Black Swan* posits Lily as the absolute Other beyond the phallus: she embodies this jouissance beyond. However, from a Lacanian perspective, we can say that she serves as a screen for fantasy: she gives body to the fact that *there is nothing beyond*. What Lacan refers to as the “God hypothesis”, we can understand therefore as the process by which man posits Woman as the Other sex (ibid.: 45).

However, Lacan states that, “The Woman (*La-femme*) in question is another name of God, and this is why she does not exist” (2005: 14). The universal “Woman” does not exist because “God” does not exist (and thus they remain “partners” on the masculine side). Feminine structure is not compatible with the figure of “God” because there is *no exception*, nothing beyond. Feminine structure is therefore *strictly atheist*: there is simply no place for God on the right hand side of the Graph.⁹ This means that the *jouissance* of feminine structure is also *atheistic*. It does not pertain to the Other (*qua* phallus/God/A) but to a jouissance of the not-all, of the barred Other: *a jouissance of the lack in the Other J(A barred)*. To recall my discussion of “frigidity” in *Black Swan*, we can now refer to Lacan’s proposed solution: that the goal of analysis is to bring about an “unveiling of the Other” (2007: 616). Morel describes this as encouraging the subject “to glimpse that point ‘behind the veil’” (2002: 87), which I suggest we interpret as *an unveiling of the lack in the Other*. Nina’s phallic jouissance is based upon the image of the Other as (A): as whole and full of jouissance. For what I want to identify as Nina’s *feminine* jouissance, then, what is required is not *God*, but the relationship that ~~Woman~~ has with (A barred).

The immanent sublime of embodied experience (or becoming a swan)

There is no transcendent guarantor for the feminine side: this structure does not imply a going beyond, or a jouissance "out there". Instead, it depends upon *immanence*: a non-theological, strictly materialist *jouissance* "in here". In order to understand this proposition, we must follow Lacan's advice and "see in what respect the jouissance of the body can serve a purpose here" by turning to *Black Swan* on the one hand, and to a rethinking of sublimity on the other (1998: 71). Tarja Laine has produced a fascinating study of *Black Swan* in terms of what she calls the "uncanny sublime" and the split between body and soul necessitated by the paradoxical demand of ballet to deny the materiality of the body.¹⁰ However, I wish to turn the sublime back towards this very materiality to posit a jouissance of the body in Nina's experience of dancing (and becoming) the Black Swan.

When dealing, in Lacan's terms, with the "not-all, which contains a jouissance other than phallic jouissance, the jouissance properly called feminine", another logic is required (2011: 103–104). If masculine structure leaves the subject trapped in the bad infinity of phallic and Other jouissance (like Achilles forever chasing the tortoise), then feminine structure is – rather than access to a transcendent beyond – an opening up of the immanent possibilities of enjoyment. The picture of this properly feminine jouissance in *Black Swan* clarifies as the film reaches its own climax. As Nina struggles with her double in the dressing room during the first night's performance, "Lily" insists it is "her" turn, pushing Nina to give herself over to the fantasy of the Exception. Instead, Nina "kills" that part of her self that is bound to the phallic libidinal economy, stabbing "her" with a shard of broken mirror. If *Black Swan* is about Nina's struggle with two aspects of herself (as two differing possibilities for jouissance), then, in killing the image of Lily, Nina effectively "traverses the fantasy" of the enjoying Other and comes to identify with her own

enjoyment: her *sinthome*.¹¹ The particular organisation of Nina's enjoyment – *her sinthome* – is centred on the image of the swan (and a specific understanding of the Black Swan in particular). Nina insists it is *her* turn: asserting an “atheistic” approach – i.e. not based on God and Woman (*or Thomas and Lily*) – which provides a chance for her to experience a *jouissance* that cannot be reckoned within the phallic logic, but *not*, I should add, one taking her into the beyond. It is an immanent *jouissance*: a *jouissance* of embodied experience.

In order to conceive of this non-theological mode of enjoyment, it will be necessary to turn to the *logic of sublimity*. Copjec has convincingly demonstrated that Lacan's formulae of sexualisation can be understood in terms of Kant's antinomies, with the masculine a “dynamic” failure of the sexual relationship, subject to an external limitation, and the feminine a “mathematical” failure predicated on an inherent deadlock.¹² What remains is to offer a concomitant reading of *jouissance* in the same terms. Most commentaries – *including Copjec's* – tend to omit the bottom half of the Graph of Sexualisation, which pertains specifically to *jouissance*, and fail to elaborate the connection between the top and bottom of the Graph on the basis of *jouissance*. This can be achieved with reference to a logic elaborated by Žižek. He describes the dynamic antinomy as that which “announces another dimension, that of the noumenal”; which is to say, something that is *beyond* us (corresponding to the masculine logic of a sublime “out there”). The mathematical antinomy – Žižek suggests – is, conversely, the properly *materialist* dimension of Kant's thought: it suggests the sublime generated as a result of recognising an inherent failure (2000: 38). *This*, I suggest, is the feminine logic of a sublime “in here”.

Feminine *jouissance* persists but cannot be counted within the phallic field; however, the idea that it *exceeds* the phallic would point towards a dynamic sublime

in terms of that which is *beyond us*, which would run the risk of returning, once again, to the jouissance *beyond the phallus*. What is required here is the kind of "Hegelian reversal" of Kant that Žižek suggests:

we retain *the basic dialectical moment of the Sublime* as the inadequacy of the phenomenality to the Thing, but we must understand, with Hegel, that *there is nothing beyond phenomenality*. Crucially, the experience of the Sublime remains the same: all we have to do is subtract its transcendent presupposition – the presupposition that this experience indicates, in a negative way, some transcendent Thing-in-itself persisting in positivity beyond it. In short, we must limit ourselves to what is strictly immanent to this experience (Žižek 1989: 206).

Bringing Žižek's logic of sublimity together with Lacan's logic of sexualisation, therefore, I suggest that feminine jouissance cannot be conceived of *within* the phallic field, but this does not mean that it is "beyond the phallus". As Claude-Noële Pickmann notes, the not-all is situated not beyond but *at the very heart of the Symbolic* (2002). Therefore, it certainly *does* pertain to the sublime; however – rather than the masculine fantasy of the sublime of a *dynamic* antinomy, forever pushing its own impossibility into the ineffable beyond – feminine jouissance is fully present, as an enjoyment comparable to the sublime of a *mathematical* antimony: inherent to experience itself as an *immanent, material* jouissance.

Throughout the film, Nina has denied herself enjoyment in the hope that this will lead to better jouissance: to *perfection*. However, Nina conflates the potential for *her own* jouissance with the ideal of *another* jouissance (of Woman). When she finally sheds herself of the illusion of the Other's enjoyment, she is able to embrace the full flood of jouissance that her own body can provide. Until the final dance of the

Black Swan, Nina had been utterly horrified by the gradual transformation of her body into that of a swan. She picks at the sore on her back, eventually pulling through her skin the tip of a small black feather, which she contemplates in shock and disgust. However, her attitude changes after stabbing “Lily”, which, I have suggested, signals an opening up of new possibilities of enjoyment. Nina then dances the Black Swan Pas de Deux with a power and passion previously unseen, and it is here that I propose Nina *begins* to find a feminine jouissance: she makes small noises of satisfaction as swan-flesh ripples across her body, while the audience applaud and her partner exclaims. What follows is clearly the most significant point of *Black Swan* but, I insist, we must approach it very carefully: even against a straightforward reading suggested by the film itself. As she prepares to perform the incredible turning fouettés of the coda, Nina looks down at her arms as swan-flesh continues to race across them. She acknowledges the change with a satisfied smile. She then takes to the stage once more as feathers begin to sprout from her skin; she spins again and again and with each turn her arms become *wings*, her body is covered with feathers. She strikes her final pose as a fully formed *black swan* before the film cuts to an extreme long shot, showing a human form on stage but casting the shadow of a Nina-Swan on the rear wall.

It would be easy to interpret the transformation here as a metaphor for Nina’s transcendence of her body: the mystical ex-stasis that Thomas insists she achieve through her dance. However, this is emphatically *not* what Nina’s experience of “becoming swan” suggests. That this is a *feminine* jouissance is indicated by the very *lack* of transcendence here: Nina’s satisfaction as the Black Swan needs no reference to the Other (God, Thomas or Lily). Her turning fouettés do not take her into a dynamic beyond; instead, it is apparent that what Nina is experiencing is the

enjoyment of every inch of her body. In this moment, the source of her jouissance is nothing but her own material existence: she is revelling in the embodied experience of the dance itself, palpably deriving jouissance *from* this embodiment. Moreover, Nina's encounter with her own body here recalls Colette Soler's proposition that feminine jouissance can be felt in the radical, corporeal disruption precipitated by extreme physical action (2005: 306). Soler relates this to childbirth, illness and sport (therefore, not reducing the question to *anatomy*), but *Black Swan*'s staging of Nina's body *in extremis* would also insist on adding dance to that list as well.

The feminine jouissance of *Black Swan* is therefore – to repurpose a term from Jean-François Lyotard – an “immanent sublime”: jouissance of the experience of the body.¹³ However, this unexpectedly *embodied sublime* must be stripped of any connotation of an “unpresentable” beyond; rather this is – as I have stated – a fully *materialist* sublime, based on the mathematical antinomy. It is not feminine structure *itself* that is “unpresentable” but that feminine structure is another way of approaching *the unpresentable as such*. Feminine sexuation does not equate to an entry into the beyond (as purported in the mystical experience); instead, it constitutes a new mode of relation to the Symbolic Order, which recognises (and therefore *enjoys*) the Other as not-all. The formulae for feminine structure insist that the phallic function remains valid but in relation to an open set, which is constituted *without exception*. To recall Žižek's logic of sublimity, everything remains the same; we merely remove the reference to the transcendent One and appreciate what is immanent to the experience. It is an acceptance of the non-theological, material enjoyment available through the body.

Therefore, *pace* Lyotard, it is not simply a question of rendering the sublime as immanent *to* the work of art (although this is certainly *also* the case); it is the

question of rendering a literally, paradoxically *immanent sublime*. Nina achieves feminine jouissance in the moment that she accepts her transformation into the Black Swan: it is not that she “loses herself” in the mystical experience, but that she “finds” her own corporeality by fully embracing the sublime satisfaction of her sinthome – the kernel of enjoyment – that takes the body of a swan. Rather than covering over the Real with a veneer of the Imaginary, as is the wont of masculine structure, the Lacanian feminine allows for an opening up and an appreciation of the Real as immanent to the Symbolic and so we can say that *Black Swan* thus stages the *immanent sublime of feminine jouissance*.

Death, psychosis, sinthome

If the film ends, as it is commonly read, with Nina’s death, then this death is “necessary” to the extent that she finally reverts *back* to the logic of the phallic libidinal economy (this masculine paradigm signalled visually by her reversion to the White Swan costume) and so persists to the end in her pursuit of Other jouissance. Nina herself, having rearticulated her body within the phallic field, insists on interpreting the experience of feminine jouissance *as* a transcendent, mystical ecstasy. Nina’s psychosis – differently from Schreber’s, then – involves being turned into “Woman” (*La femme*) by “God” (Thomas).¹⁴ She is constantly pushed towards the image of the Other (sex) by those around her, and her pathology involves total submission to that image. It is not that Nina finds “liberation through madness”, but that *this is not where we find Nina’s madness*. It is the White Swan – not the Black – that stands for her psychosis. The jouissance she derives from the Black Swan would constitute her sinthome: that which could knot a psychotic structure.¹⁵

Instead, Nina assumes the position of the Other, and thus finally loses herself. As she lies (presumably) dying backstage, she tells Thomas – with a beatific expression – that *it was perfect*. If we recall the (phallic) image of Achilles pursuing the tortoise, we should note that Lacan observes that, they meet only “at infinity” (1998: 8). The realisation of such a jouissance coincides with the realisation of the impossible-Real Thing. As such, in maintaining her phallic course towards the Other, Nina’s path to jouissance is, as Lacan suggests, “the path toward death” (2008: 18). She thus falls into the same trap as those readers of Lacan who would figure feminine jouissance as *absolutely Other*. Rather than accepting the immanent jouissance of the body she experiences as the Black Swan, she denies this feminine logic – and with that her *sinthome* – and her insistence on transcendence forces her back towards the White Swan: towards the *beyond* and into death.

Apropos of Lyotard – and following Laine to a certain extent, but approaching the question differently – *Black Swan* does not simply point *towards* the sublime but directly contains and presents it to us as spectators, and in this way allows us to experience such sublimity. However, in order to avoid Nina’s fate, it must be understood in terms of the logic of *feminine jouissance*: not as an ineffable beyond, but as a fully embodied experience. Indeed, on my first viewing of the film, it was the final Black Swan fouettés that most stood out. My encounter with this moment – Nina’s jubilation in the transformation of her body into a swan – provided both the “kernel” of my *own* enjoyment of *Black Swan* and a starting point for my thinking about the film. It led me to consider the different modes of Nina’s jouissance, and the sheer materiality of her enjoyment in that moment in particular allows me to suggest that, if we speak of the body in cinema, it seems *Lacan has not yet made his exit*.

Notes

1 Cf. Lacan (1998: 23–24).

2 See Lacan (1998: 78).

3 See Tyrer (2012) and *Out of the Past: Lacan and Film Noir* (forthcoming).

4 As Agnieszka Piotrowska has pointed out to me, the classic Lacanian reading here might refer to a deficiency in the function of the Name of the Father for Nina, which would relate to *psychosis*.

5 Cf. Žižek (1993: 203).

6 Cf. Lacan (1998: 71).

7 Cf. Lacan (1998: 74 & 77).

8 Cf. Žižek (2007: 155).

9 It is for this reason that Claude-Noële Pickmann can state: “the not-all is atheistic in itself” (2004: 25). I am grateful to Claude-Noële for sending me some of her work on feminine structure.

10 I am grateful to Tarja Laine for providing me with a draft version of the chapter on *Black Swan* from her forthcoming book on Aronofsky. My own thinking was partly initiated by a version of her work presented at the *Film-Philosophy Conference* (2012). As such, my analysis of the film should be considered something of an *uncanny psychoanalytic double* of Laine’s phenomenological account.

11 Cf. Žižek (1989: 124).

12 See Copjec (1994: 201–236).

13 Cf. Lyotard (1991: 128).

14 The question of Nina’s “psychosis” in the film is a crucial one but its further investigation is unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter.

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15 Recalling the classic theory of psychosis, the sinthome is what would compensate for the foreclosure of the Name of the Father (see Lacan 2005).

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