



**“The Anti-Feminist ‘Feminine’; Beyond the Barre of Detriment”
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The Anti-Feminist “Feminine”; Beyond the Barre of Detriment

Ballet is an art that has been enjoyed since the early renaissance. It is a symbol of grace and elegance and is viewed as one of the top forms of classical entertainment. When one thinks of ballet, the first image that may pop in their head would be a tall, lanky woman dressed in her pink tutu, tights, and bun. What is interesting is that the silhouette of this ballerina is more commonly thought of than the music or actual dance moves. Something about this figure with her arms held round and high, causes her body to be the symbol of ballet. The physicality of the figure presents itself first in one’s mind far before the thought of skill or dedication. In a style so heavily reliant on female talent, it should be assumed that the industry is well appreciative of women in all their forms. Yet in ballet, this is often not accurate. The ballet industry is notorious for being extremely harsh behind the stage curtains. Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* is a film that explores the inner battle of newly named prima ballerina, Nina, and her journey of dealing with the baggage of being crowned the swan queen in the ballet *Swan Lake*. It has many themes which show the corruption of the industry and the way it exploits its ballerinas. Feminism, the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, is frequently overlooked in the ballet industry. Principles of body acceptance and individualities in gender expression are crucial elements to a ballerina’s mental health. These themes allow the audience to have an explicit take away when watching the film. *Black Swan* becomes less about dancing and more about manipulation and oppression. The dancers should be accepted for their physical forms and have a

career without worrying about presenting themselves in a desirable way. Yet, male-run companies and pressures of extreme competition often weigh heavily on them. These instances in the industry are conformative and detrimental to the dancers. The film, which is filled with twisted psychological images such as feathers growing from Nina's skin, seems to be a substantial fictional exaggeration of the industry. What is not an exaggeration is the serious cut-throat environment, the presence of mental manipulation, and the detriment to the dancer's overall health that is emphasized throughout the film. Ballet, which seems to be the ultimate display of adoration for the female body, has many antifeminist trends in its road to stage "perfection." These trends cause more harm to the dancers than they add to the productivity of their skill, as seen through analysis of the film *Black Swan*.

Body Images Broken Through Manipulation

Perhaps the most visible and digestible sign of anti-feminism in ballet is through the broken body image of the female dancers. Kylie Shea, an Instagram famous professional ballet dancer wrote about her struggles in the caption of a video of her contorting to show her protruding bones in her figure. She wrote "Part of your job as a dancer is to maintain a very specific aesthetic. The truth is, it is a constant battle to maintain a healthy balance, both mind and body. Starting today I am challenging myself to banish any negative body image thoughts from my mind" (IG: @kyliesheaxo). She continues to say someday she feels "strong and confident," and the next day she feels the "complete opposite." This caption depicts the conflict many dancers have with their own body image because of the demands of the "aesthetic."

Many dancers benefit from improving or simply igniting their positive body image. This is because positive body image is not always advocated in the industry. "Body positivity embraces the woman's natural body. Body positive feminism can also be referred to as fat

feminism. Fat Feminism comes from the fat acceptance movement, which highlights sizeism and anti-fat bias. This began in second-wave feminism and is still expanding through the third wave” (Demarco). Although we are currently in the fourth wave of feminism. The 1990s third wave made body image a massive element in what “modern” feminism is. Third wave feminism emphasizes body positivity. Positive body image is discussed in the book *Body Positive: Understanding and Improving Body Image in Science and Practice*, and is defined as,

“An overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as outer radiance, or a ‘glow;’ (d) emphasize their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; and (e) interpret incoming information in a body- protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed” (Daniels 9).

What is essential to notice is that having a positive body image is indeed an internal event. Most of what defines positive body image has to do with feeling good, “admiring” and respecting the bodies “assets.” It is the mind that ultimately dictates the body image. With proper reflection, a positive body image is undoubtedly obtainable. However, when taught that there is a particular aesthetic that is necessary, figuring out how to gain this mentality is extremely difficult because the mind is conditioned to believe otherwise. In the film, Nina’s personal thoughts are obviously inconsistent with these defined thoughts.

It can be inferred that Nina struggles with a positive body image. In multiple scenes in the film, such as those after showers, she is seen intensely staring at her reflection. She even shows signs of the body image issue identified as “body dysmorphia.” Nina often sees her body in a way that it is not in reality. To reiterate, when she looks in the mirror, she legitimately sees images that are not present in her actual physical body. It becomes impossible for Nina to have a sound mental health if she is so

obsessed with her appearance that she begins to hallucinate rashes just days before her debut. In the ballet industry, women like Nina are forced to have an obsession with perfecting the way they look rather than loving themselves for their uniqueness.

Body image issues in dancers are seen in multiple ways, aside from body dysmorphia. “Body image disturbance, or negative body image, encompasses many forms, such as body/appearance dissatisfaction, body surveillance, body shame, and internalization of media appearance ideals” (Daniels 6). These signs are generally relative to being uncomfortable with physical appearance, verbally shaming or making rude comments about other people’s body types, and over fixating on bodies seen in the media. Anytime a girl is constantly verbalizing that she wants to “look just like her” or “have a body like that,” body image disturbance is present.

It is possible body image issues stem from the physical presentation that dancers are required to partake in every class. To better display the presence of such issues in dancers, a case study at Mercyhurst College evaluated the link between required dancewear and its relations to the dancers’ mental image of themselves.

“For nondancers, body image problems may not be as severe because they are not required to wear skin-tight leotards and tights everyday and to stare at their bodies in the mirror for extended periods of time. Many companies or schools of dance require their students to participate in mandatory weigh-ins, although researchers find this practice creates problems that may contribute to eating disorders (i.e., Hamilton, 2002)” (Price 991).

Dancers have issues with their body image because they are required to wear clothes that put all of their body on display. They are often not allowed to participate in class without their leotard and tights. The reality that they have no choice but to show off their bodies alongside being forced to look at their bodies must be indicative to their over-analytical habits. On many occasions, instructors will say that loose clothing ruins the lines the girls’ bodies create when

they are dancing. When mentioning the lines of the bodies, one is referring to the literal lines the body creates, such as those that would run from the hip to a long stretched leg and pointed foot. Choreographers want the bodies to be displayed with nothing distracting from these lines such as loose baggy clothing. What causes suspicion to arise around this “breaking of the lines” claim is that many dancers are required to weigh in.

The “Solution” that is Eating Disorders

It can be assumed that weigh-ins are necessary for more serious and professional companies because they want to be certain the girls’ bodies are aesthetically pleasing enough to make ticket sales. Stuff website’s article on “humiliating weigh-ins in ballet,” quotes dancers and their experiences with their weight. “From the public weigh-ins to high praise for eating next to nothing, [their] mind[s] became warped about what it was to be a healthy woman” (Caldwell). It is of no surprise that a young dancer who has to report the numerical value of her weight before a group would have issues with accepting her body in every form. The shame of possibly weighing the most in the class would be enough to skip meals. In one of the earliest scenes in *Black Swan*, there is signs of over active weight control. Nina’s mother serves her a breakfast of an egg and half of a grapefruit on a large plate. This seems to be planned by Aronofsky’s as to display how small the meal is. This breakfast totals to 130 calories. A “healthy” breakfast is deemed one that ranges from 300-400 calories, based on a 2000 calorie day, which makes Nina’s portion half of what it should be. This is the one meal Nina is shown eating in the film. Having this as one of the opening scenes starts the film with a dancer’s life in the frame of an eating disorder. The only other time food is shown is when her mother buys a celebratory cake for Nina being named the Swan Queen, the most desired role of Swan Lake. Nina’s mother cuts her a standard size piece of the cake when Nina insists the slice is way too large and refuses to eat it.

She says her stomach is still in knots from hearing the news, but it can be assumed that she is using this as an excuse to control/avoid her eating. Without the presence of such principles such as fat feminism, dancers are mentally conditioned into thinking only one type of body image is admirable for its beauty. This is obviously false, but due to the amount of times dancers' bodies are picked apart throughout their career, the possibility of body image issues turning into eating disorders is inevitable. The subject is much more than every girl feeling pretty; it's a matter of mental implications on the physical body. Working in an anti-feminist industry can legitimately lead to fatal illnesses.

Ironically, many women of all ages watch ballerinas and wish to have bodies with similar aesthetics as them. Long legs, narrow torsos, and toned muscles are envied by those outside the industry, while the dancers themselves are rarely satisfied with their appearance. The dancers' bodies, which may seem "ideal" to the audience, are considered heavily flawed in their own eyes because of how meticulously they have been taught to analyze their bodies.

"The dancers, even if slender, reported greater dissatisfaction with their bodies than their non-physically active counterparts, suggesting that participation, even recreationally, in sports that value leanness or aesthetics could be related to higher levels of body image concerns. (Kosteli et al., 2014)." (Nerini).

Overall, young girls, regardless of their skill level, often compare themselves to women in their field and draw personal dissatisfaction from it. Additionally, it seems the more time spent being athletic results in higher body image issues. In ballet, this could be explained by the fact that the girls are spending more time looking at mirrors and comparing themselves to other bodies around them.

This lack of appreciation for their physical bodies is closely tied to the clothes the dancers wear every day. "When dancers wore standard-issue tights and leotards, they reported less satisfaction with their body, self, and performance on all ten statements on the survey

compared to when the dancers wore ‘junk.’ The attire dancers wear during a single class can make a significant difference in self- and body perceptions” (Price 991). It is clear that when the dancers feel physically comfortable, they also feel comfortable mentally and confident with their work ethic. The clothing that other people decide looks best on them, actually inhibits their ability and their mental state. Being forced to have their bodies on display leads them to be judgmental of what they are displaying.

“The “junk” dance attire was provided by each dancer herself, so she was able to wear whatever she desired from her own collection of clothing. Typically, this includes skirts, legwarmers, sweat shirts, and sweat pants. None of the dancers chose to wear tight-fitting clothing when given the option to choose their dance attire, nor did they choose clothing that reveals a lot of skin (i.e., cropped t-shirts, shorts)” (Price 994).

On the days that the girls were excused from wearing their required costumes, they chose to wear clothing that was certainly distinct from the backless leotards and truly skin-tight tights. This proves that dancers simply feel better in clothing that is not stuck to them like a second skin. Their chosen clothing is that which makes them feel best and is least distracting from their skill. It is worth mention that the girls wore clothing that would be more protective of their body as well. This also is evidence that the dancers find the required dress to be physically “uncomfortable” and “restricting.” The leotards and tights are made of extremely thin materials, so that the body’s contours can be as visible as possible. If the girls were to slip and fall, it would be as though their skin comes in direct contact with the floor. This can lead to the conclusion that the attire they are forced to wear is not always practical and is repeatedly proven to be purely focused on exposing the dancers’ bodies visually. In another early scene of *Black Swan*, Nina is shown warming up with a large class in a studio setting. The dancers are given prompts by their instructor when the company director Thomas walks in. Immediately the girls begin to strip their extra clothing layers off. Sweatpants, shrugs, shirts, and skirts are removed. Film director, Aronofsky, makes it a point to pan and zoom to all the dancers taking off their extra clothing to

show the nature of the scene. The girls readily strip down to their leotards so that Thomas can see their bodies, in hopes they will be selected for a role. It is common knowledge to the dancers that showing more of their body will give them a better chance at being selected for a role.

The most troubling part of body image issues is their connection to unhealthy eating habits leading to severe weight loss. Actress Natalie Portman who played Nina, appeared clearly underweight on screen. ABC News reporter, Luchina Fisher reported her striking weight loss and the concerns of those around her. “When Natalie Portman dropped 20 pounds to play a ballerina in her new movie, "Black Swan," even her director worried the petite actress had gone too far” (Fisher). Natalie was already a naturally thin woman, yet she felt the need to lose extra weight, thus appearing unhealthy to properly portray a ballerina. This association between being underweight as a dancer shows the prevalence of the issue. The dissatisfaction dancers have with their bodies are often “solved” through the establishment of their eating disorder. “Research has found that elite dancers tend to be preoccupied with their weight and develop body image and eating disorders more often than other athletes and the general population. Moreover, they tend to score higher than controls on various subscales regarding the assessment of both eating and body image preoccupations such as: The Body Self relations Questionnaire; the Eating Attitudes Test; the Eating Disorder Inventory” (Pullatou 132). This is proof that body image issues can be life threatening and detrimental to not only the dancers’ mental health but also their physical health. If ballet was feminist, Natalie Portman would have been able to be comfortable portraying the character with her natural weight. Yet, she felt the need to have her rib cage stick out and her collar bone to be prevalent in order to be a believable dancer. It seems, there is no “ballerina” without protruding bones and little to no body fat. This stigma is clearly harmful and is not in accordance with third-wave feminism.

The Male Gaze & Supposed Gender Roles

In a style heavily displayed by women, one would assume ballets were designed, choreographed, and produced by women. This is often not the case for many companies. Thus, creating clear moments of inequality in the workspace, which is not exactly chilling for everyone. Some believe ballet is all about inequality- and it should remain that way. “Alexei Ratmansky—now famously—expressed on Facebook last fall: ‘Sorry, there is no such thing as equality in ballet: women dance on pointe, men lift and support women. women receive flowers, men escort women offstage. Not the other way around and I am very comfortable with that.’” (Bouder). This way of thinking seems to be similar Thomas’ demeanor. Regardless of personal opinion, the abundance of male choreographers that work to position and make art of the female dancers’ bodies allow ballet to be created in the male gaze. The male gaze, in this case, means that the dance is created by a man and executed purposely for the liking of other men. The most apparent signs of anti-feminism in the film is the examples of how ballets are directed through the male gaze. It is clear this gaze is related to the fetish of underweight women, but it also has a link to non-physical instances. Repeatedly, Thomas explains the difference between the white and black swan, both characters which Nina embodies. The white swan is pure, soft, and elegant. It is described by Thomas as a “virgin girl, pure and sweet...she deserves freedom, but only true love can break the spell” (*Black Swan*). Whereas the black swan is corrupt and undeniably seductive. Thomas fixates on the need for Nina to portray the black swan in a manner he chooses. There are many issues with his description of the role. Firstly, the role is built off a narrative of the damsel in distress. The female character is totally dependent on the rescue of a male savior. She is “trapped” without her prince. Feminism is cemented on the equality of the sexes which this storyline lacks. *Swan Lake* is one of the most famous ballets and is clearly

antifeminist. Secondly, Thomas tells Nina, “Seduce us, not just the prince, the court, the audience.” This exemplifies that the dancers are exploited to be a discrete sex symbol in the ballet. This also backs up the claim that the girls’ attire is for the audience and is a main tool for their sexualization. Their bodies are displayed and phrases such as “seduce the audience” are barked at them. Here, Thomas is trying to shape the ballet so that it appeals to its male watchers. Later in the movie, Nina is seen rehearsing with the dancer who plays the prince. Thomas cuts in and asks the prince, “Honestly, would you fuck that girl?” Thomas answers himself, saying that no one would. He makes her sex appeal more important than her technique or movement, which is her livelihood, and couples it with a hint of humiliation. The ballet is no longer about the beauty of the dancer and her complete devotion to the art, but it is about her gender and sex. This reflects Thomas’ view of the women’s role; to be a sex partner. Although the storyline of *Swan Lake* does include a chase between a male and female, Thomas abuses his right to comment on Nina’s sexuality because of the way he has forced kisses on her and made assumptions about her intentions in the past. The presence of these sexual harassment moments eradicates the chance that he is only focused on the ballet.

Another time Thomas’ view of gender roles is seen is in the beginning of the film, before he gives Nina the swan queen role. After Nina comes in his office to talk about the role, he forces a kiss upon her- the first event of sexual harassment. He then asks her why else she would come into his office all dolled up if it wasn’t to seduce him. He unjustly reads her lipstick as an invitation. It can be assumed that he would believe women only dressed up or applied makeup so that they could be more appealing to men, rather than something they do to make themselves happy.

Overall, Thomas constantly pushes certain gender roles on Nina. These forced expectations are linked to her physical health yet again. “The rash on Nina’s shoulder appears as the material effect of Nina’s stressful affective relationships with her work, with the masculinist and highly restrictive options for gender-identification that she is expected to embody and move between, with her peers and with her own feelings of inadequacy and ambition.” (Bignall 127). The stress of the industry was so immense that Nina was developing a skin condition because of how worn down she was. The constant pressure to be more “womanly,” began to eat away at her mental health and cause hallucinations. What is ironic is that a man was telling her she needed to conform more to her sex’s identity. Nina couldn’t simply be as she was because she didn’t completely possess all the traits of her gender, so she was forced to morph herself to display this gender she was “supposed” to show.

This issue of dancers having to alter themselves are quite common occurrences. Dancers are constantly forced into a moment of “counteractualization,” a term coined by philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Counteractualization is a time of realizing what one is not and creating actions to start completing that are opposite to the actions one exhibit naturally (Bignall). In *Black Swan*, counteractualization occurs when Nina discovers herself and needs to be the opposite of this actual self completely. Through counteractualization she starts to change her thinking and becomes consumed in what she needs to be, based on what she lacks, such as sexy and careless. In these situations, Nina feels that her natural self is not suitable enough to be someone other people would spend their free time to see, so she changes herself to make those on the outside feel more content. Thus, she is recreating herself in the gaze of others.

Competition on the Professional Stage

One of the most tragic expressions of antifeminist issues in ballet is the prevalence that the art turns women against each other. Third-wave feminism advocates the strength women can create when they support each other. Although many may argue competition leads for dancers to be more dedicated and work harder, it often has negative effects. Dr, Amanda Cawston, Professor of Philosophy, describes the nature of competition in accordance to feminist theory. “Competition seemed antithetical to important feminist aims, including the promotion of solidarity, the abolition of hierarchy and domination, and the rejection of particular masculine norms that promote and support oppression. But competition also promised to motivate exceptional performance and achievements, [and] build self-worth” (Cawston). Because it is evident that one’s spot on stage is not guaranteed, there is a negative incentive for the dancers to not slack on their training. Any type of performance career has a risk of competition and being replaced. Workers in the industry may argue that its exciting and keeps them alert and ready to evolve as the stage needs them to. Furthermore, the competition in lives of all women may cause them to be more mentally disciplined. On the other hand, the competition between dancers in ballet reverses the efforts to destroy domination and hegemony. Thus, it puts women back into the position to need to feel better than each other.

In the film, female competition is seen between Nina and Lily. Lily is the opposite of Nina as a dancer- she is naturally seductive, reckless, and wild. A stirring scene shows just how uneasy Nina is when she learns Lily is given her understudy position. “She is paranoid and convinced that Lily is out to replace her: ‘she’s after me ... she wants my role’. Tomas reassures her, saying he thought Nina had had a ‘breakthrough’ that morning when dancing the Black Swan” (Bignall 124). This reassurance by Thomas seems to be manipulation. It can be inferred that Thomas purposely chose Lily as the understudy because he knew it would rile up Nina. It is

possible he did so to get her to commit more while getting a sort of pleasure knowing that the girls are competing over his attention. “If [Thomas] embodies patriarchy, then Nina’s relationship with other women shows the damage that patriarchy has done. Other women are either hostile or so annihilating close that Nina can’t distinguish herself from them... Nina experiences Lily as an erotically confident enemy conspiring to destroy her, as her double”(Fisher and Jacobs). Lily is the physical presence of Nina’s “goal.” Nina continually watches her and analyzes the way they contrast each other. This epidemic of having to constantly be better, sexier, as prima ballerina is completely realistic in the ballet industry today. Ballet creates a space of constant competition, where classes are often tense and full of anger, which surely have an effect on the overall energy in the space.

The Finale of the Film: Only the Beginning of the Disturbing Industry

Perhaps the truest, cinematically chilling parts of the film is the finale. In the scene, the black swan takes her victory while the white swan dances off and ultimately dies. Before this scene, Nina is shown in her dressing room, struggling with hallucinations of Lily. She decides the best way to rid herself of “Lily”, is to stab her. Nina then gets on stage, having little remorse for what she did. The film audience later figures out that Nina actually stabbed herself, rather than the fictitious Lily. Nina’s on stage dancing the most dramatic part of the ballet, and is able to properly portray the storyline because she is, in fact, dying. At the final moments, Nina dances the death of the white swan and the crowd loves her. She falls off her prop cliff to her “death” as Thomas and other company members come running to congratulate her. It is then when they realize her white tutu is becoming stained deep scarlet. Her final words are, “I was perfect”(Black Swan). What is frightening about this scene is that Nina had to literally kill herself in order to give the audience the performance they wanted and to be “perfect.” The stresses of

the industry that was not created in her favor, or in favor of any female dancer, led her to have such erratic actions and a deteriorated mental health. This staircase towards perfection, which she was constantly working to climb took over her life. The death of a dancer from work induced stress is not simply a creation of Aronofsky. In Boston, 1997, Ballerina Heidi Guenther, collapsed and died due to malnourishment. Her issue was no secret and “colleagues suggested she gained weight” (Associated Press). It is clear Aronofsky wanted to emphasize how serious the lives of these dancers were and how fragile they become once consumed by the demands of a crowd.

The women in ballets are far more than the graceful beings they are perceived as. Because ballet lacks supporting fundamentals, such as those portrayed in third wave feminism, many women are permanently psychologically harmed because they are unable to separate their personal worth from the feedback their company directors/crowd gives them. In a society where ballet is anti-feminist, it is impossible for the dancers to live a desirable life even though they are envied by thousands of people. Women are conditioned to justifying drastic actions that may be harmful to their health because they believe any chance at perfection is going to be the fruitful. When young girls are trained to take on a role that requires a “perfect aesthetic,” it is inevitable that they would have eating disorders or body dysmorphia. They are taught there is a very specific look which will sell, which creates body image issues because of the stress of needing to be marketable makes them over analytic. The complex male gaze of the industry creates an environment to incubate this need to make sales and the dancers compete to be the most sellable. This is because the studio environment is lacking feminism. Ballet is like a movie where the women use *only* their physicality to capture the audience’s minds. The dancers are looked at and praised while on stage, but behind the curtains they are abused, manipulated, and extorted.

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