

## Interlude : *Black swan* or the delusional episode

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*Black swan*, the film directed by Darren Aronofsky, is a brilliant example of what it's like to have a delusional episode. We'd like to take a moment to briefly explain what is involved in this often transient type of delirium. What's striking about this type of manifestation is its sudden, spectacular, noisy and uncontrollable nature. Hence the interest of a cinematographic representation, as it highlights both the various hallucinations and the faulty aspect of identifications - with the possibility of incessant mirror games in which the figure of the double appears as central. We've entitled this chapter "interlude", which is a little shorter than the others, mainly because rather than psychoanalysis and clinical structures, this chapter is more about phenomenology. It's about describing symptoms and signs. So, for once, we'll be taking a psychiatric viewpoint.

In this film, the exquisite Nina (a slimmed-down Natalie Portman, perfect in the role of perfectionist prima ballerina) dances for a New York company run by Thomas Leroy (a "perverse" Vincent Cassel). She lives alone with her mother, Erica, played by Barbara Hershey. She's over twenty-five, but still sleeps in her little girl's room, painted pink and full of stuffed toys. The film opens as Nina finally lands a leading role, suddenly and totally unexpectedly. It was to star in *Swan Lake*, just as her career was about to come to an end. The double role of white swan and black swan, which the script generously offers Nina, will nevertheless open the door to delirium.

In a threatening New York, the young woman begins to glimpse a mysterious double. Between the chaste white swan and her dark, erotic version, Nina soon loses all her bearings, to the point of losing her mind.



Are we with Nina in the prodromal stages of a paranoid interpretive delusion? Or are we witnessing the onset of schizophrenia? The film doesn't allow us to decide, even if it's probably schizophrenia. What is certain is that it's psychosis. Nina is clearly experiencing a delusional episode. And the whole film, beyond depicting a rivalry between women vying for the same role, can be viewed through this prism: the staging of a delusional episode. The dance, the music, the way the camera keeps moving, the way it shifts from one shot to the next at a speed that's always a little too fast, the way it plays with the grain of the light - all of this subtly shows us what his phenomenology is all about.

It's a film about the onset of psychosis - the famous decompensation. What triggers the delirium? Is it the role, the pinnacle of her career, the first role she's always wanted? Or is it the rivalry with another woman, too close to Nina, that reactivates her fragile identifications? All this could only be conjecture about hypothetical causes and will not interest us here. The only thing to remember, perhaps, because it's a kind of clinical axiom, is that behind every psychotic there often lurks a pervert. In this case, at least, it's out in the open. Our dancer's mother, Erica, is clearly a pervert, her sadism unmistakable. Indeed, she behaves like a real horror movie mother - think of Norman Bates's mother in *Psycho*, or Carrie's in Brian de Palma's *Carrie at the Devil's Ball*. Let's say she suddenly sees her daughter achieve what she herself has not been able to accomplish. As she keeps telling her, it's all her fault, since once she became a mother, her career inexorably came to an end, depriving her of the success she should have achieved. So, in a morbid ambivalence that's palpable at every turn, while encouraging her to be the best, she does everything she can to make sure she fails. Clearly, the mother is enjoying her daughter's difficulties, and her behavior is clearly perverse.



Let's take a quick look at Nina's main signs of a delusional episode: the theme of the delusion is persecution, with the unshakeable belief that her rival wants to take her role away from her at all costs. It is constantly accompanied by ideas of grandeur. Persecution and megalomania, then, but also a slight tinge of eroticism - she hallucinates that she's sleeping with her rival. In terms of mechanisms, the delirium presents multiple visual hallucinatory disorders, occurring suddenly. Nina constantly sees the other as her double. Her mirror image is a *mise en abîme*, and she perceives herself in frightening terms. As for her mood, it changes rapidly from depression to elation. However, there's no evidence of mental automatism: Nina doesn't feel under the sway of an external force that's stronger than she is. She does not feel that her ideas are constantly being divined by others. She hears no voices. Her only hallucinations, though visual, are nonetheless very rich. The delirium is not systematized, it goes in all directions and its logic escapes us. Nevertheless, Nina's adherence to her delusion is total. Nina is convinced she has killed her rival, even when she sees her alive and well when she opens the door to her dressing room shortly afterwards. And even when she returns to the empty place where she's convinced she's hidden her corpse. Very often, the film presents us with a Nina in the throes of severe depersonalization, feeling as if she's no longer herself. She sees herself as someone else, from a distance, a stranger to herself.



Identification problems are recurrent: her body image, her specular relationship with it, is not stable. She constantly confuses the other with herself. The woman she meets in the metro is her. She takes herself for the other: she thinks she's killing her rival, when in fact she's attacking herself without even realizing it. Another symptom that's very present in Nina: she spends her time mutilating herself, tearing the skin from her fingernails, cutting them until they bleed. Even if these are sometimes hallucinations, the wound being perceived as real when it's not - but what's more real than a hallucination? She scratches compulsively. She's clearly trying to hurt herself, as if to atone for something - though we'll never know what. Unless, on a more perverse level, she finds a certain pleasure in mutilating herself.



Last but not least, Nina is plagued throughout by intense anxiety. Nina has no idea what's going on inside her: her anguish is one of fragmentation. Her whole body feels fragmented.



The final scene shows Nina's act of self-inflicted laceration, which causes her to die on stage in a final crisis of acute depersonalization.

The immense interest of this film is to show us, using the rich art of cinema, and with extreme phenomenological precision, what it's like to be in a transitory delirium when it's the prodromes of an entry into schizophrenia. What stands out is the unbearable anguish endured by the subject who falls prey to such a delusion, but above all this key point, which is the hallmark of all true madness: the subject's unwavering adherence to his delusion, in which there is no room for doubt. A mad certainty that yields to neither fact nor reasoning.

When psychosis is triggered in the form of a delusional episode, it brings into play the Other jouissance of which Lacan speaks. This unlimited jouissance, localized in the body, of which nothing can be said except that it is experienced. When it's boundless, without limits, without anything to contain it, it literally wreaks havoc. This non-phallic jouissance, this mad jouissance, is unleashed in Nina both in the way she tortures her body and in her hallucinations. The delirious breath takes the subject by surprise, leaving him defenseless in the face of this insane jouissance. It is only a constructed delusion, developed over time, that can eventually provide this defense. If it can take this form, delirium is often the only solution. It's an elaboration that gives meaning to a mortifying jouissance that has none. In this way, the delusion can be treated by injecting meaning. In this case, Nina was unable to construct a sufficiently structured delusion to explain to herself the reason for the enigmatic jouissance that assailed her.

This Other jouissance, specific to psychosis, is a jouissance that possesses you, invades you, totally submerges you: for Nina, defenseless, the only way out is pure and simple suicide.