

I Was Perfect: Fragmentation and the Death of the Unified Self in Black Swan

How does *Black Swan* destabilise the notion of a unified subject through psychoanalytic concepts of fragmentation, repression, and the uncanny?

Abstract

This essay examines how *Black Swan* (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky, destabilises the notion of the unified subject through the psychoanalytic concepts of fragmentation, repression and the uncanny. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud as well as other theorists, it argues that the film does not simply depict psychological breakdown, but instead reveals identity as inherently divided, constructed and unstable.

The essay begins by analysing subject formation through Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, demonstrating how Nina's identity is shaped through misrecognition and external images. The film's use of mirrors, doubling and performance constructs her as a fundamentally fragmented subject, whose sense of self is dependent on unstable visual representations. It then explores Freud's theory of repression, showing how Nina's rigid discipline and pursuit of perfection rely on the suppression of instinctual drives, particularly those linked to sexuality and spontaneity. These repressed desires return in distorted and disruptive forms, often through hallucination, fantasy and bodily transformation, destabilising her sense of control and coherence.

Finally, the essay examines the emergence of the uncanny as the culmination of this instability. Through doubling, hallucination and bodily transformation, *Black Swan* collapses the boundary between self and other, revealing identity as both familiar and alien. Nina's final transformation exposes the impossibility of achieving a unified self, as her declaration of 'perfection' coincides with the complete disintegration of identity.

Ultimately, the essay argues that *Black Swan* does not represent the loss of unity, but reveals that such unity is fundamentally illusory.

Introduction

The notion of the unified subject, understood as a coherent, stable and self contained identity, has long been central to Western conceptions of the self (Aimiehinor, 2025). However, psychoanalytic theory fundamentally challenges this assumption, instead positioning subjectivity as divided, constructed and shaped by unconscious forces. Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) engages directly with this tension, offering a psychologically intense exploration of identity that calls into question whether a unified subject can truly exist.

Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, the essay examines how *Black Swan* destabilises the notion of a unified subject through the interconnected psychoanalytic concepts of fragmentation, repression and the uncanny. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage suggests that identity is formed through misrecognition, in which the subject identifies with an external image that appears

whole but conceals an underlying division (Mambrol, 2016). Similarly, Freud's theory of repression argues that the subject is structured by unconscious desires that are excluded from conscious awareness yet continue to exert disruptive influence. (Boag, 2019, pp 11,12) Together, these frameworks challenge the idea of identity as stable or fully knowable, instead presenting it as inherently fractured.

Within this framework, *Black Swan* can be understood not simply as a depiction of psychological breakdown, but as a cinematic articulation of the unstable nature of subjectivity itself. Through the character of Nina, a disciplined ballet dancer striving for perfection, the film reveals identity as something continually constructed through performance, surveillance and repression. Her pursuit of perfection depends upon the suppression of instinctual drives, particularly those associated with sexuality and spontaneity, yet these repressed elements inevitably return in increasingly destabilising forms (Baloch, Mir and Ahmed, 2025).

This essay argues that *Black Swan* destabilises the notion of a unified subject by demonstrating that identity is never coherent to begin with, but is instead produced through processes of fragmentation, sustained through repression and ultimately undone through the emergence of the uncanny. Firstly, the film constructs Nina's identity through reflection and misrecognition, presenting her as fundamentally divided. Secondly, it shows how her apparent stability is maintained through repression, as unconscious desires return in disruptive ways. Finally, the film culminates in an uncanny collapse of identity, in which the boundary between self and other dissolves entirely.

By tracing this progression, the essay demonstrates that *Black Swan* does not simply depict the breakdown of an individual psyche, but exposes the illusion of the unified subject itself, revealing identity as inherently unstable, divided and ultimately impossible to sustain as a coherent whole.

Subject Formation and Fragmentation

Psychoanalytic theory challenges the notion of the human subject as unified and coherent, instead proposing that identity is constructed through processes that are inherently unstable and divided. The work of Jacques Lacan is central to this understanding, particularly his concept of the mirror stage, which describes the formation of the ego through identification with external images (Lacan, 2006). In this process, the subject encounters its reflection as whole and unified, despite experiencing the body as fragmented and uncoordinated. This produces what Lacan terms misrecognition, in which the subject falsely identifies with an image of coherence that masks an underlying division. The ego is therefore not a stable expression of identity, but an illusion constructed through visual identification. This illusion is compelling precisely because it offers a sense of stability that the subject does not internally possess, creating a reliance on external image to sustain identity. From this perspective, the

subject is always split between its perceived unity and its fragmented reality, meaning identity is continually produced rather than possessed.

This instability is immediately reflected in *Black Swan*, which introduces Nina as a subject already marked by division rather than coherence. The opening dream ballet sequence establishes this fragmentation from the outset, as Nina performs both the White Swan and Black Swan within surreal, dreamlike space. This dual performance suggests that opposing aspects of her identity coexist simultaneously, positioning her as divided between control and instinct before the narrative has fully developed. The moment of transformation between the White Swan and Black Swan is particularly significant, as it visually collapses the boundary between these identities, suggesting that they are not separate roles but conflicting elements of the same subject. The use of dream logic reinforces this instability, aligning with psychoanalytic interpretations of dreams as expressions of unconscious conflict (Cliffe, 2025). The lack of clear distinction between reality and imagination further destabilises Nina's subjectivity, as the dream space reflects an unconscious struggle that cannot be contained within a unified sense of self. Rather than presenting fragmentation as a later breakdown, the film establishes it as a foundational condition of Nina's subjectivity, establishing her identity as unstable from the outset.

This instability is further reinforced through the film's use of mirrors, by visually enacting Lacan's theory of identity formation through reflection. Throughout *Black Swan*, Nina is repeatedly confronted with her own image within the mirrored spaces of the ballet studio, suggesting that her sense of self is constructed through external representation rather than internal coherence.



Figure 1 Afionofsky, D. (2010). *Measured for a Costume*. [Film Still] California Herps *Black Swan*.

The mirror scenes are particularly significant, as they surround her with multiple reflections producing repetition and instability in which no unified identity can be located. The multiplication of her image

creates a visual fragmentation of the body, as Nina is no longer reflected as a singular figure but as a series of disjointed copies, each slightly detached from the other. Rather than confirming who she is, these reflections fragment her image, reinforcing the Lacanian argument that the self is constituted through an external image that is both idealised and alienating (Lacan, 2006). This environment also situates Nina within a collective space of dancers who move in synchronisation, further destabilising her individuality as her body becomes one among many, reinforcing the idea that identity is shaped through repetition rather than uniqueness. In this way, identity is shown to depend on visual repetition and performance, rather than any inner core.

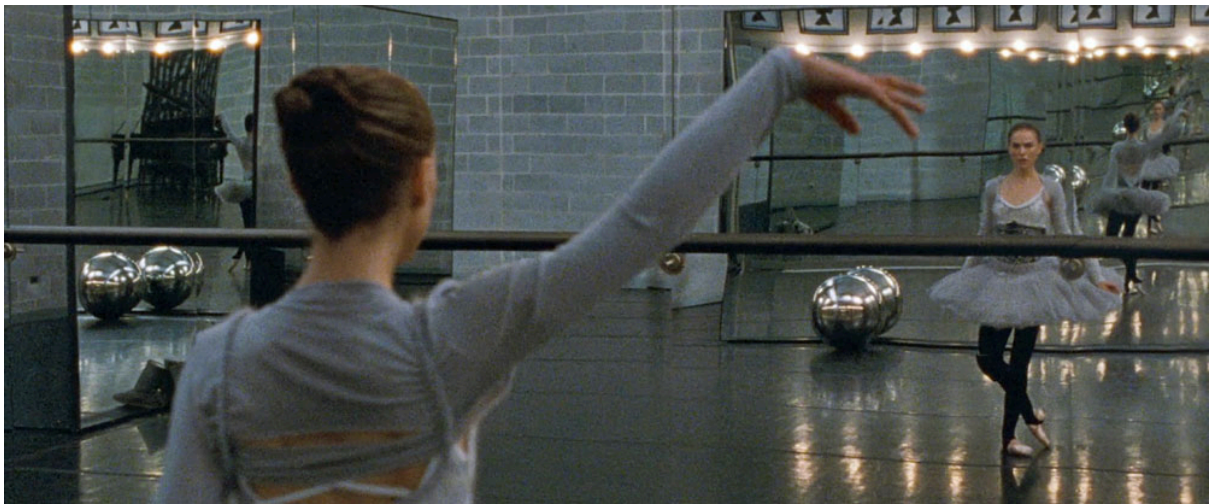


Figure 3 Afronofsky, D. (2010). *Reflection Moves Independently*. [Film Still] California Herps *Black Swan*.

However, *Black Swan* does not simply illustrate this process of identification, but actively destabilises it. In several moments, Nina's reflection appears to move independently of her body, creating a disjunction between the subject and its image. This disruption is particularly unsettling because it breaks the assumed synchronisation between body and reflection, suggesting that the image Nina relies upon is no longer under her control. This breakdown undermines the stabilising function of the mirror, revealing the fragility of the ego and the illusion of unity it produces, exposing the gap between Nina and the image with which she identifies. This instability is further intensified through Nina's obsessive self surveillance, as she continually watches and corrects her own body in an attempt to maintain control. In doing so, she occupies a dual position as both subject and object, reinforcing the division within her identity. As Žižek (2007) argues, the mirror image is not a true reflection of the self but a misrecognised construct that structures subjectivity. In this context, the breakdown of Nina's reflection signals not the loss of identity, but the exposure of its instability, as the image she depends on begins to detach and operate independently. In *Black Swan*, this construct begins to collapse, as the image Nina relies upon becomes unstable and uncontrollable.

Through these visual and narrative strategies, the film constructs Nina as a fundamentally fragmented subject whose identity is shaped through misrecognition, reflection, and performance. This construction emphasises that her sense of self is never internally secure, but constantly dependent on unstable external images and repeated acts of performance. This is reinforced by the film's visual focus on the body, which as Wild (2025) suggests, reflects a subject that is never fully coherent, but constantly at risk of fragmentation and transformation. As Jacques Lacan suggests, the subject is always already divided, meaning that any appearance of unity is inherently precarious and liable to collapse (Claude-Giroux, 2025). By exposing the illusion of unified self, *Black Swan* aligns with psychoanalytic theory in challenging the idea of identity as coherent or self contained. As Creed (2024) suggests, the instability of identity is often expressed through the body itself, where psychological fragmentation becomes materially visible, reinforcing the impossibility of a fixed or unified subject. The film therefore does not depict fragmentation as a failure to achieve unity, but as evidence that such unity was never fully possible to begin with. This fragmentation lays the foundation for the emergence of repressed desire, as the instability of Nina's identity creates the conditions in which suppressed elements of the self begin to surface. This fragmentation creates the conditions in which repressed desires begin to emerge, shifting the focus from divided identity to the forces that destabilise it further.

Repression and the Return of Desire

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud, argues that the subject is structured through repression, in which unacceptable desires are pushed out of conscious awareness but continue to exist within the unconscious (Billig, 1999). This suggests the subject is not fully autonomous, but shaped by unconscious forces, undermining the idea of a stable and self contained identity. These repressed desires often relate to instinctual drives such as sexuality, aggression and loss of control, which are perceived as threatening to the stability of the ego. These drives are often incompatible with socially acceptable behaviour, meaning they must be suppressed in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. In *Black Swan*, Nina's strict discipline and commitment to perfection can be understood as a form of repression, particularly in relation to sexuality, aggression and spontaneity. Her controlled physicality, rigid routines and childlike presentation all suggest an effort to suppress instinctual impulses in favour of order and purity. Her childlike bedroom, relationship with her mother and strict bodily discipline all reinforce a state of arrested development, in which desire is not expressed but actively denied. What is repressed often returns in distorted or excessive forms particularly through the body, where it disrupts the boundaries that maintain a sense of identity (Creed, 2024). These suppressed traits can also return in altered forms, often through projection and fantasy (McGowan, 2015). This dynamic is most clearly articulated through the figure of Lily, who embodies the qualities Nina is unable to consciously accept, including sexual confidence, emotional freedom and

spontaneity. The contrast between Nina and Lily is therefore not simply narrative, but psychological, positioning Lily as the embodiment of everything Nina excludes from her identity. Rather than functioning solely as an external character, Lily can be interpreted as a projection of Nina's unconscious desires, reflecting Freud's argument that repressed impulses often return in forms that appear external to the subject.

This repression is reinforced through Nina's interaction with the ballet director, who challenges her inability to access sensuality and instinct. His instruction that she must "lose herself" highlights the tension between control and desire, as Nina's rigid self discipline prevents her from engaging with the more instinctual aspects of performance. This dynamic reflects Sigmund Freud's argument that repression operates by restricting access to instinctual drives, preventing their conscious expression while allowing them to persist within the unconscious (Rickman, 1954). This instruction reflects the need to abandon conscious control to access the unconscious drives required for the role, something Nina is fundamentally unable to do. Her visible discomfort during this interaction, particularly in response to physical contact, suggests a deep resistance to intimacy and loss of control, reinforcing the extent of her repression. The tension in this scene is therefore not simply interpersonal, but psychological, as Nina's inability to respond reveals the extent to which her body has become disciplined and controlled, rather than expressive or instinctual. Her reaction reflects deeper resistance, but a manifestation of deeper psychological resistance to desire and embodiment. Her inability to respond authentically shows that her identity is structured through restriction, rather than emotional or bodily expression. This moment demonstrates that her failure to embody the Black Swan is not due to a lack of skill, but rather the result of psychological repression that limits her subjectivity. As a result, Nina's identity remains restricted and incomplete, as it is defined more by what is excluded than what is expressed. This repression does not remain contained, however and begins to surface more visibly in subsequent scenes.

The nightclub scene represents a key moment in which Nina's repression begins to break down. Surrounded by drugs, music and sexual energy, she temporarily abandons her rigid self control and begins to engage with previously suppressed behaviours. The dim lighting, rapid editing and distorted sound design contribute to a sense of disorientation, visually and aurally representing Nina's loss of control. The chaotic and sensory overload of the environment contrasts sharply with the controlled discipline of the ballet studio, visually marking a shift in Nina's psychological state. The shift marks the emergence of repressed desire, as Nina experiences a loss of control that contrasts with her earlier restraints. Her behaviour in this scene marks a significant departure from her usual restraint, indicating that these desires are not newly formed but have been suppressed throughout. Her disorientation and altered perception further indicate that this release is not fully conscious, but driven by unconscious impulses beginning to surface. This aligns with Freud's assertion that the return of the

repressed is often experienced as something foreign or uncontrollable. However, this release is unstable and disorienting, indicating that these desires cannot be fully integrated into her identity. Instead, they begin to destabilise her sense of self, illustrating Freud's argument that repressed impulses return in ways that disrupt the subject's stability (Rickman, 1954). This partial release of control intensifies in the following sequence, where repression returns in a more distorted form.

Nina imagines an intimate encounter with Lily. The scene initially appears real, before gradually revealing itself as a hallucination, blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality. This ambiguity destabilises the viewer as well as Nina, reinforcing the collapse of boundaries between internal and external experience. This moment represents the return of repressed desire in a distorted and unconscious form, as the experience takes place within fantasy rather than conscious action. The intensity of the hallucination suggests that repression has not weakened these desires, but instead amplified them. Freud argues that repressed desires often re-emerge through dreams and hallucinations, where they bypass the restrictions of conscious control (Julian de Medeiros, 2024). Nina's inability to distinguish between her internal desire and external reality suggests that these repressed impulses are beginning to dominate her perception. This loss of distinction further destabilises her identity, as unconscious desire disrupts her ability to maintain a coherent sense of self. As a result, Nina's subjectivity becomes increasingly dominated by unconscious processes, further eroding any sense of stability or control.

Through these moments, *Black Swan* demonstrates that repression does not produce a stable or unified subject, but instead creates the conditions for psychological conflict and fragmentation. Rather than maintaining order, repression produces tension that builds throughout the film, ultimately leading to psychological breakdown. As Nina's repressed desires return with increasing intensity, her carefully maintained sense of control begins to collapse, revealing the instability at the core of her identity. The more Nina attempts to maintain control, the more forcefully these repressed elements return, highlighting the unsustainable nature of repression. As Freud suggests, repressed desires inevitably return, often in intensified and disruptive forms (Akhtar, 2020). In Nina's case, this return does not resolve internal conflict, but instead amplifies it, leading to a breakdown in the boundaries between control and instinct. This escalation demonstrates that identity cannot remain unified when it is built upon the exclusion of fundamental aspects of the self. This progression prepares the ground for the emergence of the uncanny, in which the distinction between self and other becomes increasingly unstable.

The Uncanny Collapse of Self

As Nina's repressed desires intensify, they begin to destabilise not only her behaviour, but her perception of reality, leading to the emergence of the uncanny. Developed by Sigmund Freud, the

uncanny refers to the unsettling experience in which something simultaneously appears familiar and strange, producing discomfort and disorientation (Fenichel, 2018). Rather than arising from the unknown, the uncanny emerges from what is known but repressed, returning in altered and often disturbing forms. In this sense, it is closely linked to repression, as the uncanny signals the reappearance of elements that were previously hidden from conscious awareness. Central to Freud's theory is the idea that the uncanny disrupts the distinction between self and other, particularly through experiences of doubling, repetition and the animation of the inanimate. These phenomena challenge the stability of identity by suggesting that the self is not singular or contained, but capable of division and externalisation. As a result, the uncanny does not simply produce fear, but reveals a deeper psychological instability, in which the subject is confronted with aspects of itself that appear alien yet intimately familiar. In *Black Swan*, this is particularly significant, as Nina's earlier fragmentation and repression create the conditions for the emergence of the uncanny, in which her identity can no longer be maintained as separate or coherent.

The emergence of the uncanny in *Black Swan* is most clearly articulated through the motif of doubling, particularly in the relationship between Nina and Lily. Lily functions as a doppelgänger figure, embodying traits that Nina both desires and represses, including sexual confidence, spontaneity and emotional freedom. While Lily initially appears as a separate character, her increasing overlap with Nina destabilises the boundary between self and other, suggesting that she is not an external rival, but an externalised version of Nina's unconscious. As Wild (2025) notes, this blurring of identity reinforces the idea that the boundaries between self and other are unstable, with Lily functioning as both a separate character and psychological projection. This aligns with Sigmund Freud's argument that the double originates as a reflection of the self, but becomes uncanny when it appears autonomous and threatening (Boyle, 2016). The doubling becomes increasingly unsettling as the film progresses, particularly in moments where Nina begins to see Lily's face in place of her own, or experiences confusion between their identities. These visual substitutions collapse the distinction between the two characters, suggesting that Nina can no longer maintain a clear boundary between her conscious self and the desires she has projected onto Lily. The double therefore ceases to function as a reassuring mirror and instead becomes a source of anxiety, reflecting Freud's idea that the uncanny emerges when something once familiar becomes strange through repression and return. As Nina's identification with Lily intensifies, her sense of self destabilises, as the qualities she has denied are no longer external but begin to merge with her own identity. Ultimately, the figure of the double exposes the impossibility of maintaining a unified subject, as Nina is forced to confront aspects of herself that she has previously disavowed. Rather than integrating these elements, the doubling process leads to further fragmentation, as the distinction between self and other collapses entirely. In this way, *Black Swan* uses the uncanny figure of the doppelgänger to demonstrate that identity is not fixed or singular, but split and unstable, shaped by the return of repressed desires that can no longer be contained.

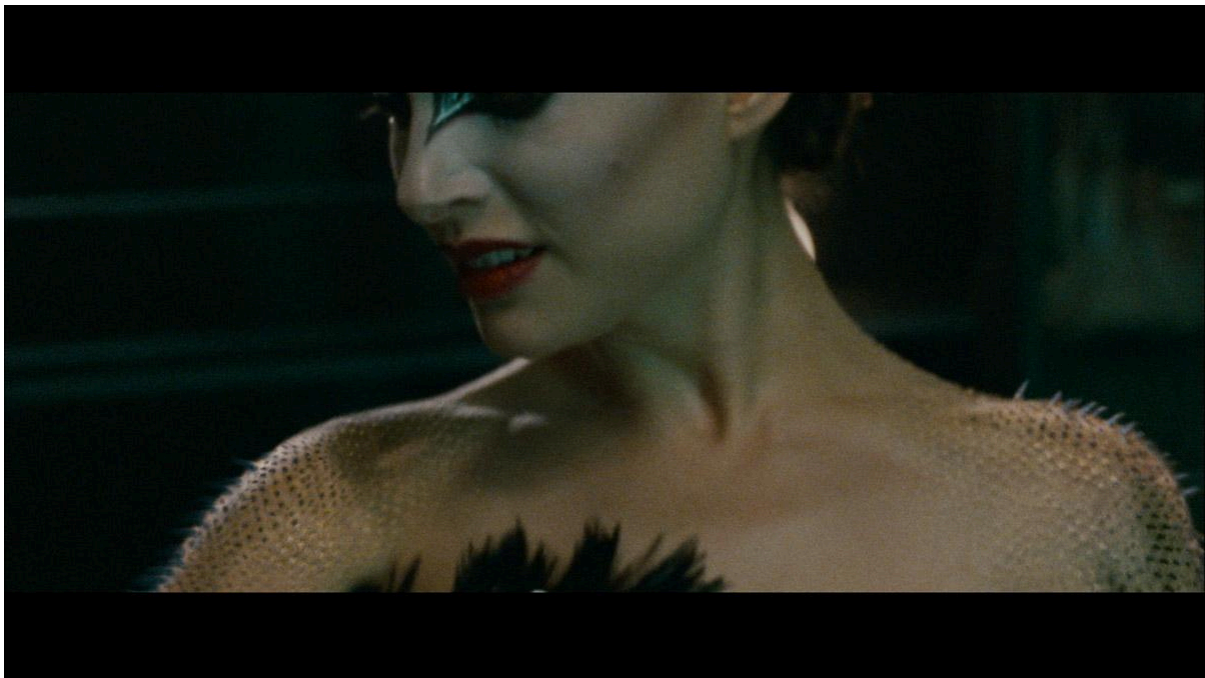


Figure 2 Afronofsky, D. (2010a). *Feathers Growing*. [Film Still] FXGuide.

This collapse of identity extends beyond perception and becomes a physical manifestation on the body. As Nina's psychological instability deepens, her body becomes the site at which represents and fragmentation manifests visibly, most notably through the emergence of feathers and the obsessive picking at her skin. These moments are deeply unsettling because they present the body as both familiar and alien, aligning with Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny as something that is simultaneously known and strange (Halking, 2022). Rather than functioning as a stable container of identity, Nina's body becomes unpredictable and uncontrollable, reflecting the collapse of the boundaries that previously maintained her sense of self. This aligns with Wild (2025)'s argument that Nina's transformation reflects a loss of bodily autonomy, where the body is no longer experienced as self but as something alien and intrusive. Rather than functioning as a stable container of identity, Nina's body becomes unpredictable reflecting the collapse of the boundaries that previously maintained her sense of self. These transformations are particularly significant because they suggest that the repressed elements of Nina's identity are no longer confined to the unconscious, but have begun to materialise physically. The appearance of feathers beneath her skin, for example, visualises the intrusion of the Black Swan identity into her body, collapsing the distinction between performance and reality. This disrupts the idea of the body as fixed and coherent, instead presenting it as something mutable and open to change. As Barbara Creed argues, body horror often reveals anxieties surrounding the instability of the human form, exposing the body as a site of transformation rather than unity. This is further reinforced by Creed's later work on the monstrous body, in which she argues that the horror of transformation lies in its ability to dissolve clear boundaries between inside

and outside, self and other, rendering the body unfamiliar to itself (Creed, 2025). In this way, Nina's physical transformation is not simply symbolic, but represents the breakdown of the boundary between identity and embodiment. Furthermore, these bodily distortions intensify the uncanny by externalising Nina's internal conflict, making visible the psychological processes that have previously been contained within the unconscious. The body no longer functions as a stable boundary between self and other, but instead becomes the medium through which this distinction collapses. As Nina's transformation progresses, she is no longer able to distinguish between her human identity and the Black Swan she is becoming, resulting in a complete dissolution of self. The uncanny therefore reaches its peak in the body, where the familiar becomes grotesque and identity is no longer contained, demonstrating that the subject is not only psychologically divided, but physically unstable



Figure 4 Afronofsky, D. (2010c). *Wings*. [Film Still] FXGuide.

This collapse reaches its peak during the final performance. The culmination of the uncanny in *Black Swan* occurs in the final performance, where the boundaries between self, other and role collapse entirely. Nina's transformation into the Black Swan signifies not the achievement of a unified identity, but its complete disintegration, as performance overtakes the self. The visual spectacle of this transformation, particularly the emergence of wings and the distortion of her body, reinforces the idea that identity is no longer contained within the human form, but has become unstable and excessive. This is made explicit when Nina believes she has killed Lily, only to realise she has wounded herself, revealing that the 'other' she sought to destroy was part of her own fragmented identity. This moment collapses the distinction between internal and external conflict, demonstrating that the violence produced by repression is ultimately self directed rather than outwardly resolved. Her final declaration of 'perfection' is therefore deeply ironic, marking not coherence but collapse. This attainment of perfection is thus inseparable from destruction, suggesting that the very ideal Nina strives for is structurally unattainable within a divided subject. In this way, the film ultimately destabilises the

notion of a unified subject, presenting identity as divided, constructed and unable to sustain stability. This supports the argument that the body itself becomes the site of this instability, where identity is not only psychologically divided but psychically undone (Wild, 2025).

Conclusion

In examining *Black Swan* (2010) through a psychoanalytic framework, this essay has shown that the film does not simply depict a psychological breakdown, but instead exposes the instability at the core of subjectivity itself. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, it has demonstrated that Nina's identity is never unified or internally secure, but constructed through processes that are fundamentally divided and unstable.

Across the progression from fragmentation to repression and finally to the uncanny, the film reveals that any appearance of coherence is always fragile and dependent on unstable structures. Nina's sense of self is formed through misrecognition and reflection, sustained through the repression of instinctual desire and ultimately undone as these repressed elements return in increasingly disruptive and uncontrollable ways. Rather than resolving this instability, the film intensifies it, showing that identity cannot be stabilised through discipline, performance or control.

Nina's final transformation therefore does not represent the achievement of unity or perfection, but its collapse. Her declaration of "perfection" marks the moment at which the illusion of a unified subject is most fully exposed, revealing that the ideal she strives for is structurally unattainable within a divided subject. In this sense, *Black Swan* (2010) does not simply portray the failure of an individual, but demonstrates that the unified subject is an illusion.

Ultimately, the film presents identity as something that is not fixed or coherent, but continually constructed, divided and vulnerable to collapse. Rather than suggesting that unity is lost, *Black Swan* (2010) reveals that it was never fully possible to begin with.

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