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BARTHIAN BLISS IN THE FILMS OF DARREN ARONOFSKY

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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Introduction

My impetus for this project boils down to two causes, the first of which was my increasing discontent with standard genre classification. In exploring how genre classification and its terms mold, embody, and even constrain our personal preferences when we attempt to utilize them in conferring with ourselves and the rest of the world on Film, it becomes apparent that the offerings of genre classification are lacking. The instability and fluidity of any given genre is what has always made me shy away from considering genre as a consistent, reliable classification system, though the idea of a system that requires the formulation of bias among its users is what strikes me as its most significant liability. As opposed to categorizing films in such a way that necessitates biases in viewers, I sought to propose a more viewer-friendly method—a qualification complementary to ambiguous generic terminology, at the very least.

In his essay "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," Rick Altman explores the history of generic terminology and most concisely explains several issues with its creation. He demonstrates that the only interest Hollywood has in maintaining use of such colloquialisms is for profit: "By assaying and imitating the money-making qualities of their own most lucrative films, studios seek to initiate film cycles that will provide successful, easily exploitable models associated with a single studio" (15). Though such terminology expedites discourse, he illustrates that "film publicity seldom employs generic terms as such" and, rather, "at every turn we find that Hollywood labors to identify its pictures with multiple genres, in order to benefit from the increased interest that this strategy inspires in diverse demographic groups" (9). The fluidity of genre classification is an institution knowingly perpetuated by production

industry aims, much to the dismay of critical audiences. Though Altman does not concede to the difficulties of genre "cartography," he does conclude that "the constitution of film cycles and genres is a never-ceasing process, closely tied to the twin capitalist needs of product differentiation and readily identifiable commodities" (17). The slightly maddening fact that the issues encountered with genre classification are rendered inevitable by Capitalism constitutes a second significant flaw with the system of nomenclature.

Though my experience in colloquium on films has revealed a widespread love of employing sub-genres to qualify and summarize films, I feel that toying with genres any further than the secondary "*sub-*" tier is the beginning of a potentially endless and unavoidably ambiguous endeavor. Even primary-tier genres become troublesome without some very concrete sets of parameters for qualification, but if one is expected to research generic terms and qualify examples stringently, the primary appeal of the system of nomenclature—convenience—is lost. Altman makes note of the fate of audiences due to this ambiguity:

> With no way to distinguish among terms, we regularly intermingle current and former genres. Lumped in the same sentence are films made under a genre-film regime and films subsequently assimilated to that genre; genres that once existed that now exist, and that have not yet fully begun to exist; genres recently substantified and others still adjectival in nature; genres currently boasting genre-film audiences and others that long ago lost those audiences. (6-7)

The appeal of genre classification—even though it requires equivocal jargon—is directly

proportional to how expedient proponents of the scheme are committed to keeping it.

As Film as an industry and a great creator continues to grow, its potential for and tendency toward diversity are also direct corollaries. This isn't to say that films are fast approaching a realm that defies convention or classification, but the more external growth of Film as an industry necessitates internal growth within the actual filmmaking aspect of the trade and its products. As Hollywood players enjoy getting too big for their britches, the liminal space within becomes a latent playground for directors, screenwriters and films to use to live up to the hype and demand for new, exciting, next-best-thing films. Consequently, films as entities have the potential to become more and more inimitable.

With this consideration of expansion and evolution in mind, it becomes apparent that traditional genre classification is in need of considerable overhaul to remain representative and specific enough to truly aid discourse. Even the curators of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) are unknowingly willing to admit a need for supplementary classification; the average number of listings in the genre fields of the entries on my top twenty-five favorite films is 3.2. Because these assigned genres are all what would be considered primary-tier classifications (no "sub-" genres), it is hard to make sense of each listed film's garnering of generic classifications; the order in which they are listed is simply alphabetical.

Our increased ability to defy conventions (and conventional terminology) in filmmaking does not, however, necessitate it. Conventions in films exist and come about due to audience inclination to latch on to the familiar. If one actively seeks out films in the genre of Science Fiction, it is because he or she is fond of encountering the subject

matter and tropes that are typically acknowledged as being characteristic of that genre. The same can be said of any viewer and established genre. We use genre classification to help us latch on to the familiar in Film. Viewers who seek out films from a particular genre can be said to be seeking out unsurprising experiences. Perhaps a viewer goes into films of the Science Fiction genre because he or she is only comfortable or appreciative of a certain degree of mystery as to what is being undertaken. The viewer wants some established parameters, or has a temporary preference at the very least, as to what he or she undertakes, yet is willing to allow for some leeway within those constraints.

Auteur theory is an excellent school to reference for this particular consideration of the familiar in Film. Where I'm willing to give any Coen Brothers' film the time of day without a second thought and I excitedly don my abstract interpretation cap to approach the oeuvre of David Lynch, I literally cringe at the mention of Michael Bay. This is all because of what familiarity with the oeuvres of these directors has instilled in me over time. Most dedicated moviegoers have at least a strong feeling or two when it comes to certain actors, actresses, and directors and their respective contributions to Film, but this is a double-hinged door: we use this framework of biases both to embrace and, unfortunately, disregard films.

The pseudo-scale that I've been consciously using and honing to evaluate films over the past half-decade or so of my life coincides most closely with the literary theory set forth by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Though my familiarity with this particular work was relatively recent, I latched onto it immediately as supportive of the personal approach that I have been using to qualify my preferences within films and

mentally catalog them.

Since I was mature and interested enough to begin thinking of films in terms of personal preference, I have lumped them into two fairly distinct categories. In brief, I classified films as either *thinking* or *unthinking*. This dichotomy at first glance seems weighted. "Unthinking" as a label certainly hosts its share of negative connotations. As the ultimate aim of this distinction, however, has never been criticism, it should not be considered as such. The term can most concisely be understood to mean not requiring academic engagement: of such a nature that substantial scholarly or learned contemplation is not required to facilitate interpretation or appreciation. With this definition in place, the explanation for "thinking" as a distinction falls more easily into place: of such a nature that substantial scholarly or learned contemplation *is* required to facilitate interpretation or appreciation. Though a less than profound method for cataloging films, the simplicity and expediency of this approach to analysis has served me well for several years. Alison Niemi offers some justification for the accessibility and appeal of such an intuitive system: "Filmic models can be internalized intuitively instead of consciously because they are conveyed temporally, and therefore emotionally, rather than remaining within the realm of abstract thought" (437). While largely unaccommodating of discourse on films, such methods are crucial to constructing personal interpretations and analyses of them.

In this essay I argue that the films of director Darren Aronofsky correspond to the *Text of Bliss* defined in Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*. In his short book Barthes explicates the *Text of Pleasure* and the *Text of Bliss*. The *text of pleasure* is described generally as one that does not challenge the reader's role as a subject, while

the *text of bliss* requires a certain degree of active engagement. With some simple translation of Barthes terminology into the register of Film Studies, films can serve as "texts," and "readers" their audiences. The drawing of a distinction between *texts of pleasure* and *texts of bliss* is productive in that it can offer critical audiences an overarching dichotomy to use in qualifying narrative films, which can quietly coexist with and complement the industry-driven creation of generic terminology.

Using several aspects of audience reception to dissect Aronofsky's films justifies identifying his oeuvre as *texts of bliss*: works that disquiet viewers by unsettling their assumptions of the world around them and their own relationships with it. Aronofsky's employment of self-destructive protagonists as well as narrative endings that require a perspective estranged from cultural norms to be interpreted as "happy" serves as the foundation for an analysis of the director as a *text of bliss* auteur. This appropriation of literary theory to audience reception theory in Film Studies provides us with an example of how films can be classified without relying on genre classification. In contrast to a society where genre classification is tied to the economic concerns of studio production, i.e., making money by capitalizing on popular generic forms, my analysis demonstrates how the original roots of genre classification in enduring cultural philosophies and historical texts remain utilitarian in seeking alternative systematic qualifications of film that are based on films' effects on the viewer. This Barthes-based alternative serves as an example of how personally-developed classification systems can be used to circumvent relying on popular opinion and corporate aims for guidance in film classification.

<u>Roland Barthes and *The Pleasure of the Text*</u>

Born in 1915, Roland Barthes lived most of his life in France. His struggles with tuberculosis and its complications relegated his career as a student and publisher to a fragmented progression. Though his early work focused on Structuralism and denouncing other schools of criticism on its behalf, his most well-known work was his 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author." As a response to the burgeoning influence of Jacques Derrida's Deconstructionism in literary theory, the essay explored what Barthes saw as the end of structuralist thought, and many consider it the transition of his work's focus from structuralist to poststructuralist aims. Barthes first introduced a dichotomous qualification of texts in his 1970 structural analysis, *S/Z*. The "readerly" and "writerly" texts explained therein served as preliminary distinctions that he would further explore as *texts of pleasure* and *texts of bliss*, respectively, in his 1973 short book *The Pleasure of the Text*. Though based on characteristic structuralist binary opposition, the distinctions focused on in the essay are based largely on reception theory, and indicated a significant departure from Barthes' previous work in Formalism.

Though Barthes fleshes out the concepts of the *text of pleasure* and the *text of bliss* thoroughly in his book, he does not do so very accommodatingly. *The Pleasure of the Text* is not divided into recognizable, titled chapters or sections but rather reads as a collection of musings in prose form, occasionally separated by thought break notation. To approach making the division between texts of *pleasure* and *bliss*, Barthes relies on describing their interplay just as heavily as defining their characteristics as autonomous distinctions. The conceptual explication that he utilizes in examples is what allows for such expedient translation to the register of Film Studies, and parallels between "texts"

and films become readily apparent.

Barthes' intent seems to be to offer a distinction for personal evaluation of texts: "I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad, for this implies a tactical aim, a social usage" (13). The extent to which his propositions are explored, however, suggests applicability on a much larger scale. He even addresses how the distinctions (though not consciously thought of as distinctions) are often viewed in the public eye: "Pleasure is championed *against* intellectuality, the clerisy: the old reactionary myth of hear against head, sensation against reasoning, (warm) 'life' against (cold) 'abstraction'" (22). The tendency of the majority of audiences to seek out *texts of pleasure*, which leave values and cultural assumptions unchallenged in their wake, is even tied back to a biological predisposition, which I will address shortly. With regards to this project, the same tendency can be used to explain the box office successes of star-studded, action-packed summer blockbusters in comparison to the relative box office "failures" that tend toward the Dramatic mode or "art film" classification.

Barthes likens the experience of *bliss* to erotic, biological desires and our engagement with the "body" of a text to erotic interaction with another person, or "body." *Pleasure*, on the other hand, "is irreducible to physiological need" (17). Here Barthes identifies a need of ours, as humans, to engage with material that does not "break with culture," and rather encourages us to continue to living our lives happily, within the confines of grand sociological structures: the *text of pleasure*. In contrast to such bodies exists the *text of bliss*, which challenges the reader's role as subject and makes requests *of* him rather than making offerings *to* him; engagement—intellectual, emotional, and so forth—is necessitated.

In summation of these intellectual snippets, Barthes ultimately says that there is no fine line between *pleasure* and *bliss*: "The distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, and the discourse incomplete" (4). Regardless, these endeavors do lead to a discernible division between the two ideas, which I will illustrate by identifying the filmic aspects with which we should concern ourselves to appropriate this dichotomy to Film Studies. Prior to this, however, further illumination of Barthes' *text of pleasure* and *text of bliss* is necessary.

Though Barthes' concept of the *text of pleasure* will serve largely as the antithesis of the *text of bliss* qualifications that will be evidenced in Aronofsky's films, a thorough exploration of its characteristics within its original context will help ground the idea before it is adapted for the purposes of this essay. Roland Barthes' most straightforward definition of a *text of pleasure* is, "The text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (14). Because this description is so dense and the proffered series of verbs apparently synonymous, strict piecewise interpretation renders equally unrevealing phrasing. Barthes' italics—"*comfortable*"—guide recognition of what can be used as a foundation for preliminary comprehension. Consider, for illustration, a book that you have read for recreational purposes (often referred to as "pleasure reading"). It probably made you smile at times; perhaps it even evoked laughter—or maybe only a grin and a chuckle. Such texts are selected by readers seeking pleasing, agreeable content. Because selections based on these aims will vary from one reader to another, based on our preliminary understanding, any text that has been read for

enjoyment can be argued a *text of pleasure*. Further stipulations need be retrieved from Barthes' offering to remedy this.

Equally as telling of the *text of pleasure* is that it "comes from culture and does not break with it." Though beyond the scope of this project, it is important to be aware that this means identification of a *text of pleasure* will vary slightly not only based on personal preference, but also with respect to an evaluator's cultural identity. Some examples of institutions governed by prevailing cultural awareness in the United States include the prescribed roles of husband and wife, the less commendable establishment of social stratification, and even "the American Dream," a set of supposedly desirable life goals. Though neither the "comes from culture" nor "*comfortable* practice" qualification can stand alone to accurately define the *text of pleasure*, they complement one another magnificently to establish its parameters: a text that one approaches in pursuit of an enjoyable, uplifting (as per "contents, fills, grants euphoria"), unchallenging experience, the content of which (themes, characters, and so forth) does not demonstrate marked deviation from accepted cultural, societal norms.

Deeper in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes goes on to describe the *text of pleasure* as one lacking an ardent ideological stance:

> The pleasure of the text does not prefer one ideology to another. We read a text (of pleasure) the way a fly buzzes around a room: with sudden, deceptively decisive turns, fervent and futile: ideology passes over the text and its reading like the blush over a face. In the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic. (31)

A text of pleasure, then, tends toward ideological indifference; culturally-founded concepts that are raised therein will serve largely as mere illustration of culture, rather than reinforcement or derision of any particular cultural understanding. What opposition or conflict *is* represented in the text is largely contrived, superficial; though conflict is manifesting ("becoming") before us, it ultimately lacks the ideological depth that would be inherent to content more aligned with hot-button cultural issues or taboos, ideologies more historically subject to repression. So while readers are being entertained by the traditional conflict-resolution pattern, nothing is genuinely psychologically unsettling or antagonizing them. All of these considerations will be shown to be in stark contrast to Barthes' *text of bliss*.

Even more problematic than typifying the *text of pleasure* is interpreting Barthes' definition of the *text of bliss*: "The text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories" (14). Such a text has three potential functions—imposing, discomforting, and unsettling—and what it is capable of unsettling comprises three types of "assumptions" as well as "the consistency of" three types of intimate personal evaluations. Once again, the distinction that stands out as most utilitarian concerns the "comfort" continuum. In direct opposition to the *text of pleasure*, which is "linked to a *comfortable* practice," is this "text that discomforts" (Barthes 14). While the concept of discomfort is something with which everyone is familiar to some extent, we must look to the rest of Barthes' definition to glean what it means in the context of reader reception.

The "assumptions" that Barthes addresses can most equally be interpreted as "understandings." Psychological assumptions, for illustration, concern the expectations that a person has about the ways in which the world is going to function; my grasp of the concept of gravity is what prompts me to assume that I won't encounter people walking on ceilings, falling up, or taking flight. If I do encounter (portrayals of) such people, my scientific understanding is challenged, unsettled, and it is quite probable that I am within a *text of bliss*. Our psychological assumptions are those that are based largely on our understanding of the natural world; observed departures from physical, feasible reality are what challenge them.

Another set of our "assumptions" as humans that Barthes addresses is cultural convention. Whereas our psychological assumptions are based on our observations of and knowledge of the natural world around us, "cultural assumptions" identify with knowledge based on experience with society and its myriad institutions. Examples of these fall in line with those offered in the *text of pleasure* section as content that "comes from culture." We assume, for example, that children will be enrolled in kindergarten when they reach approximately the age of five; we assume that the food we buy in stores is fit for consumption because of our knowledge of the Food and Drug Administration's work; and we assume law enforcement officers really are there to help. With respect to these concepts, then, the *text of bliss* may concern a child genius who instead graduates from high school on his fifth birthday, an epidemic sparked by increased toxins in foods, or racist police officers who abuse their power. A near infinite number of individual concepts (or entire scenarios, by expansion) could be cited as "psychological" and "cultural" assumptions, or departures from them. The important

thing to have a firm grasp of is simply to which side of the *pleasure-bliss* dichotomy each would belong: as consistent with our understandings or as conflicting with them, respectively.

The "historical" assumptions that Barthes references can best be understood as an amalgamation of both one's psychological and cultural assumptions. The very reason our psychological and cultural understandings exists is that we make assumptions about the future based on our past observations. People understand the culture around them as ever-evolving, though they maintain awareness of its more traditional "customs," if you will. Especially when assessments are based on understandings of patterns that have endured prior to one's existence among them are they truly "historical assumptions." An important nuance of the term "assumptions" that Barthes implies is that they need not necessarily be true or accurate, but rather simply widely accepted or prescribed. For example, we need not strain to call to memory that the Union won the Civil War, so encounters with (portrayals of) personalities who thrive on the claim that "The South will rise again" or insist that the South actually won is off-putting, to say the least.

The final part of Barthes' definition concerns an unsettling of "consistency." Because the "tastes, values, memories" that he refers to are all such highly personal evaluations, the unsettling of their stability seems an exceptionally powerful characteristic of the *text of bliss*. Though readers' "tastes" and "values" are going to be based on their aforementioned psychological and cultural assumptions, and may at first seem synonymous with them, instability of their consistency is Barthes' focus here. To finish fleshing out the definition, we must explore the causes and effects of questioning

our values to assemble our understanding of its applicability to a literal text. Say I am an ardent pro-life advocate and I read a book that makes me question my stance on the abortion debate; I have just been prompted to call one of my values into question. Barthes does not claim that a *text of bliss* blatantly overturns one's values, but rather implies that it at least prompts one to briefly reexamine his or her stances on them. Just as "tastes" are ultimately personal biases, they, too, are susceptible to change given the proper impetus. To use a less lofty, more applicable example of a potential unsettling of taste here: I read a book on the history of silent films and learn volumes about the theory and production of an era in film that I previously had little interest in, consequently becoming more interested in silent films. Where before my tastes were geared elsewhere (away from consideration of silent films) a *text of bliss* has unsettled that stance to the point of changing my personal taste in films. Texts that are capable of unsettling just such otherwise-consistent facets of our interaction with and interpretation of the world are what Barthes seeks an ultimate definition for in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Not all *texts of bliss* are destined to be so embraced or noticeably affecting, and Niemi initiates our focal shift to Film by encouraging us to keep in mind the more subtle effects of films: "The viewer is presented an account of how aspects of reality fit together, or should fit together, and even if the model is rejected, it may widen the realm of what the viewer thinks is possible or desirable" (437). Though an optimistic stance, there is certainly no harm in approaching every film screening as a means to widening our perspective on the realms of possibility and desirability.

Adapting *The Pleasure of the Text* to Film Studies

Barthes wrote very little about film over the course of his life, and Dana B. Polan puts forth on the matter:

> His scattered comments on film demonstrate a certain belief in Godard's adage that film is truth twenty-four times a second. The inexorable flow of images through the projector creates a force that, for Barthes, is beyond analysis, beyond a possible demythologizing or demystifying stance. (42)

Polan certainly doesn't seem off-base; it was only in Barthes' later years, in his last work, *Camera Lucida*, that he embraced and explored photography: "a personal art, an art in which particular photographs touch the self while others have no effect" (Polan 45). This can be viewed as Barthes' final acquiescence to work with film, albeit a frame at a time. So while Polan opines that "scholars concerned to develop analytic methods have found little of interest in Barthes's later work," I strongly disagree (41). The filmic aspects that I have chosen to work with were all partly chosen because of their susceptibility to placement on the *text of pleasure-text of bliss* dichotomy, respective to Barthes' definitions of those terms. In her book on film reception, *Perverse Spectators*, Janet Staiger offers support of such endeavors that approach qualifying film from a framework of broad cultural understanding:

> The best means currently available for analyzing cultural meanings exists in poststructuralist and ideological textual analyses. These methods, of necessity, draw upon multiples theoretical frameworks and perspectives such as deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology,

linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies Marxism, and feminist, ethnic

and minority, and lesbian and gay studies. (162)

Up to this point, interpretations of Barthes' terminology have been conducted with literal respect to "texts" as books. The concepts of the *text of pleasure* and the *text of bliss* have been shown, however, to be based on evaluations that underlie and factor intimately into several aspects of daily life. This isn't to say that adapting and applying Barthes' overarching dichotomy to everyday experiences would prove a productive distinction in many of them; that is an endeavor for trained sociologists and psychologists to determine the significance of. No overly cavalier aspirations are required, though, to adapt the prevailing concepts in Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* for application to Film Studies.

In order to maintain fidelity to Barthes' literary theory, a method of deconstructing films into aspects that are either inherent to both textual and filmic narratives, or derivatives of them with regard to the multi-track nature of Film, is necessary. With this in mind, I will be using five different narrative aspects to evaluate films with regard to *The Pleasure of the Text*: theme weight, intellectual demand, dialogue conventionality, emotional appeal, and action filler. Themes are equally integral to the textual narrative as to the film narrative, and intellectual demand and dialogue conventionality are also qualifiable aspects of each. Emotional appeal inarguably has the potential to play a role in each medium, as does action filler, though the latter is an exceptional case. In the instances of departure from broad "narrative" aspects to more specialized "filmic" aspects for the purposes of this essay, justification for differentiation will be offered.

The first step in the adaptation process is a simple translation of the word "text"

to "film." Films can just as fairly be referred to as "texts" as books can, but it is this preliminary adaptation that sets the stage for in-depth exploration of the corresponding aspects of the mediums of print and film. As an equally valid method of storytelling, film narratives are composed of a number of the same features inherent to prose narratives. In short, each focuses on a character or character set, which serves as the vehicle for depiction of one to several themes. This thematic content is what typically serves as the "meat" of a narrative; in Barthes' terms, themes are what raise and address (typically via either reinforcement or criticism of) one's "historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories" (14). It is for this reason that I will use an evaluation of thematic content, or *theme weight*, to initiate analysis of films. The exact same material that can be used as thematic content in a text is available for use within a film, so no "translation" is necessary in this regard.

More innovative strides are required for exploration of the following narrative aspects, most of which will be explored as characteristics endemic to films. Given the potential for portrayal of disjointed, non-chronological, or otherwise abstract storylines and ambiguous character identities in narratives, an evaluation of what can be deemed a film's *intellectual demand* will also prove useful in determining its qualification as either a *text of pleasure* or a *text of bliss*. Though the aforementioned structural techniques are fair game for employment in textual narratives as well, the multi-track nature of the medium of film is what renders it genuinely more intellectually demanding than the single-track, more necessarily accommodating textual narrative. These two principle narrative and filmic aspects of theme weight and intellectual demand are largely what will govern analysis of Aronofsky's films in this project. Neither of these

assessments alone will prove wholly indicative of a film's qualification, though, so other factors are needed to construct a more informative perspective.

Dialogue conventionality (or departures from it) will be explored as a strictly filmic aspect that can serve as telling of not only onscreen personalities but also indicative of overarching thematic content. The ways in which characters conduct conversation with one another and occasionally themselves, with regard to the tenets of linguistic dialogic conventions, give viewers an excellent perspective on what sort of implicit information is being conveyed. Dialogue conventionality is considered an aspect of the film narrative rather than a wholly narrative aspect due, again, to the multi-track composition of films. While use of ellipses, dashes, and other fluid punctuation techniques in writing can be used to dictate its reading to an extent, the capability of a film to portray discourse visually *and* verbally—simultaneously—drastically increases its potential for complexity. Where readers encounter only textual dialogue for personal cognitive interpretation, film audiences are prompted to more engaging interpretation by tangibly portrayed social interactions.

Another filmic aspect that will prove supportive in qualifying theme weight and intellectual demand is consideration of *emotional appeal* in films. The orientation of emotions evoked—positive versus negative—as well as their roles in factoring into evaluation of theme weight and intellectual demand will be considered.

It is also worth addressing a filmic aspect that will be identified as absent from Aronofsky's films in the interest of fleshing out the opposing *text of pleasure*: *action filler*. This concept concerns the occurrence of onscreen fights, chase sequences, and so forth that do nothing to assist or enrich plot progression.

These narrative and filmic aspects that I have identified and will continue on to provide illustrations of were all drawn from primary consideration of Barthes' terminology and his proffered definitions. Speaking in terms of "cultural" and "psychological assumptions" without such a set of aspects to evaluate could certainly become vague very quickly. Further illustration of these individual filmic aspects will be provided prior to analysis of Aronofsky's films.

The order in which I bring to light the nature of each aspect in analysis is significant. Theme weight, as an evaluation of a film's overall "message," is primarily responsible for a film's overall cohesiveness, so it serves as principle consideration. A close second, however, is evaluation of a film's intellectual demand. Though identification of this as a significant aspect began as largely intuitive, it is a concept easily conveyed and readily identifiable in films thereafter. Its position as secondary in analysis is due to the not uncommon interrelatedness of theme weight and intellectual demand, as aspects of intellectual demand often govern the stance that a film takes on the theme(s) it portrays. Evaluation of dialogue conventionality is tertiary, as the only other narrative aspect it directly affects is intellectual demand (which in turn *does* have the potential to factor into theme weight). The degree of emotional appeal in a film also has the potential to factor significantly into theme weight, and action filler as the final consideration, as previously mentioned, is due to its usefulness as an opposing concept.

Weight-related terminology is often used in colloquial evaluation of films, though the "weight" of a film's thematic content is not a qualitative measurement. This common usage is what prompted my adoption of the corresponding terms. A dichotomy that

closely parallels Barthes' *text of pleasure-text of bliss* distinction exists in this register: *light* versus *heavy*, respectively. Consider what expectations you formulate when someone informs you that a film they saw was "heavy" or, on the contrary, "light" or "light-hearted." Assorted assumptions about how the film ends, what types of characters are encountered, how conflicts play out and are resolved, and what sort of "message" the film conveys, begin to manifest. With the intent of these colloquialisms dissected, it becomes apparent that what one is typically offering with such evaluations, whether aware of it or not, is a summation of a film's thematic content. The readiness with which critical viewers are capable to glean such a rundown is a testament to thematic depth as one of the most highly visible aspects of a film, the appeal of which Niemi summarizes in her article: "Viewers are, in effect, instructed in a new (or old) way of thinking without having to do the conceptual heavy lifting for themselves" (437). Regardless of the weight of thematic content, we as audiences are always content to engage with structured, readily accessible depictions of it.

In scaling the weight of a film's thematic content is where Barthes' dichotomy comes into play. In a nutshell, themes that content, fill, grant euphoria; come from culture and do not break with it, are linked to a *comfortable* practice of viewing contribute to a film's qualification as a *text of pleasure*; themes that impose a state of loss, discomfort, unsettle the viewer's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, contribute to a film's qualification as a *text of bliss* (Barthes). The interpretation of these dense definitions with regard to textual narratives needs no adaptation to become applicable to film narratives, though contextually appropriate illustrations are in order.

A film that nears qualification as a *text of pleasure* due to its handling of the theme of childbirth, for example, is Judd Apatow's 2007 comedy, *Knocked Up*. In the film we see portrayed an accidental conception, followed by the parents' debate on whether or not to foster the fetus to term, the father's hesitancy to commit to being around, his eventual reconciliation with the child's mother, and the child's birth. This progression is well in keeping with prevailing cultural assumptions on how such a scenario may play out, as well as congruent with popular opinion against abortion.

Consider the same thematic content handled in Sam Mendes' *Revolutionary Road* (2008), however, and we find a thematic approach that resonates with a much heavier tone, much closer to unsettling cultural and psychological assumptions and values. Set in the Fifties, a couple's lifelong dream to travel intercontinentally is rendered impossible by unintentional conception. Though the mother feigns contentedness with this change of plans, she is ultimately unable to come to terms with them and performs a home abortion, killing herself in the process. This thematic content is unsettling even by today's standards, and we see an example of a film's principle theme largely qualifying the film as a *text of bliss*.

These examples highlight a key element in this distinction: the handling and approach of the themes in any given film are more important than their manifest content alone and are what evaluations of theme weight must be based on. Suppose a certain film's theme concerns a tyrannical dictator. This offering alone is unrevealing of the film's content as a whole. When further informed that the dictator in this film succeeds at brainwashing the masses and bringing his domain to its knees in reverence of him, though, an evaluation of the film takes on a much more discernible identity—as a *text of*

bliss, for the purposes of this essay

It is interesting to consider the two examples Niemi offers in *Spectator* of just how evocative unsettling thematic content can be. Directed by Stanley Kubrick and released in 1971, *A Clockwork Orange* received less than stellar critical reception. The borough of Hastings on the south coast of England banned the film "on the grounds that it was 'violence for its own sake' and 'had no moral,'" and Andrew Sarris' review in the *Village Voice* "described *A Clockwork Orange* as a 'painless, bloodless and ultimately pointless futuristic fantasy'" (94-5). Equally affecting but slightly better received was Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Niemi gives an excellent analysis of American cultural reception of the film in the chapter "Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of *The Silence of the Lambs*." She identifies three propositions that debates over the film stemmed: (1) "The character of the serial murderer had attributes associated with stereotypes of gay men"; (2) "In a time of increased violence directed toward gays in the United States, suggesting connections between homosexuals and serial murderers was irresponsible"; and (3) "Clarice Starling was a positive image of a woman working in a patriarchal society and, thus, empowering for women viewers" (161). These analyses serve as excellent examples of how films have the potential to affect culture just as intimately as they are born of it, and ultimately how integral the role of culture is to Film as a whole.

Similar to explication of the filmic aspect of theme weight, evaluation of a film's intellectual demand will also be based on Barthes' proffered dichotomy. Though the literal definitions become less applicable when we depart from consideration of thematic content, the effects of certain narrative film techniques will be shown to affect audience

reception in a dichotomously evaluative way founded on the concepts of the *text of pleasure* and the *text of bliss*. The distinction between these two qualifications of intellectual demand can also be thought of as similar to the *thinking-unthinking* pair that I explained using in the introductory section. In brief, the lesser the degree of intellectual engagement a film demands for understanding and/or interpretation, the more exemplary it is as a *text of pleasure*, and vice versa. The narrative film techniques the increasing presence of which qualify a film further and further as a *text of bliss* comprise: nonlinear or disjointed plot progression, abstract or convoluted narrative, and ambiguous character identities.

Consider for illustration of nonlinear plot progression Quentin Tarantino's cult classic, *Pulp Fiction* (1994); a brief analysis of the structure of its story arch will suffice. The film consists of eight narrative sequences, which one would expect to encounter as presented chronologically (1, 2, 3, 4 …). The plot progression is much less accommodatingly structured, however, thusly: 4, 2, 7, 1, 8, 3, 5, 6. Another excellent example of less conventional storytelling is Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). Viewers ultimately encounter the conclusion of the film first and retroactively glean the series of events that lead up to it. Where narratives typically progress, for illustration: a-b, b-c, c-d …, *Memento* develops: y-z, x-y, w-x … Both of these films would be qualified *texts of bliss* based on the degree of intellectual engagement required to simply interpret their narratives chronologically.

The film that initially comes to mind for illustration of the concepts of abstract or convoluted narratives, as well as ambiguous character identities, is David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). In this genuinely befuddling work of Lynch's, viewers

encounter a narrative about an amnesiac, the woman who attempts to helps her, the blending and instability of their characters and roles, a "swamp thing" that seems to dwell in alleyways, a very creepy cowboy, and a Spanish vaudeville theater that seems to be of some importance. Past a certain point (which will vary from viewer to viewer), the narrative becomes unintelligible, and scenes of what can most simply be described as backstory begin to predominate in rapid succession. The blending of characters that I refer is exemplary of the concept of ambiguous character identities. Viewers see Naomi Watts' character in places that they previously thought that character did not belong, and she is even referred to by different names, to highlight the ambiguity of who her character is. *Mulholland Drive* is, resoundingly, a *text of bliss*.

In light of these intellectually demanding *texts of bliss*, qualifying a film a *text of pleasure* based on the degree of intellectual engagement it requires is simple. Essentially, the more "standard" a narrative's plot progression and the more well-defined its characters, the more deserving of the *text of pleasure* qualification it is. This explanation falls well in line with Barthes' definition as well: "comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of [viewing]" (14). A break from culture is going to necessitate more significant intellectual engagement due to the simple fact that information conflicting with existing understandings must be actively processed and assessed by viewers. In other cases, intellectual demand may be necessitated because the content of a film seems in conflict with itself and must be made sense of, or at the very least personally interpreted. This will be demonstrated further in analysis of Aronofsky's films which jump directly into a narrative without providing audiences with backstory.

Dialogue conventionality is more of a linguistic concept appropriated to film analysis than a commonly referenced filmic aspect, but it is easily appropriated regardless. I must start by basing qualitative consideration of "conventionality" on something concrete, and the linguistic tenets of American English conversation provide a jumping off point. Consider, for example, the concepts of *quality* and *quantity* within verbal communication. When one speaker asks what time it is, he or she is assuming that his query will be responded to with the correct time of day; this concerns *quality* of information. If the same respondent tells the time and continues on to comment on the weather, your mother-in-law, or his thoughts on *Mulholland Drive*, a breach has occurred in the expected *quantity* of information provided. Each of these scenarios is a feasible occurrence, and it is important to consider that breaks from dialogic convention in films (in the interest of dramatics) are even more common. The use of unfamiliar registers in dialogue can constitute an intellectual demand that arises from breaks in dialogic convention—with respect to a "standard" (American English)—as well.

The Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007) is the film that has most recently stood out to me as containing a considerable numbers of instances of unconventional dialogue. The narrative's antagonist, Anton, plods methodically along regarding his responsibilities, and approaches dialogue with a mentality similar to that of the Cheshire Cat. In one particular scene concerning the potential senseless murder of a gas station tenant, Anton repeatedly requests that the clerk call heads or tails on an upcoming coin flip. Fearing potentially dangerous repercussions, the attendant skirts the request, inquiring as to why he should and what's riding on the wager. Anton largely regards this as a threat to the intimidation factor he thrives on enforcing and persists in

asking even more nebulous questions until his request is satisfactorily addressed. With regard to dialogue conventionality, we find that *No Country for Old Men* is a *text of bliss*.

Again we find that the *text of pleasure* qualification with respect to dialogue conventionality comprises all films in which character dialogue exhibits standard conventions or strays only minimally from them. As the *text of bliss* qualification of each of these aspects is largely the one that demonstrates a departure from "cultural assumptions," it makes sense to continue giving examples of the anomalous content and allowing the *text of pleasure* descriptions to fall into place subsequently. Exemplifying a standard becomes difficult, as our understandings of what "comes from culture and does not break with it" is so largely intuitive. Departures from convention are more readily identifiable than examples of it.

Barthes' distinctions will also be used to govern qualification of emotional appeal in films. If the emotions appealed are in keeping with the emotional responses we would arrive at if the scenario onscreen were playing out in real life, the nature of the emotional appeal "comes from culture and does not break with it" and largely indicates a *text of pleasure*. When we also consider that the "*comfortable* practice" of viewing relates to the *text of pleasure*, a tendency toward appeal to positive emotions can be expected as well. On the other hand, this seems to indicate that appeal to negative emotions can be used as an indication of a *text of bliss*, even when they may be in keeping with typical response to the situation; sadness at a character's death, for example, is a *text of bliss* emotional appeal even though the emotion being prompted "comes from culture."

It will be demonstrated that also more common in the *text of bliss* is a lack of

emotional appeal, in favor of emphasis on intellectual demand. More specifically, repeated instances in a film that at first manifest as negative emotional appeal can become so inherent to the psychological challenges it presents to viewers that it can more accurately be described as a factor affecting theme weight.

It is important to note that theme weight and emotional appeal are not conceptually unrelated either. The solution to this potential discrepancy is to establish that if the degree of focus dedicated to a particular birth, death, or other such "tragedy" or "miracle" becomes the focus of more than a quarter of the film's duration or has explicitly acknowledged effects on other characters for more than a quarter of the film, it qualifies as a theme and factors into thematic depth. Such life events that don't garner as much focus, consequently, will more than likely qualify as content constituting emotional appeal instead.

Consider Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), in which there is only one death in the film (which takes place just shy of the conclusion) and nothing in the narrative qualifies as traditionally "tragic." There is an undeniable emotional appeal, though, inherent to the shambles of both the Burnham and Fitts families that the narrative follows (due to portrayal of themes such as marital infidelity and homophobia—emotionally stirring content).

This filmic aspect is labeled as an "appeal" rather than a "demand" because engaging with any given film is a voluntary act. Sitting down to watch a film means that you have agreed to encounter its contents. This is rarely a simple act of good faith; we are usually guided by multiple exterior influences to watch a given film. Motives aside, the accepting relationships and environments that are related by and inherent to this

simple gesture, are not ones typically operative in terms of *demands.* Though there's

certainly a recommended quota as to the degree of response to be elicited, whether or

not you actually shed tears over a given circumstance is not going to be the deciding

factor in how much sense a film makes to you. Your individual response to such

emotional appeal will simply determine the degree of emotional *involvement* that you

take on and, consequently, how that film will functions for you.

The concept of action filler is exactly what it sounds like: fights, chases,

explosions, and so forth ("action"), which don't largely serve to progress a plot. More

significant reliance on action filler typically indicates a *text of pleasure* whereas a

complete lack will often be indicative of a *text of bliss*. There is a distinction to be made

between *action* and action *filler*, and examples are in order to help distinguish them. The

first film that comes to mind when I think action filler is Michael Bay's *Transformers*:

Revenge of the Fallen (2009).

Revenge is the continuation of an overarching conflict (and battle) that was

supposedly resolved in the first film, *Transformers* (2007). The concept that filmmakers

seemed to lean on mercilessly in creating this film is that since audiences were

proffered fifty-foot-tall robots and explosions in the previous film, the way to make the

second one original was to introduce larger robots and larger explosions into the mix.

Battle sequences are long, drawn-out, and special effects-laden, and the fighting serves

very minimally to progress the narrative. It serves, rather, to drop jaws, deafen children,

and reaffirm that it is hard to look away when Megan Fox is running in slow motion.

Furthermore, the oddly arena-staged "battles" within the central robot war seem, if

anything, only to illustrate how a highly-sought-after supernatural historical artifact

continues to exchange hands. Based on this evidence, I consider *Revenge of the Fallen* to be an excellent example of action filler in a film and, accordingly, a *text of pleasure*. In Wheeler Winston Dixon's introduction to *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays*, he offers an example of the Nineties genre film as a similar, compensating "creature of excess": "Roland Emmerich's recent remake of *Godzilla* (1998) was mostly a construct of noise and spectacle, presented in thunderous digital sound, in a desperate attempt to mask the lack of content in the film" (5).

Fernando Meirelles' *City of God* (2002) is the first contending film that comes to mind as an example of "non-filler" action in a film. The narrative chronicles the lives of several boys growing up in Brazilian slums alongside drug cartels, and focuses on one in particular who rises above his means to chase his dreams and benefit the larger community. Gun violence in the film is realistic and unfortunately gratuitous and serves primarily throughout as either characterization or character eradication. A handful of foot, vehicle, and bicycle chases in the film serve to accentuate the partly-voluntary plight of those operating in the underbelly of an already corrupt society. These high-adrenaline instances in *City of God*, then, qualify as action sequences or simply action, rather than action filler. Considerable thematic depth, intellectual demand, and emotional appeal further combine to establish the film firmly as a *text of bliss*.

<u>Darren Aronofsky and his *Texts of Bliss*</u>

An American director, screenwriter, and producer, Darren Aronofsky was born in Brooklyn in 1969. Brief reflection on his educational history makes apparent that his career in anything he set his mind to was to be promising: after training in Kenya and Alaska throughout high school to be a field biologist, he attended Harvard University with established interests in live action film and animation (The School for Field Studies). After his senior thesis project at Harvard, *Supermarket Sweep*, earned him finalist consideration in the 1991 Student Academy Awards, Aronofsky began work on his first feature-length film*, Pi*, the production of which was primarily funded by one-hundred-dollar-increment donations from friends and family (Idov). After operating on a production budget totalling sixty-thousand dollars, Aronofsky sold distribution rights for one million dollars, and the film subsequently grossed more than three million. *Pi* earned him the Best Director award at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, and with every film he has released, Aronofsky has garnered increasingly prestigous accolades.

Pi

Released in 1998, *Pi* was Aronofsky's first feature-length film. The plot concerns Maximillian Cohen, a tortured mathematical genius who suffers from debilitating social anxiety. His meager social circle consists of a young neighbor girl who delights in pitting his arithmetic abilities against her calculator and Sol Robeson, Max's mentor and competition in the occasional game of Othello. Max spends most of his days scrutinizing the paper's daily stock market analysis in a bar near his apartment, seeking the systematic formula that drives—the "answer to"—the stock market, which he is

convinced exists. Incessant number crunching is Max's only hobby, and he suffers the occasional panic attack and breakdown (increasingly characterized by hallucinations in the film) because of it. Until some questionable figures in the employ of a brokerage firm particularly interested in his project and a group of equally interested Hasidic Jews begin keeping uncomfortably close tabs on him, viewers are led to believe that Max's life as a reclusive genius used to be comfortably uneventful.

As Max's intellectual struggles and mental instability in their wake are the focus of the film, the primary theme is of a humanistic nature. Though Max's motivation is not explicitly based on self-actualization, it is still centered on pursuit of an ideal (the solution to the stock market equation); variations of this core theme of self-antagonism are what will be shown to plague the protagonists in each of Aronofsky's works.

This central theme is what grounds *Pi* as a *text of bliss*. In Barthes' terms, it "unsettles cultural assumptions" on multiple levels. In contemporary society, fervent single-minded, self-destructive pursuit of any goal to the point of social withdrawal is far from the norm. The only motivational stories of such content that we hear typically regard the cloistered, substance-abusing geniuses of bygone days—and it's understood that no one is encouraging such a "miserable" existence. Rather, hopeful citizens are instructed to receive education and become good at something so they can find work and be "productive members."

Through thematic acquaintance with Max's self-antagonistic pursuit comes an awareness of "the text that discomforts," also. The progression of his panic attacks is made palpable by abstract images strobing onscreen and, most notably, shrill, grating, electronic intonations. Throughout, shots of Max vacillate between him writhing and

screaming on the floor and increasingly abstract portrayals of him interacting with a power drill and a disembodied brain. The interpretive facilities that these symbolic hallucinations demand will be explored further with regard to the filmic aspect of intellectual demand.

The film's secondary theme of the omnipresence of patterns in the world is also embodied in the protagonist, and the focus on humanity's history of and obsession with mathematics and pattern-seeking brings viewers to conflict with their own values. Max entertains numerous amalgamations of number theory, Fibonacci's golden spiral, the work of Leonardo da Vinci, and chaos theory throughout his struggles and is convicted that patterns exist for *everything* in the natural world, including anything humans have a hand in. This worldview and its execution are eccentric, to say the least, but certainly not unfounded. This insight into a human's sincere commitment to the seemingly unattainable—yet conceptually feasible—is what prompts viewers to question what worldview it is they claim to associate most closely with.

As the film's protagonist is painfully unwieldy with social interaction and willfully frequents a grand total of only three locations (his apartment, Sol's apartment, the bar), narrative progression is primarily a following of Max's cerebral excursions and the symbolic hallucinations that accompany his decline. These hallucinations are what riddle an otherwise solid linear progression with perforation. Indeterminable lapses in time take place between Max's loss of consciousness following an attack and when he comes to, yet progress seems to have been made on his work each time he wakes up in his apartment, which is also inexplicably trashed each time. Though the plot progression never indicates that Max has been out of commission for a significant

amount of time, viewers begin to realize that it is obviously a significant enough amount of time for some frenetic, unconscious compulsion to be overtaking him and bringing his genius to fruition.

Succeeding at making sense of the symbolism of Max's hallucinations early in the film and being able to progressively correlate the abstract representations with the protagonist's waking moments are crucial to an accurate interpretation and appreciation of the work. After a particularly frustrating bout with some numbers, Max unscrews the casing of his computer's central processing unit, which he keeps suspended in the room's center for some reason, and smashes the motherboard on the floor. The next day Max rendezvous with the aforementioned brokerage firm thugs to accept a computer chip referred to as "the Ming Mecca," presumably in exchange for the stock market solution that it will bring him to. Max hallucinates a trail of blood in the subway station on the way home and follows it to a disembodied brain perched on a staircase, before suffering an attack and losing consciousness. His visions from that point on become more and more brain-centric, with him being fearful of and ultimately attacking the inanimate gray matter.

In the throes of his final meltdown, Max takes a power drill to his own temple. In the closing scene he is sitting on a park bench, wearing a temple-concealing beanie, blissfully unoccupied by thought. This is evidenced by the passing neighbor girl's success at finally evoking an "I don't know" from Max with her calculator (Aronofsky). The extended metaphor is unsettling and graphically depicted. It ultimately challenges audiences' cultural and psychological assumptions that intellectual endeavors must either end in success or failure by portraying a character whose final contentedness is

with the middle ground of complete, blissful dissociation.

The themes of self-destructive obsession and alternatively-focused worldviews, and the intellectual engagement required to interpret and explore them are what principally posit *Pi* as a *text of bliss*. An analysis of the aspect of dialogue conventionality in the film is worth offering as further justification, though. Max's conversations with his confidants (Sol and bar clientele) transpire in the register of mathematics. Though the jargon is not unintelligible, audiences are in contact with a specialized vocabulary nonetheless. What is most unconventional about Max's dialogue is that he is incapable of carrying it out colloquially; outside of mathematics, Max does not have a life, so Max has nothing to talk about. This roadblock to social interaction is used primarily in the film as characterization. Even before viewers are fully aware of Max's personality and circumstances, they become acquainted with the protagonist as socially dysfunctional to a degree, based on his speech. Aronofsky's *Pi* derives its *text of bliss* qualification chiefly from the weight of its themes and the degree of intellectual engagement required to reconcile the happenings onscreen with the film's meaning.

Requiem for a Dream

Released in 2000, just two years after *Pi*, Darren Aronofsky's second film was *Requiem for a Dream*. He was able to gather a more notable cast for the film, including Ellen Burstyn, Jared Leto, Jennifer Connelly, and Marlon Wayans. As though running with the momentum from his first feature-length success, Aronofsky constructs a narrative that delves even deeper into the realm of self-affliction. Though viewers saw a man who resorted to self-medication (unsuccessfully) to escape his clamorous brain in

Pi, Max's struggle was never highlighted as one exacerbated by drug use. In *Requiem*, however, the plot follows three young characters—Harry (Leto), Marion (Connelly), and Tyrone (Wayans)—whose free-spirited recreational drug use spirals into addiction when they decide to begin selling heroin to "get on top of the game," and things don't go as planned (Aronofsky, Requiem for a Dream). Harry's widowed mother, Sarah (Burstyn), is driven to abuse wrongly-prescribed diet pills by her loneliness and the desire to be the "somebody" that the motivational speakers in her incessant infomercial watching have engrained in her.

Though the scenario of Sarah's road to drug abuse is drastically different from that of Harry, Marion, and Tyrone, her story is told parallel to and slightly intertwined with those of her juniors. This highlights her habits and symptoms as almost equally as troubling as those of heroin junkies, though audiences are aware that Sarah's intentions were not as reckless as those of her son and his friends. It is this distinction that creates the majority of the film's emotional appeal, which will be explored later in this analysis, and a division of the primary theme. Though the film focuses audiences on the rise and abysmal decline of Harry and his friends by portraying the most intense ramifications that drug addiction has on each of them, Sarah's descent is represented equally well. In Peter Henné's analysis of the film's thematic content, he summarizes: "*Requiem* is about the lengths we will go as a race to escape our present" (20).

As seen in Aronofsky's *Pi,* the themes of *Requiem for a Dream* serve as the major justification for the film as a *text of bliss*. The primary theme of drug addiction and delusion is not one that "breaks from culture," in the words of Barthes; drug addiction is a very conspicuous issue throughout the country, regardless of if the effects of it can

largely be swept under the rug. Though this explanation belies this primary theme as perhaps a *text of pleasure*, it is important to consider the overall approach to and perspective on the thematic content. Rather than breaking from displaying the typical plight of hard drug users, Aronofsky gives the theme its *text of bliss* poignancy by zooming in and providing a front-row seat to it. This affects audiences most significantly by overturning their comfortable cultural assumptions that drug addicts quietly die off in their hovels because of the poor choices they made, and aren't people, aren't worth helping.

The graphic depictions of desperation and grasping at straws that manifest in the film are difficult to stomach. A degree of human empathy is almost evoked by the fits of withdrawal and manic outbursts that Harry and Marion inflict on each other in troubled times. The awareness that they are inflicting it all on themselves persists though. The same dis-ease audiences experienced in watching Max drive himself insane in pursuit of a utopia, manifests more aggressively as *Requiem*'s characters insist on continuing to probe themselves with needles to get back on top, even after their dreams exist as nothing more than drug-induced delusions. Their means are more deplorable than Max's, and the ramifications are equally more stirring. So while viewers are inclined to *feel for* the characters in the more dire situations, the awareness that the degree to which they've deranged themselves was their own doing, again, persists. Aronofsky's unabashed representation of their struggles results in the same sort of uneasy stasis that audiences took away from *Pi*: the self-antagonistic protagonist blocks his own road to success, so we can only sympathize to an extent.

The offshoot of this primary theme plays out in the character of Sarah. Her abuse

of prescription diet pills parallels her son's substance abuse and is even portrayed similarly in the film: a quick montage of pill-popping or plunger-pressing accompanied by grating sound effects. As previously mentioned, however, her struggles are not the result of aspirations to be a drug kingpin. Her motives are in no way sinister; they arise out of a history of heartbreak, loneliness, and desperation—circumstances in which any person could find him or herself. To create the *text of bliss* using this thematic content, Aronofsky again focuses on how feasible and realistic his characters and their situations are. After Sarah is led to believe that she is going to be on a television show and is unsuccessful at losing weight to fit into her favorite red dress, she resorts to getting diet pills from a doctor who doesn't even look up from his notepad the duration of her appointment. She gets addicted to the high and the unhealthy amount of false happiness the uppers bring her and begins upping her dosage to combat her tolerance to the drug. I explore Sarah's situations as indicative of a different theme from her juniors due to her motivation—to begin medicating unnecessarily—as well as the effects of the drugs on her.

As mentioned, Sarah is a retired widow whose days consist of staring at infomercials for a self-help program and taking her lawn chair to the sidewalk to gossip with the other retired ladies who operate in varying stages of senility. Though opting to take diet pills was not a good idea, a physician should have stepped in to stop her. When her condition worsened and she began abusing them, the doctor should have done something other than simply prescribing Valium. It is through little fault of her own that Sarah spirals into invalidity. The specifics of Sarah's struggles constitute a thematic critique of healthcare efforts. She is a unique character in that she is legitimately

seeking legitimate help before it is too late, but her health is of little concern to anyone.

Even after she is hospitalized, medication is followed by forced feeding, and

unsuccessful efforts in that vein qualify her for electroshock therapy. This brings viewers

to question their understanding of just how humanitarian society is, as well as their own

values regarding treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts. This sub-theme highlights

the overarching juxtaposition viewers endure of balancing how much to sympathize with

self-perpetuated struggles with how to evaluate fault and how "deserving" one is of his

or her fate. This heavy thematic content is a close-up of the most deplorable parts of

society laid bare and challenges viewers' feelings on multiple cultural issues.

 Requiem for a Dream does embody a significant intellectual demand, though plot

progression is disjointed and storylines run parallel. The opening scene, in which Harry

is in his mother's apartment, berating her for not making her television set easier to

steal, is the most perplexing sequence in the film. His insistence that "You'll get it back

in a couple of hours" doesn't quite make sense (Aronofsky, Requiem for a Dream). This

is simply due to Aronofsky's disinterest in initiating his narrative with hyper-revealing

backstory, though, and Harry's intentions become clearer as he wheels the television

cart out of Sarah's apartment to meet Tyrone in the stairwell. Tyrone voices concerns

that the set is starting to "look a little seedy" but isn't worried "as long as we get our

bread" (Aronofsky, Requiem for a Dream). At the end of a beautifully-composed

opening credit sequence, during which Harry and Tyrone seem to be wheeling the

television across the city, they sell the television to a vendor on the pier, Mr. Rabinowitz.

His parting remarks—"Your mother needs you like a hole in the head"—reveal that this

is not an uncommon transaction, and viewers piece together shortly after that Harry

steals his mother's television regularly to pawn it for drug money, and she simply buys it back from Mr. Rabinowitz every time (Aronofsky, Requiem for a Dream). This strategy of gradually revealing an example of Harry and Tyrone's antics is an excellent method of characterization, and the intellectual engagement that it requires leads to a strong initial bond with the protagonists, even though their actions are questionable. This forming of a bond is crucial to Aronofsky's efforts to begin garnering from viewers a tainted sympathy for the characters and posits it squarely as a *text of bliss* by acquainting audiences with a handful of semi-lovable, drug-addicted protagonists.

Though narrative progression in the film is disjointed, following the separate stories of Harry, Marion, Sarah, and Tyrone, the misadventures of the central characters are interwoven to such an extent that the plot is being fleshed out in entirety, regardless of whose perspective it is shown from. Even though Sarah's situation is different from that of her juniors, her portrayal in the film is distinct enough from that of her son and his friends that there is no confusing the two scenarios. While this fragmented style of storytelling is powerful and representative of the shattering of the character's respective lives, it does not entail an exceptional intellectual demand.

Departures from standard dialogic conventions play a significant role of the film. The register of hard drug culture is employed by Harry, Marion, and Tyrone. Most viewers will not be familiar with phrases such as "This is some boss scag," or be completely attuned to thoughts such as "We need to get us a piece of this Brody shit, cut it up, and off it…then we could buy us a *couple* of pieces and we'd have some whole 'nother shit goin on"; the vast majority will be able to keep up with what's being said, though (Aronofsky, Requiem for a Dream). The ways in which Harry, Marion, and

Tyrone begin speaking to each other becomes indicative of the effects of their drug addiction. They begin wrongfully blaming one another for not being able to score, make personal attacks, and eventually all decline to a vernacular of unintelligible whimpers. Even Sarah's idiolect changes after she becomes obsessed with being on television and fitting into her glamorous red dress. Her personal decline compounds with age to deliver her to a much more public and functional level of incoherency before she is institutionalized, ultimately making her the voice of every character, pining for the unattainable from a vortex of consequences. Departures from conventional dialogue indicate drug intoxication as well as prolonged drug addiction in the film. This *text of bliss* approach to dialogue implementation makes sure the unsettling issues of drug abuse and hopeless addiction are at the forefront of viewers' awareness.

Perhaps further motivated by the success of his first film, Aronofsky institutes a greater emotional appeal in *Requiem for a Dream*. Though the three young protagonists are central to the narrative, audiences' reactions to them remain in limbo between sympathy and disgust, as is the director's forte. The inclusion of Sarah's unique situation in the tumult is what prompts viewers to the awareness that not every person suffering from a drug problem is one hundred percent at fault for their circumstances. Viewers' inclinations become to leave evaluations of the three young adults suspended in shades of gray to make room for the seemingly more lamentable fate of Harry's mother. Happy endings the characters' respective storylines have not, and Sarah's fate (to remain institutionalized, presumably indefinitely) gives audiences a concrete *reason* to feel despondent when they are not sure how to pass judgment on the lives of the other characters. Acquiescence to the film's emotional appeal is what unites the

thematic content and guides us to settle on an emotional response to the film as a whole. This pivotal role of emotional appeal in *Requiem* is what unsettles cultural assumptions of the despondent and invalid within society, acting as reinforcement for its proposed qualification as a *text of bliss*.

The Fountain

Six years span the gap between the releases of *Requiem for a Dream* and Aronofsky's third feature film, *The Fountain*. The narrative comprises three storylines in three respective temporal settings, each of which relates the tale of a romantic couple, played by Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz. Though interpretations of the film vary widely, most concede that the three "different" couples represented are to be interpreted as reincarnations of an original—namely Adam and Eve, as suggested by the film's epigraph: "Therefore, the Lord God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and placed a flaming sword to protect the tree of life" (Aronofsky, The Fountain). Though I allowed the scripture to slip from my interpretive consideration during my first viewing and wound up stranded, cognitively fronting the phrase in subsequent viewings rendered a magnificently entangled, in-depth narrative.

Circa 1500, the Spanish Inquisition is in full swing, prompting Queen Isabel (Weisz) to send a trusted Conquistador, Tomas (Jackman), on a special mission to Central America in search of a tree fabled to have magical powers. Isabel gives Tomas a ring, promising that when he finds the tree ("Eden"), she will be his "Eve" (Aronofsky, The Fountain). Circa 2000, married couple Tommy (Jackman), a neurobiologist, and Izzi Creo (Weisz), a brain tumor patient, are fundamentally at odds with one another about

how to spend Izzi's last days. Tommy is hell-bent on spending every waking hour in his lab to find a cure for her cancer whereas Izzi would rather he just spend his time with her. Though a test subject chimpanzee with a brain tumor responds favorably to a compound derived from the extract of a rare Central American tree, the miraculous results come too late to save Izzi's life. Circa 2500, a very monastic-looking Tommy Creo (still Jackman) is hurdling through space in a transparent sphere with an old, gnarled tree. Tommy talks to the tree as though it is Izzi, and he suffers the occasional hallucination of her and/or her disembodied voice in the bubble with him. Viewers learn that Tommy and his tree are on their way to a nebula called Xibalba.

The title of the film echoes the title of the novel that Izzi 2000 is working on in the film. Though audiences are privy to only a portion of its contents, one's understanding becomes that the plots being related in the novel coincide with what is playing out onscreen. Further evidence in support of this interpretation is that Izzi 2000's book remains unfinished as she succumbs to malignant cancer—as she is unsure of her and her husband's final fates—and she makes it Tommy's charge to "Finish it" (Aronofsky, The Fountain). Several clever motifs are used to indicate the temporal interrelatedness of the characters and their respective settings and stories. Modern-day Tommy and Izzi, for example, have a massive painting of a Mayan Temple in their house. With the individual storylines sorted out, the endeavor of making sense of—and attributing meaning to—their parallels predominates attempts at analysis.

Identification of a single, specific "primary" theme in *The Fountain* is problematic. Undying love is a significant focus in each storyline. Though each iteration of Tommy fails to prevent each iteration of Izzi from dying, interpreting each failure on each

Tommy's part as inevitable brings a supernatural arch into consideration of the theme of undying love. As indicated by the film's epigraph, a supernatural "flaming sword" was put in place to bar Adam and Eve from the Tree of Life. Though it manifests figuratively across the storylines, this "sword" is obviously still operational; it seems God has yet to forgive or forget. For illustration, if the film were to be expanded by introducing a parallel Tommy and Izzi story, circa 3000 CE, they, too, would be unsuccessful. The prevalent theme in the film is dense, to say the least. Though different interpretations of the film may render different wordings of the thematic content, what is clear is that undying love and unassailable divine mandate are the central tenets of what audiences are left pondering. By using implicit reincarnation to unite these two concepts, Aronofsky challenges viewers' values as well as their psychological assumptions. How feasible one regards each grandiose concept as a whole will affect how one interprets the two interacting. The personal introspection that this exploration of infinities requires is largely what posits the film's theme weight as substantial.

Intellectual demand is as integral a part of the viewer's experience as if it, too, had been divinely mandated. I required a second viewing to make cohesive sense of the narrative as a whole. I suspect this is not terribly uncommon, as the true "meanings" of the film thrive in the liminal space between the parallel storylines rather than within them. Since meaning can be extracted only after getting a solid grasp of each storyline and its interplay with the other two, some extra mental effort is required. Adhering to the formula of past successes, Aronofsky opts not to provide a backstory before diving into plot progression. The first five minutes of the film concern Tomas, who viewers see cornered in a Mayan complex (inexplicably) and driven to the top of a temple, where he

is (presumably) killed. Rather than following a logical past-present-future sequence of introducing the storylines, the narrative next takes viewers to Tommy 2500's bubble/spaceship, where he is perpetually talking to a tree, doing tai-chi, or hallucinating Izzi and/or her voice. Viewers have no concept of why Tomas is being captured by Mayans when the film starts, nor are they privy to what exactly is going on in Tommy 2500's interstellar tree bubble.

Plenty of time is spent fleshing out the modern-day Tommy and Izzi after viewers are initially befuddled by their past and future selves. The echoes and memories that Tommy 2500 struggles with are seen playing out in "real-time" via Tommy and Izzi 2000, and the endeavors of Tomas and Isabel to save Spain are also related in "real-time" via Izzi's novel-in-progress. Identifying the proper ties and parallels among storylines is largely the viewer's charge. The high degree of intellectual engagement that *The Fountain* requires is staggering. There seem to be just enough pieces of a "solution" to answer all of one's questions about the film, but they don't seem to fit together flawlessly. This film is exemplary of disjointed, convoluted plot progression, positing it strongly as a *text of bliss*.

Unconventional dialogue is not heavily relied on in the film to supplement any sort of nuanced meaning, but a handful of verbal instances do notably affect viewers. Before Tomas is killed in the beginning of the film, his murderer briefly recounts the Mayan creation story. It is anecdotal information that seems allegorical, but can't be made sense of until the end of the film, when Aronofsky begins filling in the blanks. Similarly, audiences see and hear visions of Izzi in Tommy 2500's tree bubble before the recollections have played out in "modern-day" Tommy and Izzi's world. These

instances challenge viewer's psychological assumptions that something has to be established before it can be referred back to, and can even bring viewers to question with their own memories of the occurrences as storylines double-back and overlap and phrases repeat.

Employing the filmic aspect of emotional appeal to more significant lengths is what Aronofsky seems to have been pursuing up to this point in his films, and *The Fountain* is a defining work in that regard. One time-defying intimate romance plays out as three, ultimately allowing audiences to establish and carry an emotional bond with the lovers across a span of one thousand years. Aronofsky posits Tommy and Izzi 2000's relationship as the most traditionally tragic, but the relationship roles of Tommy and Izzi 2500 take on even more poignant meaning as the film develops. Tommy is faced with the paradox of committing his time to the (highly unlikely) possibility of curing cancer before Izzi dies versus spending time with her as she dies. Though audiences know that the odds of him finding a cure are astronomical, it is difficult to blame him. Though viewers *would* like to see him spending more time with his dying wife, his resolve is painfully commendable.

In one of Izzi's final moments she recounts a seemingly-irrelevant story about seeds being planted on a man's grave so that he would eventually become part of the tree that grew on top of his grave from them. After her death is when Aronofsky begins to reveal that Tommy 2500 could very well be the same Tommy who failed to find a cure for his wife and was fated to watch her die. This is only the beginning of a shocking revelatory progression which reveals that Tommy 2000 *did* find a cure for his wife (albeit after she had died) and planted a tree over her grave, in the hopes of rooting a part of

her existence in the tangible world. It is the implicit conclusion that he committed the next five-hundred years to a monastic life of maintaining her tree and torturing himself with her memory that vehemently vitalizes the film's emotional appeal. Living in a society where more than half of marriages end in divorce, viewers are confronted with a one-thousand-year relationship and asked what to make of it. The considerations that arise on the sad state of relationships in society, seemingly-unattainable eternal love, and how religion may play into each of them are what emotionally arouse viewers in Aronofsky's third *text of bliss*.

The Wrestler

Aronofsky released his fourth film in 2008, just two years after *The Fountain*. *The Wrestler* portrays the physical and emotional decline of a professional wrestler to whom time and two decades in the ring have not been kind. After a debilitating heart attack and bypass surgery, which should have definitively marked his retirement, Randy "The Ram" Robinson finally ventures to embrace a life outside of the professional wrestling circuit. Stephanie, his estranged daughter, and Cassidy, Randy's regular dancer at *Cheeks*, are receptive to kindling futures with him and his new lifestyle at first. After a long night out causes Randy to miss a dinner date with his daughter, and Cassidy begins to fear the ramifications of fraternizing with a customer, they each renege on their optimism and kindness. Aronofsky strings audiences along by inferring the potential for Randy's reconciliation with his dwindling list of family and friends throughout. In so doing he entertains the film's latent potential to be qualified a *text of pleasure*, while ultimately settling on creating a *text of bliss*

Theme weight in the film is substantial. Though a considerable portion of the thematic content is driven by emotional appeal in the film (typically more indicative of a *text of pleasure*), the appeal is evocative of emotions that turn sour shortly after manifesting as positive. This underlying appeal for *negative* emotional responses is what drives the narrative and the film to a *text of bliss* classification. The primary theme concerns the protagonist's insistence on living in the past by trying to relive his glory days (as evidenced most humorously by a classic "some assembly required" Polaroid camera and the VHS cassettes that he takes to sell at his low-attendance autograph signings). The tone that the theme creates could certainly be more despondent than it is. Though we see the Ram punishing his aging body to compete in increasingly dreadful matches, he is not quite "washed-up"; he is known and loved by all of his competitors and promoters, and his performances remain a significant draw for spectators. In this sense, Randy has a family, a group of people who care for and look after him.

The ultimate thematic conflict throughout the film concerns this sense of "family" and puts Randy's desire to remain connected to his lifelong passion in competition with the more societally conventional familial relationships that a daughter and steady girlfriend could provide. The Ram is happy when he is backstage or in the ring— possibly as happy as he feels about rekindling things with his daughter and finding a romantic partner—so there is little to fault his "wrestlers as family" mentality with in that regard. The flaw in this mentality, which registers it as unquestionably inferior to the pursuit of settling down, is that his wrestling family beats him to within an inch of his life to make money. In Randy the Ram, Aronofsky again portrays the pursuit of satisfaction

at the expense of self-destruction. Were he to amend his ways (and preserve his life) in the film, viewers would see a *text of pleasure* uncharacteristic of Aronofsky. As though fated by his creator, though, Randy clings to his drug, the rush of the ring—even when given opportunity to step down at the last second—to establish his story as a *text of bliss*. The emotional appeal that derives from audiences' awareness of the risks that the protagonist neglects will be explored further in time.

    The Wrestler does not demand significant intellectual engagement to interpret. Opening credits scroll over a collage of "Randy the Ram" literature and memorabilia to Quiet Riot's "Bang Your Head" to evoke the spirit of the Eighties' professional wrestling era, and a simple "20 years later" introduces modern-day Randy, hacking, wheezing, and hunched over in a locker room (Aronofsky, The Wrestler). Again, though not strictly washed-up, viewers are aware of a competitor who is well past his prime. Viewers gain some startling "behind the scenes" insight into professional wrestling, but this is information that is offered, rather than inferred or skirted. Randy keeps a razor blade taped inside his wristband, for example, and when offstage, the wrestlers Randy interacts with really are all nice enough fellows. The directness of these insights eliminates any need for interpretive intellectual engagement, as the information is used to highlight thematic weight and emotional appeal. Randy's use of the razor to feign a bloody injury to end a fight when needed is saddening if a little gruesome, and regardless of how loving his backstage family is, it will remain their role to destroy his body as long as he stays with them.

    There is not much to be said for exceptional dialogue in the film. The register of professional wrestling (moves) will be unfamiliar to some audiences, but this doesn't

affect understanding of the plot to any considerable degree. Devices such as verbal motifs are absent, and the most striking use of symbolic terminology is Randy's use of the phrase "Rock 'n' roll" as a blanket adjective, which illustrates his insistence on clinging to times past. This nuanced *text of bliss* qualification pales in comparison to the largely conventional, *text of pleasure* use of dialogue throughout the film.

Surprising to audiences familiar with Aronofsky's other works, emotional appeal in the film is tremendous. A man who commendably follows his passion in life is just barely managing to scrape by, and most of his much-needed income goes toward steroid use, maintaining his "Rock star" haircut, and the tanning salon. As his wrestling matches in high school gymnasiums fail to sustain his income, Randy resorts to wrestling larger matches in bigger venues (where more depraved conduct is allowed), as well as scrounging for extra hours at the supermarket where he works. Though the Ram always gets his fix in the ring, the debased form of entertainment that he insists on participating in becomes progressively more painful to watch. Sustained delusions of grandeur make the pause before Randy's finishing move longer each time, eventually to the point of awkwardness, as he revels in the surrounding din (growing increasingly more aware he may never experience it again). This embarrassing display becomes even harder to stomach as Randy competes in matches with staple guns, broken glass, and crutches wrapped in barbed wire as weapons. A singular poignant shot is used at one point in the film to illustrate the extremes to which he has resorted. After receiving medical attention following a match, a slow zoom out reveals Randy's back to be nothing more than vibrant bruises, welts, and holes.

An upswing of the wrestler's life outlook (following a heart attack and bypass

surgery) finally leads to some inviting emotional appeal. Stephanie seems to have given him one more chance to be a father, and Cassidy seems content to ignore her employer's stipulations regarding maintaining a professional relationship. In one sequence Randy and Stephanie are taking a walk down the pier, reminiscing, and they stumble upon an abandoned building and what "must have been a ballroom or something" (Aronofsky, The Fountain). A father-daughter slow dance sans diegetic soundtrack ensures, and *The Wrestler* begins developing as a *text of pleasure*. Cassidy even agrees to having a beer with him one day; all seems well with the world, and audiences inherit the optimistic tone.

After Cassidy changes her mind about cultivating affection, Randy is driven to a night of alcohol, cocaine, and a female bar acquaintance, and he misses a dinner date with Stephanie the next day. His attempts to sustain a "normal life" fail almost immediately, and the Ram phones his promoter the next day to come out of his brief retirement. Randy's story continues on as a *text of bliss* as he presses himself beyond his limits at the gym and his potential family has rejected him, though one shot at redemption remains to be offered at the penultimate moment of the film. Cassidy has a change of heart (again), and manages to catch Randy before he enters the ring for (what is implied to be) his final match. At her prompting to stay alive, with her, and out of the ring, he replies, "The only place I get hurt is out *there*…the world don't give a shit about me…you hear [the fans]? This is where I belong" (Aronofsky, The Fountain).

A *text of pleasure* conclusion, though dangled in audiences' faces, is nowhere to be found. As far as audiences know at the film's conclusion, Stephanie will never speak to her father again; Cassidy will return to her high-income, low-repute job at *Cheeks*;

and Randy will die from heart trouble and other physical complications, if he has not already. Audiences have followed a story in which the protagonist is living in the past, destroying his aging body to participate in a violent, outdated spectator sport, and fails to better his situation when given opportunity. The spirit of resignation that Randy adopts resonates with the concept of divinely mandated failure in *The Fountain*, though there is no implication of divine governance. The emotional appeal of seeing a character have genuinely tried to change his life for the better and then fail is what most strongly posits *The Wrestler* as a *text of bliss* when all is said and done.

Had Cassidy have stayed with Randy after he insisted on competing, the film even then could have been argued more strongly as a *text of pleasure*. Portrayal of Randy's final, life-threatening decision with his accompanying, applause-evoking theme music, "Sweet Child O' Mine," constitutes a palpable juxtaposition of poor decision-making and the contentedness it brings the protagonist. The emotional appeal that a self-destructive downward spiral and neglect of the legitimate love and support that family offers is what ultimately constitutes challenges to viewers' values (regarding family), and an unsettling of audiences' cultural and psychological assumptions that preservation of life should prevail in pursuing enriching habits.

Though the film centers on professional wrestling, Aronofsky does not rely on onscreen action as filler to any extent. In one sequence a match plays out as a series of flashbacks to reveal the causes of Randy's odd injuries and make audiences cringe at the graphic physical violence that transpires in what is typically considered "staged" and "fake." In the other two matches shown in the film, the two competitors are maintaining dialogue under their breath, coaching each other through the routine and, at times,

pleading for an end to the match. The final match is arguably the most susceptible to being argued a *text of pleasure* qualification. The match really does seem to be playing out for the sake of showing Randy thriving in his natural environment, entertaining fans. What must be considered for thorough interpretation, however, is the sequence's role as a poignant denouement. Randy grows progressively more tired during the match, and the pains in his chest seem to be returning with a vengeance. Essentially, audiences are wondering throughout if they are going to see "The Ram" drop dead. This uncomfortable tension is what finally establishes the film as a *text of bliss*.

Though Aronofsky continues to experiment with the filmic aspect of emotional appeal in his works, its prevalence in *The Wrestler* is certainly a reining in of its role in *The Fountain*. Much less overtly a romantic drama, the film is more a realistic exploration of what can happen to the select few citizens of humanity who become celebrities when the lifestyles they learn to live no longer cradle them. The prognosis portrayed in the film is obviously not a positive one, but it is not a complete "downer" either. Randy has his chances to make things right—and audiences are led to be optimistic with him—but his wrestling boots seems to be shod with banana peels, as the happy medium between the two worlds that would be ideal is an impossibly slippery path. For once in a film, Aronofsky entertains the construction of a *text of pleasure*, but his self-destructive protagonist, again, ensures a *text of bliss.*

Black Swan

Aronofsky's fifth and most recent film, *Black Swan*, released in 2010. The film received bids for five Academy Awards, making it Aronofsky's most successful and

critically acclaimed film yet, though the only Oscar won went to Natalie Portman for Best Actress. The narrative centers on Portman's character, Nina, who is an accomplished, lifelong ballet dancer. After repeated attempts to procure starring roles in her company's productions, she lands the starring role in *Swan Lake* as both "the White Swan" and "the Black Swan" (the traditional corresponding character names are not used). The company's director, Thomas, expresses hesitance to cast her because while her dancing fluently embodies the White Swan, the part of the Black Swan requires a style and attitude far from exemplified by Nina's personality. The thematic focus of the film concerns Nina's struggles to overcome her reserved, precision-obsessed disposition to embrace and convincingly portray the more reckless, sultry character of the Black Swan.

In addition to the pressure that would be placed on any performer to alternatively portray two wildly disparate personalities, Nina's artistic maturation into the Black Swan requires of her a psychological maturation on the whole. This secondary theme of personal growth and overcoming a restrictive, sheltered upbringing underlies the conflict between Nina and her mother (with whom she lives) throughout the film as well as Nina's personal battles. Hearing an adult preface her emotions to her mother with the address "Mommy" certainly makes one's ears perk, but the extent of her stunted psychological and emotional growth becomes palpable when audiences see the childish décor in Nina's room: the dominance of the color pink and all things frilly just barely overshadows her menagerie of stuffed animals. Writer Mark Heyman recalls thinking of the film "as a coming-of-age story for someone who should have come of age ten years earlier" to help guide development of the screenplay (Debruge 31). This challenge to

audiences' cultural assumptions regarding when one should be mandated to "leave the nest" situates the weight of the theme, which is bolstered by an emotional appeal of both pity for Nina and scorn for her overbearing mother.

Nina's struggles with supplanting her mother's governance pale in comparison to her mania-inducing pursuit of self-actualization. Again we find in one of Aronofsky's "protagonists," self-destructive obsession and compulsions. Nina inflicts on herself the numerous hallucinations and panic attacks that mark the psychological deterioration she embraces to overcome the naivety of her past. The process of maturation that Nina is ultimately prompted to undertake attacks in waves rather than coming in the more progressive, conventional form of self-learned lessons. This onslaught of concentrated "life experience" includes less than professional advances from the company's director (supposedly in an effort to encourage Nina to embrace her sexuality) as well as being the target of jealousy for what seems to be the first time in her life. Though these formidable barriers alone could drive one to the breaking point, they combine with her fateful aspiration—"I want to be perfect"—to push her over the edge in grand form (Aronofsky, Black Swan).

This thematic content comprises a number of challenges to the viewer's cultural and psychological assumptions. Where parents are expected to raise self-sufficient members of society, we see instead a mother hell-bent on vicariously living out her unrealized dreams through her daughter by dictating every aspect of her development. Where tortured artists are expected to drive themselves to success through (perhaps unconventional) enrichment, we see a ballerina completely destroying her body and mind for the sake of a single performance and an unattainable goal. The weight of these

principle themes relegates the film to a *text of bliss* classification, though an exploration of the film's intellectual demand will illustrate this more clearly.

Aronofsky takes his characteristic no-backstory-necessary approach to initiating *Black Swan*. Nina at first appears onscreen in performance mode. She dances briefly beneath spotlights before being joined by a grotesque, black, plumaged dancer. Their number becomes more heated and what is conveyed is that this mysterious counterpart is antagonistic to the character she is dancing (assuming she is representing a character onstage other than, or in addition to, herself). We come to see that this was a dream sequence, though remain unaware of what it meant. On the metro ride to the studio that follows shortly after, Nina catches sight of a woman from behind who is wearing similar clothing to hers, is sporting the same hairdo, and mirrors her actions. Audiences become aware from this very early point in the film that Nina is seeing things, though nothing like the full-blown hallucinations that are to come—fifteen in all by my count. These increasingly disturbing and often gory visions (as she begins to physically transform into the Black Swan) come to manifest so frequently that viewers are responsible for determining their functions and meanings as well as distinguishing between reality and Nina's dementia. She eventually comes to demonstrate marked character shifts—reminiscent of Tourette's or schizophrenia—indicated by nuances in soundtrack. All of this necessitated intellectual engagement absorbs audiences into the film, leaving little escape from the distressing events unfolding onscreen. The convoluted abrasiveness with which Nina's downward spiral is portrayed is captivating.

Interpretation of her hallucinations is guided by the understanding that she is making the transformation into the character of the Black Swan. Though Nina's

respective embodiments of the White Swan and Black Swan are not hard to distinguish between, what does become hard to distinguish is Nina's identity. Nailing down a concrete definition of her personality never becomes feasible in the film, as she is so rapidly undergoing change throughout it. This ambiguous character identity becomes definable only in terms of her single-minded pursuit of perfection; Nina ultimately represents the embodiment of consumption by an antagonistic pursuit. The myriad questions that the plot's progression raises are what establish the film's significant intellectual demand. These in combination with the thematic weight of the narrative are what invariably posit the film as a *text of bliss*.

Departures from dialogue conventionality in the film are slight, though identification of them does lend some weight to the thematic content, as briefly mentioned. Several instances of dialogue between Nina and her mother near the beginning of the film demarcate how appallingly under-confident and insecure Nina is before her transformation begins. As she begins to come into her own, however, we see at first a small stride toward independence: a slightly agitated "I can do it" when her mother attempts to help her undress without being invited (Aronofsky, Black Swan). In a similar scene not long after, she takes a blatantly defiant stride in the direction of self-realization: when instructed by her mother to take off her shirt, Nina simply replies, "*NO!*" (Aronofsky, Black Swan). These brief but poignant instances serve to highlight the degradation of Nina's relationship with her mother, which will be explored further as an aspect of emotional appeal.

Thomas, the director of the ballet company, is genuinely interested in elevating Nina's abilities. However, he is also genuinely interested in sleeping with her. Nina finds

herself on her way to his office to appeal to him for the lead role in the ballet yet is unable to voice her desires and concerns once in his presence, stemming from a lack of self-confidence as well as a genuine fear-heavy reverence of the man before her. After claiming to have denied her the role, Thomas forces a kiss on her, essentially to test her ability to be assertive in one way or another; she panics and bites his lip. The results of the auditions are posted mere minutes after and audiences are just as stunned as the girls in the company to learn that Nina landed the lead role. The blatant lie on Thomas' part (as a form of manipulation) defies the dialogic convention of quality of information requested and posits this first face-to-face encounter with an at least marginally unscrupulous character as an establishment of the questionable role that he will play in "helping" Nina. Later in the film Thomas invites her to his apartment after the gala announcing the company's new production and leading lady. The direction of Thomas' dialogue again strays from convention. He begins by asking if she is a virgin, followed up by "You enjoy making love?" (Aronofsky, Black Swan). Finding her nonresponsive, he presents her with a homework assignment: "Go home…and touch yourself. Live a little" (Aronofsky, Black Swan). Though he claims these are discussions that there is no need to be embarrassed about, it certainly represents a break from typical dialogue between professionals. Thomas' off-color conversations with Nina persist, placing his role as integral to the thematic context of Nina's ascent to independence and maturity. The peculiarity of his talks with Nina is striking, though, and his refusal of conventional dialogue contributes to the film's qualification as a *text of bliss*.

The vehicle of the film's appeal to emotion is the portrayed degradation of Nina's relationship with, or perhaps tolerance of, her mother. Though audiences largely

support Nina's defiance of her mother, she begins doing things expressly to spite her mother, and her insolence begins to lack realistic justification. As Nina grows to embrace her inner Black Swan and the striking departure from her longstanding disposition, her mother turns to being genuinely concerned for her, and audiences can finally sympathize with her concerns. The most notable aspect of the film's emotional appeal comes at the conclusion, as Nina lies dying after he first and final performance of the ballet: "I felt it…*perfect*…it was *perfect*" (Aronofsky, Black Swan). Audiences are not led to despondence at her death, though. Rather, an ecstasy pervades the scene due to her success at satiating her aspiration to perfection. The price she pays is high, but it is mandated by the very nature of perfection. Though the emotions evoked are strangely positive, their juxtaposition with the death of the protagonist largely neutralizes them. The sequence ultimately brings viewers to question their values, what it is they could ever be driven enough to die for. The pity felt for Nina's mother as well as Nina's triumphant departure from the world place qualification of the film's emotional appeal very near the *text of bliss* qualification. More than ten years in the making, *Black Swan* affectingly pulls viewers into and through intimate personal turmoil while illustrating, once again, the darkest potential of the self-destructive pursuit of the unattainable. The critical success of Aronofsky's most recent *text of bliss* sets the bar exceedingly high for his next project.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that the films of director Darren Aronofsky correspond to the *text of bliss* defined in Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*. Adaptation of Barthes' terminology to the register of Film Studies has founded primarily the concept of the filmic *text of bliss* while also outlining the filmic *text of pleasure*. This has provided, in contrast to the industry-driven aims of generic terminology creation, a method of subjectively qualifying narrative films that does not actively seek to challenge, but rather complement, genre classification. This appropriation of literary theory to audience reception theory in Film Studies has provided an example of how films can be classified without relying on genre classification, effectively circumventing reliance on popular opinion and corporate aims for guidance in film classification.

The degree of broad conceptual consideration evoked through the research behind this project, in addition to time and scope restraints, leaves several notions unexplored. The most readily apparent of these is consideration of a director's work that embodies the Barthian *text of pleasure*. And after considering films that qualify expressly as *texts of pleasure* and *texts of bliss*, one is inevitably led to question what sort of continuum might bridge the dichotomy.

To claim that *texts of bliss* garner certain proportions of positive and negative critical reviews based on this project would be erroneous; *Black Swan*, which was widely lauded, is as significantly a *text of bliss* as Aronofsky's first film, *Pi*, which established itself under the radar. The most telling film of Aronofsky's oeuvre can be said to be *The Fountain*, a box office failure and the target of happily voracious critics. Analysis of these films has highlighted for me their predominant narrative aspects,

ultimately and effectively foregrounding *The Fountain* as one of my most recent

additions to the "favorite films" designation. In having come to this realization, I am

encouraged to seek out "similar" films: those that have garnered largely negative critical

reception yet principally demonstrate tremendous degrees of theme weight, intellectual

demand, breaks from dialogue conventionality, *and* emotional appeal.

Analysis of the films of a director who has strayed only marginally from reliance

on theme weight and intellectual demand throughout his career, and all of whose films I

have enjoyed, has provided a more intimate understanding of the nuanced differences

in composition of his films, with regard to the narrative and filmic aspects evaluated.

Approaching the oeuvre of a notable auteur thusly has provided me—and can provide

others—the opportunity to evaluate nuances of personal taste in film.

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