“To me, watching a movie is like going to an amusement park. My worst fear is making a film that people don't think is a good ride.”

- Darren Aronofsky

After the twentieth century’s primarily ocular-centric understanding of cinema, ‘cinema of the senses’ and ‘cinema of the body’ have now become new catchphrase in area of film studies over the last two decades. In what could be potentially being called a ‘carnal understanding of cinema,’ prominence is placed on the sensation and lived experience, whilst perception and vision are often comprehended in terms of embodiment and affect. ¹Tim Palmer has defined this type of film as the ‘cinema of brutal intimacy’, characterized by ‘bold stylistic experimentation’ and ‘a fundamental lack of compromise in its engagement with the viewer’, demanding ‘a viscerally engaged experiential participant’. Cinema of the body manipulates the ability of the filmic medium to provoke vivid, fractious sensations and unsettling visual experiences. One can’t help but quiver in instinctive terror and discomfort when watching the vehement climax of Darren Aronofsky’s Requiem for a Dream (2000). Physical and emotional torment, images of decaying flesh and graphic scenes of sexual abuse interweave, we witness these scenes by means of a cacophonous interchange of numerous discordant aesthetic components, directly engaging

¹ (Laine, T, 2015, Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky, Berghahn Books, Britain, p1, 2.)
the spectators’ bodies in a particularly disturbing fashion. Completely repulsive to see, yet almost impossible to avert one’s eyes from, this *Requiem for a Dream* climax is perhaps the definitive instance of cinema of the body.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

The phrase cinema of the body is normally used to indicate the aesthetic style of such French filmmakers as *Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Philippe Grandrieux, Gaspar Noé* and *Marina de Van*. But it is equally relevant for understanding the cinema of, for example, *Andrea Arnold, David Cronenberg, Michael Haneke, David Lynch* and *Lars von Trier*. The corporeal aesthetics of ‘*body cinema*’ are best characterized as affective, immediate and sensuous. It is a cinematic style that aims at bodily immersion and affective sharing within the cinematic event.

However this is not merely achieved by the film’s characters, but through the audience’s full participation in the ‘life-space’ of the film.

2 The sensuous quality of body cinema triggers deeply felt physical and affective responses, both on the pre-reflective and the self-reflective levels of consciousness (Laine 2011).

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Now focusing on Darren Aronofsky and how his interpretation of body cinema by his film’s engaging the spectator’s lived body by means of their sheer corporeal film style. As a filmmaker Aronofsky could be considered ‘intellectual,’ i.e. his films examine topics such as hallucinations, obsessions, social anxiety, mathematics, madness, addiction, psychosis, schizophrenia and neuroscience. Aronofsky’s interest in intellect and the cerebral process is extremely surrounded in the affecting operations of the body, combined with the viewer by means of cinematic postures and gestures.

In concern to the body, Aronofsky is a very special filmmaker; all of his films are full of tension-filled conflicts between body and mind, bodily self-injuries and mental disorders. There are blends of technology and of bodily experience as ‘extensions of man’ involving computers, televisions and microscopes, but also encounters between psychological expression and bodily performance, i.e. wrestling and ballet, (The Wrestler, Black Swan).

Aronofsky uses certain cinematic techniques to his advantage, aiming at sensorial and bodily engagement, these techniques entail of; hip-hop montages with accompanying sound effects (scratching, sampling), extremely tight framing, lengthy follow shots and SnorriCam and alternations between extreme close-ups and extreme long shots, in order to create a sense of isolation.

Aronofsky grinds his actor’s ability to the core, getting the best on screen result many have ever given, whilst promoting Black Swan, in an interview described as ³“An hour with Black Swan’s director Darren Aronofsky, cinematographer ³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5zZ3UqoQaU
Matthew Libatique, and editor Andrew Weisblum”, upon the question “do you push your actor’s?”

Aronofsky said that,

“All actor’s want to do is fucking act, the actor’s I’ve always worked with are the ones that want to go for it, so for me its not a pushing thing, its just like you know let’s push each other and let’s work!”

Through his ability in getting the best out of his actor’s, four stars from Aronofsky films have received Academy Award nominations for best performance; Ellen Burstyn for Requiem, Mickey Rourke and Marisa Tomei for The Wrestler and Natalie Portman, who won Academy Award for best actress in a leading role for her performance in Black Swan. Generally speaking in cinema, and conceivably in Aronofsky’s films in particular, the physical performance of the actors enables the bystander to grasp the qualities and affects of specific characters. Vivian Sobchack said that, “it is the actor’s lived body that makes the character intelligible, because the character’s ‘inner’ experience is only manifest through the actor’s ‘outer’ performance.”

The performance of the actors in Aronofsky films is incorporated into the film’s performance, i.e. there is interchange among their corporal energy, affect, cadence, valence and the very same characteristics of the film’s artistic system. For example in The Wrestler (2009), the on-screen performance and physicality of Mickey Rourke becomes the vehicle for the protagonist’s masochistic disclosure and self-duplicity in and through interaction with the cinematic aesthetics, e.g. the setting and close-ups.

Ram (Rourke) physically goes through pain and torment, but being an Aronofsky character of course that pain is self-inflicted. His love of the sport, the crowd and the fame keeps him wrestling even though he’s years past his prime. There’s a moment that happens sometimes, that moment when the

viewer flinches and makes a face of shock, like a tingle just went down there
spine, *The Wrestler* is full of those flinch worthy moments, this is Aronofsky
physically putting the viewer into the film, letting them become attached to the
pitiful character and putting their body through the ring with Ram.

*Natalie Portman’s* performance in *Black Swan* personifies a ‘doubling’ rather
than a representation of an eccentric character, this is countered by the digital
aesthetics of the film, and by such a means a human being is doubled by an
animal. This animalistic doubling is enhanced by ‘actor transformation’, a self-
induced change of the body, which lends greater fidelity to *Portman’s*
performance in the film as well as drawing a correlation between *Portman* and
the self-disfiguring ballerina Nina. Another similar example of this can be
found in *Requiem for a Dream*, actress *Ellen Burstyn* occupies Sara Goldfarb’s
corporeal rhythm, by which Aronofsky interspersed specific sound and editing.
These augment the spectator’s awareness of Sara’s bodily pace and cadence as
they change in response to her growing addiction to amphetamines.

5 Acting and performance apart, it is this particular ‘hybrid’ quality of his films
that has made Aronofsky famous. He blurs the line between fantasy and reality,
and employs the signature styles of various genres, such as science fiction,
psychological thriller, melodrama, fantasy and body horror. His films often
create uncomfortable viewing positions, something already evident in his early
works, which have not been released commercially. These are student films

5 (Laine, T, 2015, Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky,
Berghahn Books, Britain, p5, 6.)
entitled *Supermarket Sweep* (1991), *Fortune Cookie* (1991), *Protozoa* (1993) – also the name of Aronofsky’s production company – and *No Time* (1994). Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I have not been able to track down any of these titles, but extracts of *Fortune Cookie* and *No Time* can be found on YouTube.3 *No Time* depicts two fishermen, framed in a two-shot with a wide-angle lens, attracting fish with one continually repeated, silly line: ‘Come on, fish’. Aronofsky’s short film *Fortune Cookie* is based on a short story written by Hubert Selby Jr., who is also the author of *Requiem for a Dream*.

Another example of Aronofsky’s ruthless use of the body is Nina’s mutilation in *Black Swan*:

Both ‘modalities of pain’ internal and external are operating simultaneously; the film’s protagonist Nina with a sense of external control mutilates herself in order to replace her feelings of insecurity. Instead of being a hysterical, pure experience of nullification, this pain, Nina’s pain is experientially contained and identified at first. Nina’s pain ‘exists here and now, not everywhere and always’ until the situation literally spins out of control and Nina’s body takes over her agency, acting against and annihilating her both within and without. At this point, Nina’s body no longer belongs to her, which paradoxically is also a precondition for fulfilling her true vocation as a dancer. The film seems to function by means of affective engulfing, inviting the spectator to give in to a sort of ‘bodily disintegration’. This experience is painful and pleasurable at the same time, and the film is best characterized as uncannily sublime, as it stages a confrontation between bodily materiality and psychic breakdown by means of aesthetic excess and estrangement.

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