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Darren Aronofsky's Films and the Fragility of Hope. Jadranka Skorin-Kapov. Bloomsbury, 2015 (216 pages).

Logan Davis

Darren Aronofsky's Films and the Fragility of Hope, which discusses all of the American director's films released from 1998 to 2014, is author Jadranka Skorin-Kapov's third book and her first text related directly to film studies. Previous books by the author, who is a professor in Stony Brook University's College of Business, primarily address aesthetics and continental philosophy. Her diverse scholarly background proves to be an important asset for this book wherein the author uses key terms from the disciplines that she is a part of, compares Aronofsky to multiple existential philosophers and discusses the symbolic significance of spirals and other mathematical patterns in *Pi* (1998), for example. Film scholar Tarja Laine's new book, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, released approximately six months before Skorin-Kapov's work on the director, instead focuses on the science of emotion and phenomenology. Laine's book and Skorin-Kapov's book are both pioneering products of Aronofsky scholarship, a relatively new field, with Skorin-Kapov addressing a wide variety of themes prevalent in Aronofsky's output, from *Pi* to *Noah* (2014), and Laine preferring topic specificity over topic diversity. Skorin-Kapov's analysis does seem to take movie length into account, though, with the chapter on *Pi* being considerably shorter than the book's other chapters.

The book's simple, chronological structure (with each chapter dedicated to a single Aronofsky film, by year of release) showcases that each film of the director's output functions as an independent work of art, although a signature preference for certain kinds of props (such as grapefruit), settings (such as restrooms) and themes (such as the pursuit of perfection) can be observed easily throughout his work. These recurring elements add a sense of cohesion to an oeuvre ranging from *Pi*, "the first narrative feature film using black-and-white reversal film" (14) to *Noah*, a film that was simultaneously controversial and in line with many contemporary American blockbusters. A discussion of the overarching elements observed in multiple Aronofsky films is found in the preface of Skorin-Kapov's book and the final chapter, titled "On Auteurship, Aronofsky's Themes, and Stylistic Signature".

The primary focuses of the first half of the book are: how audiences connect so strongly with psychologically askew characters such as *Pi*'s Max (Sean Gullette), visual signs of addiction in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and cyclical/symmetrical shot patterns in *The Fountain* (2006). Skorin-Kapov claims that audiences are able to believe the character of Max in *Pi*

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because of historical accounts of groundbreaking mathematicians who suffered from mental illness and the common nature of the struggles "between the rational and the irrational residing in our human lot, and the consequences when there is gross imbalance" (5). The chapter on *Requiem for a Dream* primarily focuses on the subjective view utilised in the film and how this view ties in with Aronofsky's body horror tendencies, making everyday experiences quite terrifying when seen from the point of view of an addict. In Skorin-Kapov's chapter on *The Fountain*, the exclusion of specific technological references that would eventually make the film appear dated is discussed in detail. While a filmmaker's enthusiasm for actual technological advancements may be seen as slightly political in nature, later in the text Skorin-Kapov writes of sharp contrasts between Aronofsky and overtly political German New Wave directors. Thus, the discussion of certain technological advancements' societal effects seems fitting for a film that Skorin-Kapov believes shows both mankind's potential for eventual immortality and the material emptiness and emotional pain that would theoretically come with that immortality.

Skorin-Kapov's chapter on *The Wrestler* (2008) addresses issues surrounding the entitlement of live entertainment audiences who believe that entertainers are somehow indebted to them, even if the entertainer's physical mortality must be sacrificed in the process. In the film, Randy Robinson (Mickey Rourke) conforms to the system that finds power in the enthusiasm of audiences and thrives on physical sacrifices, performing a strenuous signature move that may kill him. Skorin-Kapov interprets this move as a gift to both Randy himself and the crowd. She, acknowledging Jacques Derrida's philosophies on gift-giving and death, paints Robinson's decision to perform his final "Ram Jam" move as one of the most heroic gifts that can be given, but admits that those who infallibly view suicide as cowardly have equally valid points (80). Skorin-Kapov's argument in this section respects both Derrida and readers who have been affected by suicide, and this type of humanistic respect is important in a book that seeks to attract casual moviegoers looking for approachable film studies texts along with academics.

The next two chapters primarily focus on the diversity of the films that Aronofsky considers *Black Swan* (2010) to be influenced by and a formalist critique of *Noah*'s audiovisual elements. The diversity of creative influences on *Black Swan* has been discussed by Aronofsky himself, and Skorin-Kapov's interpretation of these discussions shows a familiarity with even the more obscure Aronofsky interviews and certain films mentioned in them. Particular attention is given to Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (*La pianiste*, 2001), a film that also explores the mother–daughter relationship between a woman who excels in the arts but is unable to achieve domestic independence and her domineering mother. In a technically detailed section in the chapter on *Noah*, Skorin-Kapov draws a comparison between the *The Fountain*'s organic visual effects style that hardly relies on CGI at all and the visual effects style in *Noah*, which uses CGI extensively. Skorin-Kapov claims that the feelings of observational omnipotence and existential minuteness that the CGI effects stir up complement the plot "about the contradictory nature of humanity" quite fittingly (129). This unique discussion brings a technical element into a chapter that is otherwise primarily concerned with philosophy and narrative film history.

In the final chapter of her book, following the six dedicated to films, Skorin-Kapov launches into a discussion of Aronofsky's status as an auteur and his stylistic signature. However, in a statement that displays the author's complex personal view of the auteur theory, she also points out that "notion[s] of an auteur as a person leaving his/her stamp on all aspects of

a movie might be outdated because a cinematic production is a very complex project involving various talents" (144). The author's view of the auteur theory is one of general acknowledgement, although she states that she does not wish to credit solely one person with the artistic merit of Aronofsky's films. She clearly realises the unique trademarks present in most of Aronofsky's films without discounting the importance of others involved in the filmmaking process, and she also acknowledges that many directors who are deemed auteurs often have a "common group of collaborators" (145) that allows a "greater unity in the collaborative effort of making a movie" (146).

Discussions of Aronofsky's status as an auteur are also present in the book's Introduction. There, Skorin-Kapov states that Aronofsky's artistic tendencies are somewhere between the "opposing sensibilities" of Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg (xxv). She argues that there is a juvenile (and marketable) sense of wonder and amazement in both Aronofsky and Spielberg, but this manifests itself as curiosity about the strangeness of certain individuals and the likelihood of their downfalls, resulting in a level of cynicism that Kubrick often reaches (xxv).

Skorin-Kapov goes on to state that film, as a discipline, "needed to acquire the notion of an auteur, to distance itself from the connotation of mass entertainment without artistic value" (145). This view of the auteur theory as necessary for film to be taken more seriously (while also allowing it to progress as a profitable industry) is expressed in a way that pays tribute to the film theorists whose writings brought about the auteur theory without underemphasising the work of professional composers, cinematographers, and actors who auteurs collaborate with. In terms of Aronofsky, Skorin-Kapov argues that his trademark cinematic style choices allow him to "explore all the possibilities of emerging cinematic techniques influenced by science and technology" (151). Evidence of this claim is seen in the fact that there are no films in Aronofsky's oeuvre that strictly adhere to the narrative and formal structures common in classic Hollywood films. Even *Pi*, which initially seems to acknowledge general black-and-white cinematographic practices common long before the 1990s, employs a pioneering use of hip-hop montage and black-and-white reversal film (151).

Another argument that Skorin-Kapov makes is that Aronofsky's films are "primarily character-based" and are "concerned with characters' existential crises induced by extreme mental states" (153). When trying to place the characteristics of an era onto Aronofsky and his films, Skorin-Kapov states that he never went through "issues with political turmoil and national identity like the New French Wave and New German Wave directors" (145). Late German New Wave directors such as Werner Herzog and Margarethe Von Trotta were still releasing films during Aronofsky's artistically influential late teenage years, so this distinction also subtly argues that Aronofsky consciously chose an approach that was different from the one of many of his influences, and allowed his films to be mostly apolitical. Preferring a balance of praise and the use of more objective descriptors, Skorin-Kapov states that the "existential feel" prevalent in Aronofsky's films "justifies labeling him as an existential director, in art/philosophical parallel with an existential philosopher" (153). She proceeds to list prominent existential philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, whose written texts have held influence for nearly a century to-date, implying that Skorin-Kapov believes that the lifespan of Aronofsky's work will be equally long.

When adding elements of specificity to the camps that Aronofsky belongs to, Skorin-Kapov states that his films combine "elements of the auteur voices of the 1970s New Hollywood and of the European film scene" (ix). It seems appropriate that she acknowledges Aronofsky's New Hollywood tendencies specifically and his European film tendencies more generally. Not all filmmakers creating works during the New Hollywood era followed popular techniques associated with that era, but Woody Allen, Michael Cimino and other prominent New Hollywood directors who were all born in New York City, the birthplace of Aronofsky, generally did follow the movement's stereotypical styles and techniques. All of these directors also used New York City as the main setting of at least one of their films. Skorin-Kapov goes on to argue that the themes Aronofsky includes in his films have a particular contemporary relevance, although they are also issues that humanity has struggled with since the beginning of time. According to Skorin-Kapov, these themes all primarily involve "the development and consequences of going overboard" (146). The information overloads associated with the modern age are often attributed to the fast pace of contemporary city life, so this focus on Aronofsky's upbringing seems quite relevant. Discussion of the contemporary relevance of Aronofsky's filmography is far from optimistic, but Skorin-Kapov does not aim for her book to be a catalyst for sociopolitical change, and she does not argue that Aronofosky's filmography aims to bring about vast sociopolitical change either.

Contemporary American cinema is finding itself producing more and more films that traverse the lines between accessible genre blockbusters and academically interesting art films, with other contemporary filmmakers working in the same tradition as Aronofsky including David Fincher and Christopher Nolan. Nolan, much like Aronofsky, has been known to create bridges between philosophical concepts and Hollywood accessibility. *Following* (1998), his directorial feature debut, and Aronofsky's *Pi* have strikingly similar elements, such as psychologically struggling protagonists and black and white cinematography. From a business perspective, both films' box office sales were forty to fifty times the films' budgets, enabling both Aronofsky and Nolan to establish themselves as financially sound auteurs. Though *Following* is not discussed by Skorin-Kapov, *Insomnia* (2002), Nolan's first studio film, is discussed multiple times as she brings up Aronofsky's noteworthy decision to avoid directing adaptations of foreign films. Skorin-Kapov's discussion of other contemporary directors frames Aronofsky as part of a larger group, but the attention is never off Aronofsky for too long.

Skorin-Kapov's book gives an equal amount of attention to how popular culture ties into Aronofsky's films and how the complex ideas of philosophers, of whom many in Aronofsky's audience may be unfamiliar with, are brought into his films, echoing a notion, found in the beginning of the chapter on *Noah,* that even this film, Aronofsky's most blockbuster-like, has moments in line with the tenets of art cinema and philosophical genres. The book's convenient index and bibliography give readers a section to turn to if they want to study the philosophers mentioned in greater detail. Bearing this in mind, the tone of the book gives off an air of public accessibility. However, those who seek intellectual rigor will also find moments of this in the book itself and in the texts that make up the bibliography.

Skorin-Kapov's interaction with the theories of Gilles Deleuze is particularly insightful. The author shows humility when she takes on a more personal tone than found in most academic writing, stating, in regard to Deleuze's theory on different types of shots and pure affects: "Let

me try to interpret it" (148). In what follows, she launches into a summary of Deleuze's theory that captures the essence of the idea in a succinct way by positing that affection images lack portrayals of the initial instigators of emotional responses, but still often produce an experience of sympathy. This theory aims to validate the psychological purpose of close-ups on characters' faces in the cinema. Aronofsky uses this technique in an important scene in *Noah* that involves a reveal of wounds that a young, feeble Ila (Skylar Burke) suffers early on in the film. Viewers know that Ila is in pain both from the initial cries that lead Noah to her and the close-ups of her face that immediately cause sympathy before the extent of the injury is even known. While a more graphic portrayal of the injury eventually arrives on the screen, the pained facial expressions are enough for viewers to know the extent of the injury before it is seen.

Ultimately, Skorin-Kapov's book enables readers to connect the films of an important contemporary director to philosophical ideas that shaped the discipline of film studies during the beginnings of the New Hollywood era, the most recent United States cinema era with a universally recognised name. These connections between Aronofsky and existential philosophies have not been explored in many other film studies texts, primarily because Aronofsky scholarship is still a young branch of film studies, but Skorin-Kapov's text could easily be a launching point for those wishing to further explore this subject area. The book could have benefitted from a small chapter on the films that Aronofsky produced and did not direct, but Skorin-Kapov's film selection ties in with the discussions of the director-focused auteur theory well, and the breadth of both technical and theoretical discussions leaves the text appearing far from incomplete.

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