"Lose Yourself": Narrative Instability and Unstable Identities in *Black Swan*

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Abstract: This article discusses narrative instability as a significant dynamic in recent American cinema and focuses on an investigation of the film *Black Swan* as such a narratively unstable text. After an introduction to narrative instability and its connection to a postmodern cultural instability in general, I analyze *Black Swan* as a narratively unstable text that dramatizes epistemological and ontological concerns about identity and reality.

Keywords: Narrative Instability; Narrativity; Crisis of Representation; Identity; *Black Swan*

Introduction

This article introduces the concept of 'narrative instability' and focuses on reading Darren Aronofsky's 2010 film *Black Swan* as such a narratively unstable text. Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in popular American texts—novels, films, TV series, and increasingly video games—that can be said to narrate instability by employing narrative strategies that lead to inconsistent and disrupted storyworlds: when the protagonist of the 1999 film *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm Crowe (played by Bruce Willis), whose perspective we follow throughout most of the film, is revealed to actually have been dead all along, this is a significant moment of narrative instability prompting viewers to question, reevaluate, and revise the text's storyworld that they constructed until that moment. Similar moments of instability as well as thoroughly unstable narrations are featured in such different texts as the films *Fight Club* (1999) or *Memento* (2000), in TV series like *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), in novels such as *House of Leaves* (2000) or *Infinite Jest* (1996), and in video games like *Bioshock* (2007) or *Alan Wake* (2010). While diverse in genre and subject matter, these texts share instability as a narrative trait that they connect to cultural concerns which can be framed as anxieties about a 'cultural instability' within American postmodern culture. Such anxieties are specifically propelled by a crisis of representation (or signification) and touch on issues such as uncertainties over one's identity (especially in light of so-called crises of masculinity, femininity, and/or whiteness), having to cope with the absence of definite truth or reality, and concerns over factuality and fictionality.

To shed some light on these different aspects, I will briefly explore instability in more general terms, first as a narrative dynamic, then as a cultural one. Subsequently, I will deepen these general investigations through an analysis of *Black Swan* as a narratively unstable text that deals with anxieties over a cultural instability in post-1990s America. In a close reading of the film and partly complemented by a comparative reading of the film *Fight Club*, I argue that *Black Swan* dramatizes postmodern concerns about identity and reality via an ambivalent and ultimately unresolved narrative instability. The film thus suggests that trying to find answers to the ontological and epistemological anxieties raised about one's identity and about one's world's reality is an undertaking that is both futile and potentially fatal.

Instability in Recent American Texts

Narrative Instability

I will introduce the concept of narrative instability in order to analyze texts that prompt their readers (or viewers or players) to either abruptly or continuously question, change, and eventually revise a text's storyworld, with 'text' understood in its broadest cultural-studies sense and thus encompassing diverse media. This can be the case in texts that build on a stable storyworld for the longest time of the narrative only to disrupt that stability in one fundamental moment of instability or in texts that from the beginning on refuse to construct a stable storyworld. The concept of the storyworld, which is critical for this understanding, is defined by David Herman as the "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative" (570). As Herman continues to explain, the term *storyworld* emphasizes the role of readers of a text in "trying to make sense of a narrative" as they "attempt to reconstruct not just what happened but also the surrounding context or environment" that embed "storyworld existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are involved" (570). In this sense, focusing on the storyworld of a text draws attention to the readers' process of creating a sense of the text's plot, characters, and setting, which are mediated by that text's narration. Rather than emphasizing the instability of a text's fictional universe, I thus focus on the instability that occurs in the process of

readers mentally (re)creating that fictional universe as the so-called storyworld, and in how that process is influenced by the text's narrative and diegetic traits.

While the storyworld at times will have to be slightly expanded and updated in every text, this notion should be specified insofar that a stable text could be said to feature a consistent storyworld that only has to be updated lightly and continuously (not abruptly) and where it is clear who is narrating the text. In contrast, an unstable text obscures these aspects through the use of diegetic elements like multiple perspectives without a clear sign of a change in perspective, an equally unmarked use of focalizations, or an overall unreliable narrative presence. However, this distinction between stable and unstable narrations is not a binary one; I understand instability as a gradual feature of texts. That is, a text might be more or less unstable but not simply either stable or unstable, particularly in comparison to other texts. Most significantly, such instability occurs not just on the level of narrative (or 'story') but also on the level of narration (or 'discourse'), to which the concept of the storyworld also draws attention; hence, my use of the term *narrative instability* comprises what could be called diegetic instability as well.

David Fincher's film *Fight Club* can serve as an example of what I consider constitutive of narrative instability. For the majority of the film, viewers construct the storyworld of the text as one in which its protagonist, actually unnamed but often referred to as Jack (Edward Norton), slowly changes his life from being trapped in a dull corporate job to leading an anticapitalist and anticonsumerist lifestyle thanks to the help of a man he met by chance, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). Yet in a crucial scene towards the end of the film, the narrative reveals that Tyler Durden does not actually exist but rather is an expression of Jack's mental condition, presumably some kind of multiple-personality disorder—a revelation that prompts us to reevaluate the whole storyworld of the text and that is often referred to as a 'twist.' Such a scene is what I want to investigate as a crucial moment of instability: After this revelation, we realize that every scene shown before that featured Jack or Tyler was narrated from Jack's perspective. This constant internal focalization of a character whose perception is clearly not reliable is a narrative feature of the text we were not previously aware of—a feature that, although it was actually hinted at throughout the film, usually stays 'hidden' when first viewing it. The revelation of this focalization in one single moment accordingly

prompts a number of sudden and significant revisions of the text's storyworld, which are so severe that they render the storyworld unstable for a while: viewers cannot be entirely certain what exactly has happened (and to whom) so far.

There are similar moments of instability in a number of recent American texts, especially films. Many films featuring such moments have been very successful commercially and critically, having received public as well as academic attention under genre labels like 'twist movies' (cf. Wilson), 'puzzle films' (cf. Buckland or Panek), or 'mindfuck' or 'mindgame films' (cf. Elsaesser or Eig).[1] Besides *Fight Club*, this includes films like *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Identity* (2003), or *The Sixth Sense* (as well as many other films by M. Night Shyamalan). However, instability can take many forms and does not have to rely on (just) one such significant moment of instability. For example, a film like David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), in which viewers continuously struggle to connect individual scenes with each other and have no certain way of knowing if what they see is 'really' happening or is part of a dream, can be said to narrate instability even more thoroughly than, for instance, *Fight Club*. This is also true for various other films, such as *Memento* (2000), *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), or *Black Swan* (and generally many of the works of David Lynch, Christopher Nolan, and Charlie Kaufman). Since I understand instability as a gradual feature of texts, though, these distinctions—a severe moment of instability on the one hand and a thoroughly unstable narration on the other—are not clear categories, and many unstable texts actually lie somewhere in between these two apparent ends of the spectrum.[2] Additionally, the effects these kinds of instability have on the viewer are generally similar, the most significant of which is the (metatextual) attention instability draws to the process of constructing the storyworld and thus to the narration as such.

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[1] In this article, I will focus on films as the seemingly most prominent medium to employ narrative instability in recent years. The early appeal especially of single unstable moments in films can also partly be attributed to the severe effect such a moment has in a medium like film, where the process of constructing the storyworld relies so much on visual input, with visual storytelling and the camera ostensibly and stereotypically suggesting objectivity. However, there are also other media that narrate instability, most notably novels, TV series, and, increasingly, video games. In each of these, instability can take different forms due to the specific medium's particular traits. I investigate instability in such a broader transmedia context in my larger doctoral research project.

[2] Still, in my later analysis, I will use *Fight Club* and *Black Swan* exemplarily to briefly demonstrate an already occurring shift in contemporary unstable films from single moments to more thoroughly unstable narrations.

In scholarship so far, the narrative instability (or stability) occurring in the process of readers creating a text's storyworld has been mostly ignored as a narrative feature or an analytical category. Likewise, unstable texts have not been investigated as one unified dynamic so far either. Instead, individual texts have been studied with different specific emphases, for instance with a focus on narrative (un)reliability, on narrative complexity (cf. Buckland or Mittell), or on certain genre considerations mentioned before. While many of these individual aspects are indeed related to narrative instability as a whole, I believe that what actually connects these diverse texts that have been gaining prominence since the 1990s is the pleasure they take in narrating instability as their textual project, casting their engagement with instability as their primary appeal. Additionally, by narrating instability, these texts point to contemporary cultural, social, and political concerns about a cultural instability in postmodern, post-1990s America.[3]

Cultural Instability

These anxieties over an instability in American culture are expressed in 'typical' concerns of postmodernism such as a plurality of identities, the supposed dissolution of the self, or a denial of (absolute) truth or meaning (cf. Hoffmann 35-40). Narratively unstable texts engage with these issues and—often in exaggerated ways—intensify them by self-consciously framing them as epistemological matters. They portray such an instability in American culture as being largely the result of what postmodern scholars like Fredric Jameson or Jean-François Lyotard have referred to as a "crisis of representation" (Jameson viii) or a "crisis of narratives" (Lyotard qtd. in Ebert 184) and what might generally be called a "radical epistemological and ontological crisis" (Bertens 48). The focus on such a crisis specifies that

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[3] This is not to say that texts before the 1990s did not feature unstable elements. In facts, texts featuring certain kinds of plot twists (e.g. in crime fiction) or writings by authors like Jorge Luis Borges can in some way be seen as predecessors for unstable texts, even though they have not been approached with notions of narrative (in)stability in scholarship so far. Likewise, there are also numerous earlier texts dealing with a sense of uncertainty and indeterminacy at different points in American culture, a trait of unstable texts I will look at in more detail below. However, what distinguishes the texts I look at as unstable is how they combine this kind of instability on a narrative/diegetic and a cultural/thematic level; how they self-consciously frame it as an epistemological issue, being aware of a crisis of representation; how they posit this as their main appeal; and how they have become so popular because of it, indeed turning instability into a mainstream phenomenon.

postmodern anxieties are not so much about questions of the 'real' but rather about matters of representation and signification (that is, of the relationship between signs and their referents): It is "meaning (signification) itself [that] is seen as self-divided and undecidable" (Ebert 184). Part of the concerns over instability in American culture thus is the recognition that "notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist [...] but that they are no longer unproblematic issues [...]. The postmodern [...] is [...] a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 32). Accordingly, the intensification of questions of reality and identity in unstable texts is composed of a shift from framing these issues as an ontological problem (who are we/what is real?) to an epistemological one (how can we know who we are/what is real?).[4] By narrating instability, unstable texts foreground the role of the narrator (or, more generally, the narrative instance(s) of a text) in influencing how the text's readers construct the storyworld, which equally foregrounds the act of representation as such.

As an example of this dynamic, one could consider how films (and, originally, novels) like *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* (2000) engage with concerns over one's identity, which is not per se a novel subject in American literature and culture. However, in both films, uncertainties about one's identity are portrayed as being the results of (American) capitalism, consumerism, and conformity of the 1990s. Additionally, in the way that these anxieties so fundamentally question and destabilize the diegetic reality of the protagonists of the two texts, they do engage in an intensification of previous similar concerns. Most significantly, this instability also takes place on the level of narration and storyworld: readers and viewers are (initially) left as clueless as the protagonists about these texts' diegetic realities, emphasizing that this is a problem of knowledge and of how knowledge can be accessed, mediated, and represented. Such a focus on instability points to a renewed sense of cultural

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[4] There are, of course, many different understandings of postmodernism, and this multitude of understandings and the apparent impossibility of defining postmodernism seem to be one of its few commonly accepted characteristics. Linda Hutcheon comments on this aspect when she expands a list of different perspectives on postmodernism by Brian McHale (*Politics* 11) and, specifically in reference to whether the postmodern is about the ontological or the epistemological, when she comments that "the contradictions of postmodernism cannot be described in 'either/or' terms" (*Poetics* 50). Likewise, I am not concerned with defining postmodernism or the postmodern but instead want to emphasize that unstable texts concern themselves with epistemological issues (and also still ontological ones, although often casting them as epistemological ones instead) and are aware of a crisis of representation, which can be understood as making them distinctly postmodern.

crisis in America during the late 1990s and the 2000s, one that might be called a crisis of representation (or signification), as just discussed.[5] Simultaneously, the fact that unstable texts have become so popular indicates that the crisis of representation is not left to being discussed in 'classical' or 'high' postmodern texts anymore but has rather entered the mainstream (e.g. in highly successful and popular films).

The tendency to engage with cultural instability can also be framed as a form of reaction to or further engagement with postmodernism. That is, unstable texts, aware of a crisis of representation, are also conscious of (varying) so-called post-postmodern tendencies in American culture during the 1990s and the 2000s, and they position themselves towards them. Many scholars that discuss such a 'post-postmodernism' detect a kind of return to realism—a so-called neorealism—as a major trend in American fiction. Other scholars trying to define post-postmodernism rather propose an "intensification and mutation within postmodernism" that could also be called "a super-postmodernism, hyper-postmodernism, or maybe a 'late postmodernism'" (Nealon ix).[6] For an investigation of instability, it seems most significant to acknowledge that these different strands of thinking (and potentially others) exist simultaneously and that they can be seen as expressions of trying to cope with a postmodern crisis of representation.

Unstable texts self-consciously locate themselves in this large field of postmodern and post-postmodern literary trends: they mostly stand in opposition to neorealist tendencies and rather embrace the 'intensified hyper-postmodernism' that Jeffrey Nealon describes, which, however, could just as well still be called (distinctly) postmodern, a continuation of (a certain kind of) postmodernism. In terms of their content, unstable texts could indeed be said to

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[5] In this regard, it seems remarkable that this perceived crisis centers, most often, on white, male, middle-class protagonists. Accordingly, almost all unstable texts feature white protagonists, almost always men (*Black Swan* and its female white protagonist are one of the most prominent exceptions), and usually from a middle-class background. The epistemological and ontological concerns over these protagonists' identity and the reality of their world thus seem to be mostly the concerns of a white (male) America.

[6] Most understandings of neorealism posit that "some form of mimesis is called for—that is, some type of renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodernism narrative repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy, etc." (Brooks and Toth 8-9) and that there is a need to "write and live one's way out of representation and into something more real" (McLaughlin 218). For more investigations of such a neorealist trend in American fiction, cf. Rebein; López and Potter; Brooks and Toth; or McLaughlin. In contrast, for arguments about an understanding of post-postmodernism as a hyper- or late postmodernism, cf. Nealon or Green.

follow a kind of neorealist impulse in trying to deal with matters of representation and signification, in taking up 'real' issues and concerns relevant to modern-day American society. However, while this aspect concerns content, their form is still distinctly postmodern, and this postmodern aesthetic is what I want to investigate as narrative instability. In opposition to neorealist texts, then, these unstable texts sharply deny any "renewed faith in [...] meaning, truth, representational accuracy" (Brooks and Toth 8-9) and work against the trend of neorealist texts to "be less formally and stylistically self-referential" and experimental (McLaughlin 218). Instead, they engage with concerns about the uncertainty of notions of truth, knowledge, reality, and identity on the level of content and on the level of narration. Unstable texts do this in thematically often much bleaker ways than neorealist texts and, most importantly, with a focus on casting these problems not just as ontological but also as epistemological by using instability to draw attention to questions of representation and textuality. Ultimately, it is this connection between narrative instability as a distinctly postmodern textual property and cultural instability as an expression of the meanings, the cultural concerns, and the politics of these texts (influenced by a crisis of representation) that is at the center of an investigation of instability in recent American texts and that will guide my analysis of *Black Swan*.

"Lose Yourself": Instability in *Black Swan*

Black Swan was released in 2010 to much critical and commercial success. In terms of genre, it lies somewhere between a psychological thriller and a supernatural horror film. The film's protagonist, the young ballet dancer Nina (played by Natalie Portman), struggles to perform the dual role of White Swan and Black Swan in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*. She dances the White Swan very well but has problems with the role of the Black Swan because, as Thomas (Vincent Cassel), the ballet company's director, tells her repeatedly, that role has to be performed with more sensuality and spontaneity. Instead, Nina tries to approach the role with the control and restraint that mark both her style of dancing and her personality: as a piece of advice on how to perform the role more spontaneously and passionately, Thomas repeatedly tells Nina to "lose yourself." As she tries to perfect the part of the Black Swan, Nina finds herself in increasingly violent arguments and confrontations with her mother

(Barbara Hershey); with Thomas; with the previous star performer of the company, Beth (Winona Ryder); and with a newly arrived ballet dancer, Lily (Mila Kunis). Furthermore, Nina repeatedly notices wounds on her body but cannot remember how they were inflicted. Additionally, through the course of the story, she suffers from what seem to be progressively more (and more severe) visual and auditory hallucinations, the most significant of which are the numerous times that she mistakes Lily for herself, perceiving her as a kind of doppelgänger. Her apparently worsening mental condition and her slipping grasp on reality culminate in a scene in which we see her stabbing and killing Lily, which, however, seems to actually have led to Nina stabbing herself. After she excels in her performances of both the White Swan and the Black Swan for the first time, she seems to be bleeding to death as the credits roll.

In the following analysis, I will first point out in how far *Black Swan* is a narratively unstable text. Then, in a close reading, I will delve more deeply into how it connects this instability on a narrative and diegetic level to cultural concerns of a post-1990s America. Some of the differences of *Black Swan*, released in 2010, to earlier unstable texts will be demonstrated via a comparison with the 1999 film *Fight Club*. By doing so, I argue that, compared to earlier unstable texts, *Black Swan* engages in a much more ambivalent kind of instability and is thus bleaker and more fatalistic in the depiction of its protagonist's attempts to find her identity and to clarify her reality. Accordingly, the film suggests that Nina's struggle to grow up and emancipate herself so fundamentally challenges and questions her identity that it also destabilizes the reality of the world around her, thus depicting such an attempt as potentially fatal and doomed to fail.

The main source of narrative instability in the film comes from a diegetic trait not immediately apparent from the plot: the entire film is focalized internally through Nina, and it does not offer any other, potentially more 'objective' points of view against which one could evaluate Nina's perspective. This becomes even more significant since the film only hints at this internal focalization throughout the text but does not, ultimately, clarify it. Indeed, *Black Swan* offers such hints as early as possible: It opens with a dream sequence showing Nina dancing as the White Swan and then fades and opens again with a close-up of Nina's face, lying in bed. That the film begins by having viewers 'witness' Nina's dream is the

first indication that they are able to see what Nina sees, even what she dreams.[7] From then on, this internal focalization becomes increasingly noticeable for viewers since many scenes seem impossible or 'unrealistic,' which suggests that they are, in fact, Nina's hallucinations. There are numerous examples, but these hallucinations particularly center on two recurring motifs, one being Nina's gradual and (apparently) literal transformation into a swan, the other being the many times that she mistakes Lily for herself.[8] As becomes apparent at the end of the film, the viewers' access to Nina's thoughts and to her perception has not actually been a privilege but a limitation. This constant internal focalization, which clearly undermines the 'objectivity' of the narration, is the basic trait of the film's instability, in the end forming a storyworld that remains full of doubts and uncertain elements.

Somewhat paradoxically, *Black Swan* is unstable exactly because it does not feature one crucial moment of instability towards the end of its narrative but rather features many smaller unstable moments, refusing to culminate into one larger, possibly clarifying one. As a consequence, the film remains narratively unstable throughout. This narrative trait stands in contrast to earlier unstable films like *Fight Club*, in which the one moment of instability significantly questions the storyworld but, ultimately, again leads to one stabilized version of it. In accordance with this heightened degree of instability on the narrative level, *Black Swan* is also less hopeful and more fatalistic in depicting its protagonist's quest to find her own sense of identity.

Despite the differences in genre and subject matter, *Fight Club* and *Black Swan* actually share, at closer inspection, a number of traits: Like *Fight Club*, *Black Swan* can be said to depict, in its narration, a character that suffers from multiple-personality disorder—or, rather, it narrates a popular understanding of multiple-personality disorder, one that is very literal in showing the protagonist's 'other' personality as a separate character. While such a disease is nowadays known as dissociative identity disorder in medical and psychiatric classifications (Ta 271) and is actually quite rare or disputed by some (Weiten 461), it has

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[7] Moreover, the close-up of her face also draws attention to her mind as being a significant force in the overall narrative (and narration).

[8] These apparent hallucinations also occur on an auditory level, as viewers often hear sounds that, supposedly, only Nina is able to hear (for instance various hissing sounds reminiscent of a swan). This corresponds to internal focalzation on the level of sound as well, a type of focalization sometimes specified as "auricularization" (Kuhn 122).

been featured relatively frequently in popular culture as this literal understanding of two (or more) 'split' personalities (cf. Elsaesser 17-18, 24-30).[9]

Like *Fight Club*, *Black Swan* at its core deals with the themes of identity and reality, and the films closely interweave these: In *Fight Club*, Jack's identity—and his masculinity—are threatened by the conformity and consumerism of (American) capitalism (Baker 76), and the sudden appearance of Tyler Durden and the later revelation of Tyler's actual identity forces Jack to question his entire grasp on reality. In *Black Swan*, Nina questions her identity as she tries to grow up and to emancipate herself from her mother, a quest for femininity symbolized by her efforts to transcend from the role of the White Swan into that of the Black Swan, struggling to perfect the performance of both at once. This theme of growing up is quite prominent, for instance in the pervasive use of color symbolism that initially associates Nina with the colors white and pink, suggesting her child-like innocence, and in the film's focus on the relationship between Nina and her mother as Nina tries to overcome her mother's controlling presence. In a way, both films thus portray their protagonist's search for their own identity as they try to emancipate themselves (for Jack, from consumerism; for Nina, from the influence of her mother). In *Black Swan*, the apparent hallucinations of Nina's bodily transformation and of Lily as her doppelgänger add to Nina's concerns about her identity and make it increasingly impossible for her to tell what is actually happening in the world around her.

Yet there are crucial differences in terms of how *Black Swan* uses instability to narrate these similar concerns. *Fight Club* begins with Jack's voice-over narration and early on foregrounds him as an active narrator, thus also hinting at the potential unreliability of his perspective. However, while there are quite a few other hints towards his inadequacy as an 'objective' narrator, these are relatively well 'hidden' and will usually only be noticed in a second viewing of the film, which is why, when first seeing the film, the moment of revealing Tyler's identity is so effective as an unstable twist moment. *Black Swan* does not feature such an

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[9] Many unstable texts feature protagonists with such mental disorders as the apparent source of their instability (on the level of subject matter). The popularity and mainstream success they have achieved points to the cultural work these portrayals do in providing postmodern American society with a possibility to discuss such disorders and, especially, the cultural concerns they are related to (cf. also Gottschalk).

explicit nod towards Nina's unreliability in the beginning but instead keeps showing smaller moments and aspects which constantly cause viewers to question her objectivity, and it does so in an open instead of a 'hidden' way. While these moments do become more severe, they only serve to strengthen the suggestion that the story we perceive is Nina's necessarily subjective and potentially unreliable one; there is, however, no one revealing moment that would provide final clarification.

This lack of clarification is especially significant because in *Fight Club*, after the twist, the film highlights the interpretation of the film I have presented so far (Tyler being a part of Jack's split personality) as the dominant reading of the text. This is established immediately after the twist, when the narration shows earlier scenes again (as Jack thinks back to these previous events), revised with the knowledge of this twist, as if this was an updated version of what 'actually' happened. Moreover, this reading of the film is most strongly encouraged as Jack physically fights Tyler one final time. In this scene, the point of view switches from Jack's, showing him and Tyler fighting, to that of security cameras in the building, showing only Jack, fighting with himself. This is one of the film's rare externally focalized perspectives, which thus explicitly marks itself as not being Jack's point of view. The choice of a security camera (a 'camera eye'), stereotypically known for showing what 'objectively' and reliably happens and thus underscoring the belief in one definite reality, also strengthens the reading that Jack is the only actual person there, with Tyler just being a literalization of his personality disorder.

Black Swan features no such scenes, no perspective other than Nina's, and, as mentioned, no final revelation of what is 'objectively' real and what is not. Instead of such a final, ultimately clarifying twist, there are numerous scenes having the appearance of a twist but, each time, turning out not to be such a revelation after all. The most significant example is the final confrontation between Nina and Lily (in the outset similar to Jack and Tyler's final confrontation), in which Nina suspects Lily of trying to steal the role of the Black Swan from her. The scene again features Lily suddenly turning into a doppelgänger of Nina, and it is also the culmination of Nina's two most severe hallucinations, that of Lily as her doppelgänger

and that of her transformation into a swan, combined in one scene.[10] Nina, either to get rid of her hallucination or because she actually wants to dispose of Lily, stabs the doppelgänger, who then reverts to looking like Lily. This scene could have been the final twist, clarifying that Lily was in fact a 'real' person and that Nina killed her, but as mentioned earlier, Lily is later seen to be very much alive and Nina instead seems to have stabbed herself, which leads to her apparent death.

However, this ending still leaves many questions unresolved, and even more significantly, after this final confrontation, we continue to see things from Nina's perspective only, constantly switching from apparent reality to apparent hallucinations, just as she does. Hence, the film does not emphasize a dominant reading. This leaves the storyworld inconsistent, unresolved, and ambivalent, and the numerous scenes that have the appearance of a twist but turn out not to be one also can be said to 'tease' the viewers, to 'play' with their expectations of a clarification in the end. Ultimately, both *Fight Club* and *Black Swan* represent their protagonists' search for the reality of their worlds as an epistemological problem, as the struggle of these characters to find out how they can possibly know what (and who) is real. However, while *Fight Club* (metatextually) highlights this question through one significant moment of instability that eventually offers a 'solution' to Jack's identity crisis, in *Black Swan*, viewers—like Nina herself—are left alone in deciphering what is 'real' and what is not, with the film providing no final answers to these ontological and epistemological questions as it accordingly leaves the instability of its storyworld unresolved.

A final element that makes *Black Swan*'s dramatization of Nina's struggle for identity most apparent is the motif of violence. Generally, violence in the film is mainly tied to Nina's quest to mature, as the confrontations between her and her mother (and other characters) grow increasingly violent. In Nina's view, her mother's presence literally and figuratively prevents her from perfecting the role of the Black Swan and thus forcefully restricts her process of growing up. Nina, in turn, has to resort to violence in order to stop her mother from holding

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[10] As Nina again hallucinates Lily as her doppelgänger, she also appears to gain more and more bodily traits of a swan: Most visibly, in their struggle, Nina's neck suddenly extends so that she can escape Lily's/the doppelgänger's grasp. The scene is also one of the myriad examples of the use of color symbolism in the film, with Nina usually being dressed in white, Lily in black, paralleling the roles in *Swan Lake*.

her back. As an element related to Nina's mental instability, violence is used in an attempt to remedy and clarify her situation: Nina tries to get rid of Lily in their final confrontation, which, however, only seems to lead to Nina harming and possibly killing herself.[11] The use of violence against herself has thus not helped Nina but led to her demise, to actual self-destruction, and this can again be seen as an epistemological problem of being unable to know who another person is or whether another person is real: Nina trying to kill her doppelgänger (or Lily) but killing herself instead is an explicit problem of signification, of a confusion of referents.

That Nina's search for identity and her struggle to know what is 'real' most probably end in death demonstrates how bleakly the text engages with these postmodern concerns. Throughout the story, Nina's attempts at maturing are symbolized in her wish to "perfect" (as she repeatedly says) the performances of the White and Black Swan. Indeed, the last words of the film feature Nina telling the director Thomas, as she lies dying on a mattress, that her performance was finally "perfect." However, the story suggests that this was a misguided desire in the first place: instead, striving for such perfection is depicted as futile, as Beth, the former star of the company, admits earlier when Nina tells her that she wants to be "perfect" like Beth. Beth's reply, however, is: "I'm not perfect. I'm nothing." Earlier, Thomas also explained to Nina that Beth has a "dark impulse" inside her that makes her "even perfect at times. But also so damn destructive." Likewise, in terms of resolving her identity crisis, Nina seems to have achieved "nothing" at the end of the film. Instead, her strive for perfection has indeed been destructive: In her attempt to perfect the role of the Black Swan in accordance with Thomas's instructions to be more spontaneous and less controlled, to "let go" and to "lose yourself," Nina did, indeed, lose her *self*. *Black Swan* thus suggests that not even something so seemingly natural as growing up can be endured by everybody and that, instead, trying to clarify the confusions over one's identity—searching for one definite and

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[11] Of course, violence is also an important motif in *Fight Club* that lies at the center of the film's concerns with capitalism, identity, and masculinity (cf. e.g. Ta or Baker 75-80 for more on the interconnectedness of these issues in the film). Significantly, Jack uses violence in order to clarify his identity when he shoots himself in the throat, which leads to his Tyler persona vanishing. The film ends on a relatively optimistic note in terms of Jack's own survival, and as such, his use of violence to remedy his situation is much more successful than Nina's.

clear version of that identity, of truth, and of one's reality—is a futile and potentially fatal undertaking.

Conclusion

In this article, I introduced instability as both a narrative trait and a cultural concern of contemporary American films. I argued that unstable texts narrate instability in order to engage with cultural issues (especially in relation to identity and reality) of a postmodern America that is aware of a crisis of representation. I then analyzed *Black Swan* as such a narratively unstable text that foregrounds its protagonist's concerns about her identity and the reality of her world as not only an ontological but also an epistemological problem. Thus, *Black Swan* dramatizes postmodern concerns about identity and reality, and as the film leaves its narrative instability ultimately ambivalent and unresolved, it also treats these themes in a much bleaker and more fatalistic manner than earlier unstable texts like *Fight Club*. Accordingly, my analysis has shown how *Black Swan* is part of a trend in recent American popular texts to portray American culture's concerns with signification, representation, and textuality and the related crises of their protagonists' identities by narrating instability.

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