

## INTRODUCTION

# Aronofsky, Auteurship, Aesthetics

After the twentieth century's predominantly ocular-centric understanding of cinema, 'cinema of the senses' and 'cinema of the body' have become new catchphrases in film studies over the last two decades. In what could be called a carnal understanding of cinema, emphasis is placed on the lived experience and sensation, while vision and cognition are often understood in terms of affect and embodiment. Tim Palmer defines 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' (Palmer 2006: 64, 172). Cinema of the body exploits the ability of the filmic medium to induce vivid, truculent sensations and unsettling aesthetic experiences. Thus, one cannot help but shiver in involuntary terror and pain when witnessing the feverish climax of Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). Here, graphic scenes of sexual abuse interweave with physical and emotional torment, accompanied by images of decaying flesh. These scenes are presented to the spectators by means of a cacophonous interplay of various dissonant aesthetic elements that directly engage the spectators' bodies in particularly disturbing fashion. Repulsive to watch, yet impossible to avert one's eyes from, this climax is perhaps the ultimate instance of cinema of the body.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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. This is not brought about by identification with the film's characters, but through the spectator's full participation in the 'life-space' of the film. As Bruce Isaacs argues, 'cinema . . . is an inherently participatory art' (Isaacs 2008: 77). The sensuous quality of body cinema triggers deeply felt physical and affective responses, both on the pre-reflective and the (self-)

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reflective levels of consciousness (Laine 2011). For the purposes of this book, the cinema of the body is defined as a sensuous bodily event that offers the spectator the chance to participate in it by means of its affective-aesthetic system. I shall focus on the cinema of Darren Aronofsky and on how his films engage the spectator's lived body by means of their sheer corporeal film style. Aronofsky as a filmmaker could be also considered 'cerebral', insofar as his films often explore such topics as mathematics, madness, hallucinations, obsessions, social anxiety, addiction, psychosis, schizophrenia and neuroscience. Yet this interest in intelligence and mental processes in Aronofsky's films is deeply embedded in the affective operations of the body, shared with the spectator by means of cinematic gestures and postures. As Jennifer Barker explains, this process of sharing is based on the spectator's close bodily connection with cinema in 'texture, spatial orientation, comporment, rhythm and vitality' (Barker 2009: 2).

As far as the body is concerned, Aronofsky is a very special filmmaker. His films are full of tension-filled conflicts between body and mind, bodily (self-) injuries and cognitive disorders. There are combinations of bodily experience and technology as 'extensions of man' involving computers, televisions and microscopes, but also conflicts between psychological expression and bodily performance (wrestling, ballet). He is fond of cinematic techniques that aim at sensorial and bodily engagement. There are hip-hop montages with accompanying sound effects (scratching, sampling). He often uses extremely tight framing, lengthy follow shots and SnorriCam. He also alternates between extreme close-ups and extreme long shots to create a sense of isolation. He favours alternative special effects, such as the macro photography combined with fluid dynamics used in *The Fountain* (2006). For his biblical tale *Noah* – which is in production at the time of writing – Aronofsky had a full-scale ark constructed in order to avoid computer-generated imagery. But others of his films boast abundant visual effects. In *Black Swan* (2010), painted, photorealistic images of a baby bird's skin and quills had to be tracked digitally to an actress's arm, while a camera vividly rotated around her body during the climax of the film.<sup>2</sup>

Four of Aronofsky's actors have received Oscar nominations for best performance – Ellen Burstyn, Mickey Rourke, Marisa Tomei and Natalie Portman, who also won the award. In cinema in general, and perhaps in Aronofsky's

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films in particular, it is the physical performance of the actors that enables the spectator to grasp the attributes and affects of specific characters. As Vivian Sobchack puts it, 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 (Sobchack 2012: 434). As the same time, such performance is inextricably intertwined with the aesthetic specificity of the film. In other words, the performance of the actors is incorporated into the film's performance. This means that there is reciprocity among their bodily energy, affect, rhythm, valence and the very same attributes of the film's aesthetic system. Thus Rourke's physical on-screen performance in *The Wrestler* (2009) becomes the vehicle for the protagonist's masochistic exposure and self-deception in and through interaction with the cinematic aesthetics, e.g. the setting, the close-ups. In *Black Swan*, Portman's performance embodies a doubling rather than an enactment of character, reciprocated by the film's digital aesthetics, in which a human being is doubled by an animal. This is enhanced by 'actorly transformation', a self-imposed alteration of the body, which not only lends greater fidelity to Portman's performance (Esch 2006), but also draws an analogy between Portman and the self-mutilating dancer Nina in the film. Another example is found in *Requiem for a Dream*, in which Burstyn inhabits Sara's corporeal rhythm, which is punctuated by specific editing and sound. These augment the spectator's awareness of Sara's bodily pace and cadence as they change in response to her growing addiction to amphetamines. It would, however, require a separate research project altogether to concentrate fully on the performance of screen actors in Aronofsky's films – and in my view, performance is not restricted to what film actors do to create characters. Suffice it to say that while this book concentrates on the performance of cinematic aesthetics, this by no means aims at diminishing the importance of actors' performances. Without their spectacular renditions, the films would be hollow and fleshless.

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

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are student films 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.<sup>3</sup> *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’. *Fortune Cookie* is based on a short story by Hubert Selby Jr., who is also the author of *Requiem for a Dream*, on which Aronofsky based his second commercial film. It features a salesman being harassed by a ‘pervert’, who fires obscenities at him. These are not merely amusing, but also embarrassing, scenes to watch, because they violate the ‘contract of looking’ by appearing too strange and unfamiliar to relate to. In 2011 Aronofsky directed the music video for the song ‘The View’ by Lou Reed and Metallica, which is strongly reminiscent of the aesthetic style of his first feature film, *Pi* (1998). The ‘migraine aesthetics’ of this black-and-white video are characterized by shaky camerawork, blurry, distorted images, double superimpositions and flashes of engulfing white frames.

Michel Foucault (1977) maintains that an author functions as a classifying principle that serves to constrain, but not to determine the interpretation given to a text by the reader. In this line of thought, the author is not a particular individual, but a discursive function that unifies the reader’s perception of the artistic whole of the text. Within film studies, Daniel Frampton has recently proposed that the concept of author should be rejected on the grounds that it denies any film’s own ‘meaning creativeness’, the way in which cinema can be considered its own ‘mindscreen’ (Frampton 2006: 29–30). Although this is an interesting approach, it fails to take into account the process of *making*, by which things visible in the world are rendered what Mikel Dufrenne terms the *sensuous* in cinema. The *sensuous* is the internal organization of the aesthetic object, with affective qualities that enable expressive resonance between the work of art and its perceiver (Dufrenne 1987).<sup>4</sup> It is the very element in a work of art that enables fundamental, affective reciprocity between the aesthetic object and the spectator: ‘the *sensuous* is an act common to both the person who feels and to what is felt’ (Dufrenne 1973: 48). The *sensuous* enables the spectator to respond to the work’s ‘*desire-to-be*’ in a way that corresponds to the author’s engagement with it; both are ‘called upon by the work to be

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done'. In other words, for Dufrenne, the process of making is embedded in the work as the author's 'gesture', in which the spectator takes part by means of 'carnal familiarity' (Dufrenne 1987: 148–49). Therefore I argue that 'author' is still a relevant concept or construct within the affective-aesthetic system that invites co-creative engagement from the spectator. This process is linked to valuing cinema. Aesthetic appreciation of a film seems to be at its most intense when one is somehow able to 'compare' one's own sensory perception and intelligent deliberation with those of the film's 'author' in the very event of cinematic experience. In this context, Paul Crowther writes that we each embody a unique being-in-the-world. This becomes manifest in the quality of an artwork, as it is borne out by the artist in reaction to and while forming the sensuous. It is this particular quality to which we seek to relate in an aesthetic experience by means of engaged reciprocity with the artist 'inscribed' in the work of art (Crowther 1993: 57–59).

In the same vein, I propose that the author be considered an integral part of the process that makes a film what it desires to be, and in which the spectator can participate by engaging with the film as an affective bodily event. This notion understands the author to be a plural and hybrid phenomenon that contains both aesthetic and signifying elements embodied in the film – and nowhere else. Furthermore, this has methodological consequences in that it requires us to reverberate with the embedded 'authorial' gestures of the film. These gestures guide us to think about the affective significance of the film, which prevents us from attempting to master its formal system only. Such 'mastering' is described in Aronofsky's *Pi*, when the protagonist aims to reduce the natural world to the purely intelligible (mathematics) in order to exert control over it. In the process, he loses his sensuous relationship with the world, which has devastating consequences. As Dufrenne writes, 'if [something] becomes an object of knowledge, it is on condition that it be welcomed initially by the body, and perhaps in order to be more intensely savoured by it' (Dufrenne 1987: xi).

My own response to sensuous qualities in the cinema of Aronofsky has brought me to the conclusion that his films are independent of any definable genre or unique signature style. Nevertheless, throughout his oeuvre a certain aesthetic and thematic continuity can be observed. On a stylistic level, there is for instance the specific "on-location" aesthetics', inspired by places

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such as Aronofsky's childhood neighbourhood on Coney Island in southern Brooklyn, New York City (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Wrestler*), the NYC subway (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Black Swan*), and run-down supermarkets (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Wrestler*). There are also recurring characters such as 'Uncle Hank' (*Fortune Cookie*, *Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Black Swan*) and the interest in religious elements (*Pi*, *The Fountain*, *The Wrestler*, *Noah*). Furthermore, Aronofsky is known for his extensive use of SnorriCam (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*), or chestcam, a camera rigged to the actor's body, facing the actor directly. It creates a hyper-subjective effect, 'freezing' the character at the centre of the frame while the background is in constant 'movement'. Aronofsky's famous use of hip-hop montage (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*) is also a recurring technique that attempts to apply the principles of music sampling to the affective-aesthetic system of film.

On a thematic level, Aronofsky's films are also marked by his constant interest in severely obsessive characters. Their obsessions often lead to a sensuous and affective shutdown that disturbs the relationship between the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of these characters. This is not merely an issue on the level of cinematic content; it also plays a part in the spectator's emotional engagement with the film as an experiential aesthetic event. As will be re-emphasized throughout this book, Aronofsky's films engage the spectator in an affective form of viewing that involves all the senses. The book can therefore be seen as a contribution to the ever-increasing interest among film scholars in the senses. This interest is driven by the rejection of what is felt to be an unjustified privileging of some of them over others. In Cartesian thinking, it is said, for example, that vision is the sense most in congruence with reason, because it renders us separate from objects in the world. By contrast, the more physical senses of smell, taste, and touch rupture distinct boundaries between the self and the world. In the philosophy of embodiment, a different perception of vision has developed. Starting from the assumption that sight involves more than locating an object of look in space separate from one's viewing position, the emphasis is now on the meaningful, affective relationship between the embodied vision and the material world. Vision is a matter of seeing the objects 'out there' with the whole body as a sense organ entangled with the world 'in here'. Similarly, cinematic experience is simultaneously a matter of distance and proximity (Burnett 2005: 7). True, the spectator has to sit far enough away

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from the cinema screen in order to see the film's content. But viewing is essentially about affective participation in the cinematic event. As cinema addresses the spectator's imagination through all the senses in ways that are immediately felt in the body, it evokes a mode of vision that is best described as *seeing feelingly*.

In Aronofsky's films, this state of seeing feelingly originates from the spectator's direct engagement with cinematic aesthetics, instead of from, for instance, character identification. It is an interesting paradox in his cinema that all his films plunge deeply into the subjectivity of their characters, but that they do not necessarily invite identification. Perhaps this is because Aronofsky's characters are often damaged, emotionally isolated and psychologically disturbed, which complicates identification. Needless to say, my privileging the aesthetic system when it comes to affective experience in cinema does not entirely justify dismissing character identification as inessential. Such a dismissal would come down to what John Dewey calls the fallacy of selective emphasis (Dewey 1981: 31–32). In this case it would mean drawing the conclusion that the aesthetic system is *all* that is distinctively important in the spectator's affective engagement with cinema. This book tries to avoid the trap of this fallacy, but still shift the focus from character-affinity to aesthetic elements that are less character-bound, and hopes to complement rather than challenge earlier views of affective engagement in cinema.

It would be equally misleading to pay attention only to pure cinematic elements beyond the narrative. As stories are fundamentally organized by emotions (Hogan 2011), writing about the affective functioning of cinema without paying attention to the way in which emotions orient the narrative would be methodologically unwise. On the director's commentary track of *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky explains that as a filmmaker he is 'trying to come up with a visual style that is born out of the narrative . . . trying to figure out what the movie is about and then creating a visual language out of this'. In this particular film, it is the rhythm of visual and auditory cinematic elements in particular that brings the spectator into contact with the subjective state of the characters. He or she observes them in a descending narrative trajectory, in which emotions run from hope through despair to pain and devastation.

I feel that scholarly film practice and methodology should point in the same direction. The scholar's task is less to force (theoretical) interpretations

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onto films than to understand how their affective dynamics resonate directly. As a result, scholars hopefully become able to grasp the affective significance of a film as it emerges from their bodily experience of the cinematic event. Cognitive theories focus on the structure of film as a formal system of elements that activate the spectator's understanding of the cinematic event as emotionally relevant. In contrast, body-centred approaches, such as the one adopted in this book, regularly emphasize the *experience* of emotional reactions to film. The methodological premise of this book is therefore best described as film-phenomenological. Even though this approach has often been criticized as too impressionistic or overtly subjective, film-phenomenology has especially been useful providing descriptions of our affective and embodied engagement with cinema that can recognizably be shared with others. This is because film-phenomenology is not merely interested in what one sees on screen, but in how films direct one's attention towards what *cannot* be seen. As Julian Hanich explains: 'Phenomenology tries to uncover what is buried in habituation and institutionalization, what is taken for granted and accepted as given, or what we have never been fully aware of in the first place' (Hanich 2010: 15). Furthermore, in film-phenomenology the lived experience and reciprocity between the film and the spectator are an essential part of research. Film-phenomenology differs significantly from those approaches that aim at an impersonal understanding of cinema located 'out there', observed from a position somewhere 'in here'. Instead, film-phenomenology explores the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the embodied spectator and the cinematic body.

Uncovering this dynamic interaction can only take place by means of 'careful looking' (Ihde 1979), and can only be articulated in terms of direct emotional response to cinema. Combining careful looking with detailed description of their emotional experience, scholars should be able to communicate their views of the film convincingly enough to others, who might accept these views even when they do not share the same interpretation. It must always be kept in mind, though, that any film-phenomenological account of emotional experience must start and end with engagement with a film's aesthetic organization as observed and validated by a wide range of film scholars. In other words, while experiencing aesthetic emotions, one must perceive how this experience emerges from participation in the film's aesthetic organization. A film's

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aesthetic organization exists objectively and can be analysed systematically, after which meaning can be attributed to it – a process that can be shared and substantiated with others.

Furthermore, I understand the relationship between the spectator and the film as a reciprocal and co-creative process. In order to define emotional engagement with cinema, one needs to examine this reciprocal relationship between the spectator and the film. In this relationship both parties must be considered agents, brought together through the sensuous. This renders cinema a bodily event that activates the spectator's affective and cognitive sensitivities. In other words, neither the formal-stylistic system of film nor the spectator's pre-existing biographical and cultural dispositions alone can sufficiently define cinematic engagement. I understand this engagement to be very much embedded in the body. On the one hand, the affective quality of a film consists of the meaning it embodies. Not only on the level of content, but also on the level of its aesthetic form and audiovisual style, a film is embodied, affective meaning. On the other hand, this affective quality is intentionally present for the spectators in the way the film directs itself towards their own sentient bodies. By this I do not mean to anthropomorphize cinema, i.e. to interpret cinematic *dispositif* in terms of human characteristics, such as the ability to feel emotions; rather, I propose to think of cinema in terms of 'resonant aesthetics', a notion similar to what Jane Bennett (2010) calls 'vibrant matter'. Cinema is vibrant matter insofar as it has agency, efficacy and vitality. Films can do things, produce effects and affects, as well as alter experience. Cinematic matter vibrates and resonates with human matter, and the cinematic event is an energy field in which 'effect and cause alternate positions and rebound on each other' nonlinearly (Bennett 2010: 33). Thus, cinema as vibrant matter refers to the affective efficacy of cinema that enables the spectators both to feel and think about the film at the same time, as active, (co-)creative, sensuous agents.

According to Dufrenne, this is the role of our bodies in general. The body is not so much a physical 'apparatus' intended to react to the world in a causal fashion, as it is a sensuous 'instrument' of reciprocity through which the individual encounters the world. This reciprocity is an 'attunement with the world as two musical instruments are in attunement with one another' (Dufrenne 1987: 8). Similarly, Dewey (1958) speaks of art as experience that is inscribed in

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the sensuous state of the body and registered in and through emotion. Emotions are continuous, intentional and sentient processes that prompt us to synthesize and reorganize our experiences actively in the world. In an aesthetic experience, the spectator's intentional attitude gets entangled with the affective attitude that is embodied in the work of art. This entanglement enables emotional response, which in turn facilitates philosophical reflection – although not necessarily in a linear fashion. This reflection is simultaneously a matter of feeling and thinking, of 'thinking-feelingly' and 'feeling-thoughtfully'. Steven Connor writes that all thinking is a form of affective feeling through the body, the affective body literally caught up in thought: 'Expressing a state of mind or a feeling means formulating an attitude, and in the process forming a relation to that attitude. All feeling involves some element of comportment towards the world and the self, which is to say some measure of taking thought' (Connor 2004: 99).

Furthermore, to think-feelingly is an *active* process of intervention, a matter of *doing* instead of merely knowing. In this context, Karen Barad argues that thinking 'must be understood as an embodied practice, rather than a spectator sport matching . . . representations to pre-existing things' (Barad 2007: 54). Similarly, aesthetic experience is the active embodied entanglement of the spectator with the work of art and vice versa, which involves processes of thinking and feeling. Perhaps it could be said that aesthetic experience is a cyclical process in which our sensuous, bodily, affective and reflective states are inextricably intertwined.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this process occurs beyond 'pre-emptive empathy' (Armstrong 2000: 166) towards fictional characters, in the spectator's direct relationship with the work of art. Methodologically, this means that in order to study the sensuous relationship between film and spectator, one needs to ask the following questions:

1. What is the affective quality that is embodied in the aesthetic system of the film?
2. What narrative meaning is embedded in that quality?
3. How is the spectator invited to participate in the sensuous event that is cinema?<sup>6</sup>

The importance of these questions is evident from the quotation below, in which William James describes the centrality of the body in our lived experience

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– including the cinematic experience – as opposed to the Cartesian mind/body dualism: ‘The body is the storm centre, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in [our] experience-train. Everything circles around it, and is felt from its point of view. The world experienced comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest’ (James 1976: 86, originally published in 1912). Similarly, for phenomenological philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, the body is one’s ‘anchorage in a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 167) or one’s ‘grasp of the world’ (de Beauvoir 2003: 36). For them, the body is central in the dynamic way in which the ‘interiority’ of the subject entangles with his or her ‘exteriority’, thus emerging as an active participant in the world’s becoming. The here and now of our bodies is the locus of our intentionality, our sentient consciousness, and our emotional and (self-)reflective orientation towards the world. This centrality of the body emphasizes the fundamental unity of body and mind as a cohesive wholeness interacting with the world. Pain is concrete proof of this, as it is a physical sensation, inextricably tied to our emotional experience of it, and as such cancelling out any dualistic assumptions about body and mind (Van Dijkhuizen and Enenkel 2009: 1). Throughout this book I shall use the term *lived-body* to indicate this ‘transactional whole of body-mind’ (Schusterman 2008: 184) engaging with the world. In film studies, Vivian Sobchack has argued that this notion of lived-body also applies to the relationship between cinema and spectator. In this concept, the film is considered an expression of experience *by* experience. For Sobchack, film is a significant and signifying intentional subject in its own right, engaging the spectators from within their own embodied presence. This means that films make themselves affectively felt and (self-)reflectively known through a reciprocal ground upon which the cinematic expression and the spectator encounter each other as lived bodies:

Reciprocating the figurally literal representations of bodies and worldly things in the cinema, the spectator’s lived body in the film experience engages in the form of sensual catachresis. That is, it fills in the gap in its sensual grasp of the figural world onscreen by turning back on itself to reciprocally (albeit not sufficiently) ‘flesh it out’ into literal physicalized sense. It is this same reciprocal relationship between the figural and literal that emerges also in our linguistic descriptions of the film experience. (Sobchack 2004: 82)

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But one does not even need such ‘figurally literal representations of bodies’ on screen in order to understand how one reciprocally encounters cinema as a lived-body. Jennifer Barker has recently argued that the corporeal aesthetics of cinema itself addresses the spectator through bodily intimacy and reciprocity, ‘through movement, comportment and gesture, in the way [the spectators] carry themselves through the world’ (Barker 2009: 69). She stresses that this process is more complex than, for instance, mere bodily mimicry of the characters. The bodily responses of the spectators might be a form of mimicry or – even better – *resonance* between the expressive body of film itself and their own sensate bodies. It is through this fleshy resonance (or dissonance) between cinema and the spectator that thoughts and affects emerge. Susanna Paasonen explains the notion of resonance as follows:

[Resonance] refers to moments and expressions of being moved, touched, and affected by what is tuned to ‘the right frequency’. . . . To resonate with one another, objects and people do not need to be similar, but they need to relate and connect to one another. Resonance encompasses the emotional and cognitive as well as the sensory and affective, and it points to the considerable effort involved in separating the two. (Paasonen 2011: 16)

As already suggested, an obvious objection to this line of argument is the apparent fact that cinema is a technology that comports itself in ways fundamentally different from those of humans. But according to Barker, the similarity can be detected in the way in which

we and the film both present ourselves to the world by moving through it, carrying ourselves and arranging our bodies a certain way in relation to space and things. . . . The film’s body and spectator’s body exist in a relationship of analogy and reciprocity. Though neither identical, nor completely divergent, the film’s body and the viewer’s body are irrevocably related to one another. The film’s body models itself on human styles of bodily comportment, and the viewer’s body in turn might mirror the muscular behaviour of the film’s body. (Barker 2009: 77)

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I broadly agree with this view, although I think that the word ‘mirror’ is inappropriately used, for this assumes an intersubjective relationship between cinema and spectator based on distance. In contrast, the term *resonance* suggests an affective relationship between film and spectator that is based on bodily reciprocity. Furthermore, the term *mirror* connotes a transitional relation between the subject and the object in the Lacanian mirror stage, while cinematic experiences are often different from those that arise out of such psychodynamic interplay. Indeed, in the cinematic experience sensuous interplay occurs in various embodied, affective encounters. First, cinema moves us directly within a gamut of emotions, ranging from fear and disgust through adrenaline thrills to laughter and sexual excitement, in ways that are immediately felt by the body. Secondly, as Barker argues, cinema can be described in terms of skin, musculature, and viscera, as if it had a body itself. Different cinematic elements correspond with distinctive bodily characteristics, such as sound (vibration), cinematography (movement), and editing (rhythm). These elements together form an affective-aesthetic whole, which offers itself for the participation of the spectator as an intentional lived-body.<sup>7</sup>

According to Barad, intentionality might better be understood as ascribable to a complex entanglement of human (spectator) and nonhuman (cinematic) agents (Barad 2007: 23). In the context of cinema, this means that the relationship between cinema and spectator can no longer be understood through the model of cinematic apparatus. In this model, the film is enclosed within the frame, while the passive spectator is seated in front of it, in a state of willing suspension of disbelief. With the approach of reciprocal intentionality adopted in this book, cinema and spectator are not separated by the frame; on the contrary, cinema and spectator are both intentional agents, united in an entangled state. As intentional agents, films both embody emotions and possess an emotional attitude towards the spectator. This in turn sensitizes the spectator as an intentional agent with the dual capacity to read the emotions that films embody and react to them.

The aim of this book, then, is to understand the way in which embodied, affective intentionality in the cinema of Aronofsky engages the spectator directly by means of reciprocal attunement. What interests me in Aronofsky’s films is that they often disrupt or even shut down this process with important

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affective consequences for the spectator. For me, one of the most important themes in his work is the notion of ‘bodies in pain’ as theorized by Elaine Scarry (1985). Therefore, one of the goals of this book is to investigate how such pain is directly ‘transmitted’ to the spectator, as a phenomenon that is simultaneously a sensation and an emotion (Jackson 1994: 201). For many philosophers of pain, the state of pain disrupts the intentionality of the body; even more keenly, pain disrupts the relationship between the lived-body and the world. In pain, one may experience one’s body as an ‘alien presence’ (Leder 1990: 73) because it appears as strange, or ‘other’, to one, becoming an object instead of a subject of experience. While in normal circumstances the body is the locus from which one directs one’s attention to the world, in pain the body becomes an object to which one attends. This effect of disrupted intentionality may result in the disembodied experience that ‘I have a body’, instead of an embodied experience that ‘I am my body’ (Zeiler 2010: 337). Furthermore, in the most extreme situations, such as under torture, one cannot concentrate on anything else other than pain. For Emmanuel Levinas, severe pain subjugates the self so completely that the individual is ‘held fast’ in pain (Levinas 1981: 52). And for Scarry, in extreme pain the self becomes pain itself, so that the individual experiences the contents of his or her consciousness as ‘obliterated’ and ‘absent’, while this pain ‘swells to fill the entire universe’ (Scarry 1985: 4). In such cases, the individual’s whole consciousness is nothing but pain – physical, emotional, psychosomatic – while both the self and the world ‘disappear’.

In contrast, for Sobchack pain is a way to bring people ‘back to their senses’. Pain can function as a reminder of one’s immanence, and of one’s physical necessity and inherent ‘response-ability’. Referring to Jean Baudrillard’s technoerotic reading of J.G. Ballard’s novel *Crash* (1973), Sobchack wishes that the philosopher had experienced some pain

to remind him that he doesn’t just have a body but that he is his body and it is on this material fact of existence that affect, and anything that we might call an ethical stance, is grounded. [This ethical stance] is based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses . . . but as a material subject that experiences and feels its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and

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suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain. (Sobchack 2004: 178)<sup>8</sup>

Thus two potential insights follow from these differing descriptions of pain. One is the possibility that pain renders the body an object of experience. Another possibility is that pain functions to ground the body in the world as an embodied subject. This contradiction is present in Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, which is about a couple, Izzi (Rachel Weisz) and Tommy (Hugh Jackman), who try to deal with physical and emotional pain in different ways. Izzi, who suffers from a brain tumour, experiences her pain as heightened awareness of her lived-body, which is still embedded in the world, but doomed to an approaching absence from it. This enables her to accept her impending death. Tommy's pain is (pathological) grief borne out by his refusal to accept fundamental vulnerability in the face of natural forces beyond his control. His is the existential (and irrational) struggle against absolute loss, an attempt to prevent Izzi's death retroactively. Yet it is not through these characters that pain is transmitted to the spectator, for pain is inherent in the whole affective-aesthetic system of *The Fountain*. As such, the film addresses the spectator directly with its affective quality, prompting a lived, sentient awareness of material conditions of subjectivity. The film achieves this through its rich, visual (visceral?) symbolism that creates a conflict between the denial and the reality of emotional pain, which stimulates the affective sensitivities of the spectator.

I do not wish to suggest that there is some common denominator of pain that functions as a vehicle between the cinematic and the authentic lived experience. As Scarry points out: '[W]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. . . . Physical pain [brings] about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (Scarry 1985: 4).<sup>9</sup> But this does not necessarily mean that pain cannot be represented, or that one cannot understand its effects, if not the experience, when not physically in pain. In pain the body 'speaks' through affect, not through language. Furthermore, this does not mean that communication through affect is void of semantic meaning altogether. In this context, Janet Wolff (2008) speaks about 'aniconic' works of art, which invite

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spectators to an active form of viewing, enabling them to engage with painful subject matters on their own terms. Jill Bennett writes that pain-related artworks engage the spectator directly by means of the sensation that is registered in the work itself. This transactive process touches the spectator without necessarily communicating the 'secret' of painful experience (Bennett 2005: 7). In this book I shall argue that in the cinema of Aronofsky, pain is not merely registered or expressed, but is part of the active, emotional intentionality of the films. This results in the spectator being confronted by particularly strong sensations, or, in Scarry's terms, by a 'feeling of being acted upon' (Scarry 1985: 16) by means of sheer film style. I understand pain as one affective quality of Aronofsky's cinema that entirely saturates the spectator's embodied engagement with the film. In other words, pain fulfils a central role in the experience of Aronofsky's films, which renders their affective dynamics particularly complex. Scarry writes:

Contemporary philosophers have habituated us to the recognition that our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply 'have feelings' but have feelings for somebody or something, that love is love of x, fear is fear of y, ambivalence is ambivalence about z. . . . This list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when . . . one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it . . . resists objectification in language. (Scarry 1985: 5)

Normally the threat of imminent pain would evoke our basic defence of fight or flight, but in extreme cases this defence can be blocked, inhibited, and arrested, which increases the sensation of being entrapped in pain. In Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*, the protagonist Randy 'The Ram' Robinson is entrapped in pain both internally as experienced in his lived-body, and externally in his life's circumstances. This is enhanced by his inability to accept change or to grasp emerging opportunities. In turn, this feeling of entrapment is relayed to spectators, with the result that their engagement with the film assumes a clogged-up, paralysed form. They become immersed in negative emotion, triggered by the inability to

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stop watching the bloodshed, brutality, and self-destruction of the protagonist's ever-sharper trajectory towards Sartrean 'bad faith'. The corporeal aesthetics of the film itself becomes the source of pain that 'takes no object', while the spectator's interior state of consciousness is thoroughly 'contaminated' by this spectacle of pain, even if its source is in the external world of cinema. Enlarging on the Scarry quotation above, one could say that this is brought about because even though pain may not be *of* or *for* anything, it is still 'because [of] something', as Lucy Bending suggests (Bending 2000: 86). Furthermore, the spectator's pain experience is not totally void of reflection, as it involves a constant shift in focus from 'my pain' (pre-reflective) to 'not my pain' (reflective).

Yet another element of Scarry's philosophy of pain is the 'pure experience of negation'. In the experience of pain there is often the immediate feeling that something external is directed against one, even though this something is located within oneself. It is identified as 'not oneself', as something so alien that it must immediately be disposed of. Simultaneously that same something is internalized in such a way that the person in pain may be dominated by a sense of 'internal agency'. Thus when a knife enters the body, for instance, one will feel one's own body, rather than the knife, hurting one (Scarry 1985: 52–53). In the film *Black Swan*, both 'modalities of pain' – external and internal – seem to be operating simultaneously. In this film, protagonist Nina mutilates herself in order to replace her feelings of insecurity with a sense of external control. Rather than being an uncontrollable, pure experience of negation, Nina's pain is experientially localized and specified at first. As a result, her pain 'exists here and now, not everywhere and always' (McLane 1996: 112) – that is, at least until the situation 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.

The argument made in this book operates on two planes. On the first plane, I analyse the spectator's direct emotional engagement with the

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affective-aesthetic system of Aronofsky's films. This affective encounter is best described as a bodily event, in which the 'corporeal style' of the film entangles with the lived-body of the spectator. This process is central in the film-phenomenological tradition. Within this event, I consider film an intentional agent, with affective energy, valence, and rhythm that correspond to the human emotional system, although they are not identical to it. I do not wish to suggest that all spectators react or should react to Aronofsky's films in the way I describe, or that my reading of his films is the only accurate one, so a disclaimer would seem in order. The analyses developed in this book draw on the viewing positions inherently present in the film, which I have inhabited as a film scholar and a film spectator. It is these positions to which the term 'spectator' refers throughout this book. On the one hand, my understanding of Aronofsky's films is connected to my experience and my emotions, moving outward from within. On the other hand, it is connected to the cinematic specificity of these films, moving inward from without. With reference to the subjective method of analysis applied in this book, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that 'I may . . . interrogate myself and on the basis of this interrogation lead an analysis of the 'human reality' to a successful conclusion which can be used as a foundation for *an* anthropology (Sartre 1993: 13, italics added). It is impossible to conduct a phenomenological inquiry into the significance of cinematic emotions without turning one's attention to one's own emotional and embodied experience. Yet this type of inquiry is more than 'sloppy liberal humanism' (Sobchack 1992: xiv), since personal emotions and private experiences can be set in motion, put in context, and shared by others across different cultures.

On the second plane, I analyse how Aronofsky's cinema invites the spectator to engage with his films conceptually, in terms of film-philosophy. At that stage, my methodological approach could be characterized by what Robert Sinnerbrink (2011a) has termed 'romantic film-philosophy', insofar as it presupposes Aronofsky's work to be eliciting philosophical experiences and aesthetic judgments, which are sensory, emotional, and intellectual all at once. More precisely, Aronofsky's films will be considered philosophically dialogical, as they engage the spectator in the experience of (self-)reflection through their emotional dynamics. This is not a matter of matching preconceived philosophical ideas with his films, but of thinking through the emotions evoked by their cinematic aesthetics, considering both distinctive features and emerging

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patterns of salience. In Aronofsky's work, such distinctive aesthetic features include noisy (*Pi*), rhythmic (*Requiem for a Dream*), repetitive (*The Fountain*), fleshy (*The Wrestler*) and haptic elements (*Black Swan*).

To summarize: this book explores both how Aronofsky's cinema functions affectively, and how philosophical significance can be attached to this. Cinematic experience is a matter of affective participation in the filmic event, based on mutual resonance felt in the body and reflected in thought. It is an experience that is simultaneously aesthetic and reflective – or better, an experience in which aesthetic and reflective practices are inextricably intertwined. As Sinnerbrink argues, cinema always provokes spectators to think in response to what film enables them to feel and experience (Sinnerbrink 2011b: 137). This involves (critical) assessment of ideas embodied in the film, in an attempt to gain insight into their ethical and/or aesthetic significance. Similarly, Crowther argues that all works of art are charged with sensuous and conceptual energy in ways that reach beyond philosophical thought. Works of art embody and transcend human experiences, but they also return to them. This is the reason they cause reflective awareness of the human condition in a unique way (Crowther 1993: 46). Similarly, cinema is an event in which the sensuous and the conceptual constantly and reciprocally modify each other by folding over in negotiation. As an aesthetic form, cinema addresses our affects and senses, while as a conceptual practice it engages our thinking and imagination. It must be strictly kept in mind, though, that the sensuous and the conceptual are not distinctive elements, but rather two sides of one phenomenological event that can be reflected upon philosophically. Thus film-philosophy is both a measure of the aesthetic potentiality of cinema, and a way of approaching film. Films embody ideas, as likewise they embody experiences and emotions, but these ideas and emotions can only emerge through interaction with the spectator who thinks and feels with the film. My goal in the following chapters is to explain how affective responses to Aronofsky's films may be a basis for conceptual insights regarding knowledge (*Pi*), addiction (*Requiem for a Dream*), loss (*The Fountain*), self-deception (*The Wrestler*) and bodily materiality (*Black Swan*).

The order of chapters follows the chronological order of Aronofsky's work. I start with *Pi* and the way in which its affective-aesthetic system enables the spectator to participate in the main character's physical pain and mental

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anxiety. I shall argue that this pain is embodied in the corporeal aesthetics of the film itself and that it is experienced by the spectator as a sensed inability to gain control in the multiplicity of the world. On the conceptual level, I understand the film to epitomize what Michel Serres calls the (non)logic of clinamen, which manifests itself as noise that is void of any pre-existing orderly structure. In chapter two I move from noise to the notion of rhythm, which gives structure to the affective functioning of *Requiem for a Dream*. I shall argue that the film evokes an experience of affective dissonance by addressing and disturbing the corporeal rhythm of the spectator by means of its audiovisual style. The film lends itself exceptionally well to Henri Lefebvre's method of 'rhythmanalysis'. This allows us to understand affective transmission through a rhythmic relationship between the body of the spectator and the cinematic body 'in pain'. In *Requiem for a Dream*, this relationship is linked to loss of agency, which an individual can often experience as a result of mental and physical humiliation.

While pain is connected to humiliation in *Requiem for a Dream*, it is pathological grief and its painful features that lie at the core of *The Fountain*, the film that is discussed in chapter three. Martha Nussbaum has defined such grief as repeatedly experienced affective frustration, thoroughly intertwined with the grieving person's bodily and cognitive fabric. It is this reverberating, repetitive logic of grief that is embedded in the visual style of *The Fountain*, providing the film with an affective quality that directly affects the spectator. A similar direct cinematic address takes place in *The Wrestler*, which I shall explore in chapter four. The film takes the spectator disturbingly close to bleeding, hurting flesh, in ways that are immediately felt in the body and experienced as displeasure. The film celebrates a character whose defining trait is his masochism – his ability to endure, and even take pleasure in, absurd amounts of physical pain. But as Sartre has argued, masochism must first and foremost be understood as a form of bad faith. In my reading of the film, not only does *The Wrestler* depict masochism, but it also calls for acknowledgement of an affective discrepancy between 'spectatorial pain' and 'performative pain'. This in turn requires acknowledgement of one's own responsibility as a spectator – one's own bad faith – in the process of watching the pain of the other.

In chapter five, the focus is on coexistence of the uncanny and the sublime in *Black Swan*. The protagonist in this film displays a split personality: there

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is the embodied, material self, which is threatened by the possibility of pain and death, and the disembodied, eternal self, free from any such threat. Such division of the self lies at the core of experiencing the sublime, but in *Black Swan* the sublime is inseparable from the experience of the uncanny. Here the 'eternal self' actually appears as the ghostly double of the protagonist. There is an obvious connection with the paradox of ballet, which is to deny the materiality of the body for the sake of the ethereal quality of the dance. Hence the film carries a meaningful commentary on the tangibility of the dancer's body and the ethereality of the ballet's ideal, suggesting that totally sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter is ethically unworthy. The film achieves this by addressing the spectator as a sentient, sensual, and sensible being, with awareness of bodily materiality, which potentially leads to further reflection on the profound connection among the body, mind, and soul.

In the cinematic experience in general, and with regard to Aronofsky's films in particular, intellectual and emotional desire often seem to go hand-in-hand. As Isobel Armstrong argues, the reason for this is that the affective-aesthetic 'energizes us by demanding not judgment, but a desire of explanation, an ever more adequate understanding of its possibilities, a repeated pursuit of the meanings surrounding it' (Armstrong 2000: 168). It could therefore be claimed that cinema makes spectators reflect – with varying degrees of success – because its corporeal style of being corresponds with their sensual experience. This could prompt direct intellectual appraisal as well, for instance by attaining to philosophical insights through pain. These insights do not lead to explicit philosophical statements; rather, they pertain to the way in which films invite direct experience of a cinematic event, rendered vivid by the film's affective-aesthetic system.

## Notes

Many thanks to Kathleen Scott for her helpful comments on the earlier version of this introduction.

1. An editorial in the journal *Senses of Cinema* describes this trend as a 'critical discourse that downplays dramatic naturalism and character psychology in favour of attention to body, gesture, "presence", physical energy and intensity' (Martin, Mousoulis and Villella 2002). However, it would be a mistake to assume that
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cinema of the body is a contemporary trend only. From its very beginning, cinema has always had a profound bodily quality. Thus Tom Gunning (1990) defines the 'cinema of attractions' in terms of bodily immediacy, arguing that it evokes in the spectator an embodied response to the screen. The relationship between the cinematic body and the body of the spectator was also understood by people like Sergei Eisenstein, who aimed to sensitize spectators to new sensorial perceptions (Eisenstein 1967: 71). In his essay 'Synchronization of the Senses', Eisenstein elaborates his ideas of cinematic techniques that create a primal, visceral unity of the senses, moving the spectator to a form of bodily ecstasy comparable to religious fervour (Eisenstein 1969: 89).

2. The process is described here: *Imagineer Systems*, 2012, 'Look FX: Visual Effects on *Black Swan*'. Retrieved 12 August 2012 from <http://www.imagineersystems.com/case-studies-folder/look-fx-visual-effects-on-black-swan>.
  3. YouTube poster My Fnord. 2011, excerpt from Aronofsky's *No Time* ('Come on Fish'), *YouTube*, uploaded 29 September. Retrieved 22 November 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGMzvMbH8a8>; YouTube poster degitz, 2011, Excerpt from Aronofsky's *Fortune Cookie* ('Stanley B. Herman edit'), *YouTube*, uploaded 11 March. Retrieved 22 November 2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk2VGzcnEg&feature=related>.
  4. In fact, this expressive resonance renders the work of art what Dufrenne calls a quasi-subject, but a more appropriate term might be Michel Serres's notion of quasi-object. Dufrenne does not make clear whether he means that a work of art is an analogy to a real subject, or is literally a special sort of subject (Funt 1968: 124). In contrast, Serres explains in *The Parasite* that 'the quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject' (Serres 2007: 225). Cinema can be considered a quasi-object because it designates a resonant relation between itself and its spectator, without which the spectator would not be a spectator, and through which both parties participate in each other's life world – the presence of the sensuous.
  5. In this context, a distinction can be made between the definitions of affect and emotion, although not necessarily on the experiential level. Affect can be seen as the pre-reflective bodily mechanism that underlies all emotion and that gives pre-semantic meaning to information that originates from our bodily systems, and, more particularly, from our senses. Emotion is the semantic account of the affective appraisal that can be narrated and remembered. Through this, we experience our being-in-the-world as subjectively, historically and culturally particular individuals. But I understand affects and emotions as unified states or processes, in which affect is an implicit quality of emotion and vice versa, since affects are not devoid of semantic meaning (Laine 2011).
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6. In addition, one might consider how our affective-aesthetic experiences are shaped by learned predispositions, since there are different types of discursively shaped and determined bodies. Thus Nina's suffering in *Black Swan* is partly structured by her gender, as argued in chapter five, which is to a certain extent fundamentally different from the emotional and physical pain undergone by Randy in *The Wrestler*, explored in chapter four. In a similar vein, one might ask in what way the spectators' experiences of Aronofsky's films are socially, politically, or culturally determined by gender or some other ideological construct; that, however, is beyond the scope of this particular study.
  7. I borrow this idea from Deniz Peters and his discussion on electronic music in Peters 2012.
  8. Drew Leder suggests that the reason why pain involves such 'return' to the body is that normally the body is 'absent' in the sense that we are not positionally conscious of its functioning; our reflective attention is not directed to our bodily states: 'Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction' (Leder 1990: 4). But, echoing Scarry, he also suggests that pain can often lead to a body that turns in on itself (Leder 1990: 74).
  9. Scarry's view has been challenged by, for instance, Lucy Bending, who argues that people not only have an overwhelming need to make sense of their pain, but they also have a large reservoir of cultural significations that enable processes of meaning-giving to experiences of pain (Bending 2000: 86).
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