

A Requiem for Addictive Personalities

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“Ultimately, *Requiem for a Dream* is about the lengths people will go to escape their reality and that when you escape your reality, you create a hole in your present because you’re not there. You’re chasing off a pipedream in the future.” In these words describing his film, director Darren Aronofsky shifts from the third-person point of view (with *people* and *their*) to the second-person (*you* and *your*). A simple grammatical and stylistic error, generally forgiven in colloquial speech, the mistake is actually appropriate for a description of the film. Aronofsky chose to tell the story of the decline of four drug addicts and the destruction of their American dreams through what he calls “subjective storytelling.” His lens remains focused on the characters, and it documents their steep falls into their own personal hells without leaving them, ever. He does not cut to bad guys. He does not look into related, situational occurrences happening outside the characters’ lives. His “subjective camera” stays on *them* (Aronofsky). Thus, along with the elements of cinematography, editing, and sound design, he translates the experiences of the characters into an experience for the viewers—from *they* to *you*. The film becomes the same sensational roller coaster for you, the viewer, as the highs, withdrawals, and ECT rounds are for the characters; the film itself becomes a drug that pulls you out of your reality and into theirs.

The film opens the same way as the Hubert Selby, Jr. novel of the same name. The aged, overweight Sara locks herself in a closet during an argument with her son Harry, who is on the other side of the door stealing her television to pawn for drug money. Keeping to the subjective storytelling style, Aronofsky wants to show the perspectives of both characters at the same time even while they are in physically different spaces. To accomplish this multiplicity he uses split-screen, with one camera on Sara inside the closet and one on Harry outside. The camera often cuts to point-of-view shots that allow the viewer to see what the character sees, such as a shot through the keyhole

(Sara) or one of a hand frantically turning the closet doorknob (Harry). From the opening scene, Aronofsky immediately puts his audience in the shoes of each character and positions the viewers so that they are in the middle of the action even before any drugs take effect.

Split-screen is a device used numerous times throughout the film, even when characters are not physically separated by a door. During a sex scene early in the first act between Harry and his girlfriend Marion, half the screen is on Harry with the camera cutting back and forth from his face to his hand caressing Marion's skin, while the other half is on Marion doing the same to Harry. There's a moment when both halves of the screen cut to Harry and Marion facing each other, which at the moment they are actually doing, yet the screen remains split between the two as if they were worlds apart. The device works as a way to keep a subjective lens on multiple characters at the same time. However, it also works as a distancing device between the characters. Whether there's a door there or not, there's an emotional distance between these characters that only grows as their addictions do. Ultimately, at the end all four characters find themselves suffering in isolation without any awareness of the fate of the others because that is the effect of the drugs. That Aronofsky expresses the distance even before the drug addictions kick in, during the intimate activity of sex, foreshadows the tragic ending, and the viewer gets a subtle hint of the events to come.

It can be disorienting having to watch two different pictures on the same screen. Each half tends to steal focus from the other, and keeping up with two different points of view is not something viewers are accustomed to doing. Perhaps that choice by Aronofsky and editor Jay Rabinowitz intensifies the subjective style—putting viewers through the characters' experiences. Drugs alter consciousness. They speed up and slow down your perception, they blur your vision, they manipulate your emotions, they inhibit your judgment, they make the room spin, they create hallucinations—ultimately, they create an alternate reality in your head, and when you return to actual reality, you are disoriented by the contrast. The film as the form behind the content tries to create a cinematic parallel to that disorientation by using a visual style heavy with camera and editing tricks. These tricks break out of the convention of straight narrative storytelling and take the viewer on a dynamic visual ride. Fast motion, slow motion, extreme close-ups, spiraling shots, vibrating frames, and use of the fish-eye lens are among some of the effects that Aronofsky alternates between to create an experience that is disorienting. Viewers are moved in and out, farther from and closer to, and they are thrown

around in space and time to simulate the experience of being under the influence of drugs.

One of the major tricks, and one that actually breaks the narrative flow each time it's repeated, is what Aronofsky calls a "hip-hop montage." Hip-hop montages are quickly cut, fast-motion, extreme close-up shots of actions that would usually take an extended amount of time but are depicted in a few seconds. These montages are cut with exaggerated nondiegetic sound effects that slightly resemble the actual sounds of the action happening, and they convey a stylized, music video-like rhythm. When a character shoots up, a hip-hop montage is used: extreme close-up shot of the pills or stash, cut to the fix, cut to the actual intake, cut to the chemical reaction in the body, cut to the eyes dilating, repeat. On top of these fast-motion visuals are exaggerated sounds of the dropping of the stash, the lighter being lit, the snorting, the deep breath, plus other imaginary sounds added to silent activity such as eye dilation. Again, this may be disorienting for the viewer because hip-hop montages abruptly break the pacing of the narrative each time they are repeated—and they are repeated often—and they expose the viewer to the drug intake experience in an instant flash before returning immediately to the narrative world. They come and go as quickly as the characters' highs. They take a magnifying glass to the characters' experiences and detail short bits of them for the viewer through extreme close-ups and exaggerated sounds. Rather than simply presenting the narrative and allowing the facts to have resonance, Aronofsky continuously breaks the narrative and uses the medium to put the viewer in the middle of experience.

The ultimate trick of these subjective storytelling devices comes from the effective use of the Snorri-cam. A special rigging that attaches the camera to the actor's body, the Snorri-cam freezes the character in the center of the frame as he or she moves, and the background becomes the element in motion as the camera travels with the actor (Aronofsky). Each character except Harry has a sequence with the Snorri-cam. When Tyrone witnesses a drug-war-associated assassination, he, with Snorri-cam attached in front of him, flees the scene screaming and covered in blood as the sound of sirens trails him. Meanwhile, when Marion leaves her therapist, whom she had sex with moments before for some extra cash, the Snorri-cam follows her traumatic exit from the building to the exterior where she collapses against a wall and vomits. Finally, Sara wanders through her apartment emaciated and paranoid with the Snorri-cam attached to her as the hallucinations of the man-eating refrigerator begin to occur. These scenes are among the most vulnerable for the characters throughout the entire film, and the Snorri-cam pro-

vides a powerful visual technique with which to lock the viewers onto the character's experience during those moments. These sequences are reminiscent of a video game screen on which a gun or other weapon is stationary at the bottom of the frame while the background moves while the player engages the scenery. As interactive as a video game, the film, with the help of the subjective Snorri-cam, again pulls the viewer even further into the drug experience.

In one scene, however, Aronofsky intentionally makes no effort to put the viewer inside the movie. He abandons his visual language and cuts all the tricks to allow the text to speak for itself. It occurs late in the first act when Harry goes to visit Sara, weeks after the argument in the opening scene. He goes to tell her that he's buying her a new television, but she is too energetic and is running around too frantically to give him a moment to speak. Her behavior is suspicious. After he finally makes his announcement, they share a quiet moment during which Harry discovers Sara grinding her teeth. That's when he realizes that she is taking speed to lose weight—the reason for all the excess pep—and he confronts her right then and there about it. With all the bells and whistles cut out, the narrative flows naturally here. There are no camera tricks, no sound effects; there is no music. The performances take center stage as Sara delivers a heart-wrenching monologue about how she's old and lonely and that attempting to lose weight gives her a reason to live:

I'm somebody now, Harry. Everybody likes me. Soon, millions of people will see me, and they'll all like me. I'll tell them about you, and your father, how good he was to us. Remember? It's a reason to get up in the morning. It's a reason to lose weight, to fit in the red dress. It's a reason to smile. It makes tomorrow all right. What have I got Harry, hm? Why should I even make the bed, or wash the dishes? I do them, but why should I? I'm alone. Your father's gone, you're gone. I got no one to care for. What have I got, Harry? I'm lonely. I'm old.

The break in cinematic tricks is a significant change in style, which actually draws more attention to the quiet scene. Sara becomes vulnerable and expresses clearly her desires and fears, almost convincingly justifying her drug use. While the camera tricks have been attempts to transfer experience, this scene examines Sara's vulnerabilities, makes her human. Drawn into her intimacy, we can share her experience. Aronofsky calls a halt to the movement, drawing us into Sara's mind while making us consider her motives.

As an aesthetic medium, film has the potential to be an emotional and mental experience for the viewers. Save for maybe laughter and tears, which

are reactionary anyway, there's nothing physical about watching—no corporal interaction, no physical punch. Film instead translates ideas and feelings through a visual experience that the viewer sees but does not go through in reality. It's very much like a dream. We wake up, the car chase we just endured or the murderer we were just trying to escape from fades, and the bedroom reappears. The thoughts and emotions may still remain within us, but nothing has physically changed from before we traipsed off into reverie. At the end of *Requiem for a Dream*, nothing will have physically changed from the moment the viewer sat down to watch it. But there is a mental and emotional change because Aronofsky explores this relationship between dreams and film, and he manipulates every cinematic tool at his disposal, especially visual techniques, to translate ideas and feelings through a subjective study of his characters and their narrative.

“You create a hole in your present because you're not there. . . . And then you'll use anything to fill that vacuum. It doesn't matter if it's coffee, if it's tobacco, if it's TV, if it's heroin, if it's ultimately hope. You'll use anything to fill that hole. And when you feed the hole—just like the hole in [Harry's] arm—it'll grow and grow and grow until eventually it will devour you” (Aronofsky). In short Aronofsky says that it's not a drug film. It may serve as an anti-drug film because it intensely portrays the negative effects of drug abuse, but it doesn't intend to be one. It's a film about the human desire to escape realities and about how we dig holes for ourselves when we attempt to do so. These holes are called addiction, and drug use is just one means to fill these holes. When addiction destroys our hopes and dreams as it does for the characters in this film, perhaps the most tragic part is that we learn that hopes and dreams of an alternate reality drive us to addiction in the first place. Having hopes and dreams of something else—desiring more than what's there in front of us—is common to everyone, whether we abuse drugs or not. Through its subjective style, *Requiem for a Dream* puts us in the shoes of characters who experience the worst of what happens when we fail to curb those desires and refuse to embrace reality, so that maybe we can learn to balance a strong desire for change and contentment with what's already present in our lives.

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