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BEAUTIFUL JUNKIES

IMAGES OF DEGRADATION IN *Requiem for a Dream*

RENÉE R CURRY

In Darren Aronofsky's 2000 film, *Requiem for a Dream*, based on Hubert Selby Jr.'s 1978 novel, he depicts extreme close-up images of heroin as it cooks, boils, enters a vein, and then passes into the body at the cellular level. The cells sizzle as heroin numbs them. The close-ups and sizzling sounds repeat themselves more and more frequently as our four main characters disintegrate through the process of becoming junkies. These images and others provide vivid, horrific, and exquisite visual renderings of the addiction process, while simultaneously providing stark evidence of heroin's take-over of the body, mind, and ethical capabilities. The images of heroin's all-encompassing control of the body at its foundational level do not glorify heroin's power in Aronofsky's film; these images serve as documents of pure horror. The degradation is devastating, thorough, real, and scarring. Aronofsky describes his film as a monster movie, a modern horror film. And, it is not the type of film in which redemption occurs. The stark and individual solitude of each character at the end of the film cannot be easily penetrated by sobriety or love anytime in the foreseeable future.

Dans son film, *Requiem for a Dream* en 2000, un film basé sur un roman de Hubert Selby Jr. de 1978, Darren Aronofsky a montré, en très gros plan, des images d'héroïne cuisant et bouillant, puis entrant dans les veines et progressant dans le corps au niveau cellulaire. Les cellules grésillent à cause de l'héroïne qui les engourdit. Ce processus se répète de plus en plus souvent suivant le processus de désintégration des quatre personnages principaux qui deviennent des junkies. Ces images fournissent un récit visuel vif, raffiné mais terrifiant, de la dépendance, et démontrent la conquête du corps, de l'esprit et des capacités éthiques par l'héroïne. Ces images agissent comme preuves que l'horreur pure existe. La dégradation est dévastatrice, profonde, réelle, et elle laisse des traces. Aronofsky décrit son film comme un « monster movie », un film d'horreur moderne dans lequel il n'y a pas de rédemption. La solitude extrême de chaque personnage à la fin du film ne sera pas facilement vaincue ni par sobriété, ni par l'amour.

“Let’s push-off,” says Harry to Marion, as they sit on a rocky point off Coney Island extending into the Atlantic Ocean, smiling at each other with love; the sun shines radiantly, and the ocean gently caresses the rocks. No one participating in a walk along this vast landscape would take these characters to be junkies. They are beautiful; the landscape is beautiful; and, their love is beautiful. But this romantic and idyllic narrative will soon be interrupted. They will indeed “push-off,” and forever disturb this fragile love story.

In Darren Aronofsky’s 2000 film, *Requiem for a Dream*, based on Hubert Selby Jr’s 1978 novel, the director depicts extreme close-up images of heroin as it cooks, boils, clouds a syringe, enters a vein, and then passes into the human bloodstream. The close-ups, sizzling and hissing sounds, pulses of threatening violin strings, and breathy intakes of shocked air, repeat themselves as the three characters invested in heroin – Harry Goldfarb, Marion Silver, and Tyrone C. Love-- disintegrate through the process of becoming entranced and entrapped by the drug. These images and others provide vivid, horrific, and exquisite visual renderings of the addiction process, while simultaneously providing stark evidence of heroin’s take-over of the body, mind, and ethical capabilities. Darren Aronofsky renders a euphoric expanse of narcotic space in *Requiem for a Dream*, ugly in its real-world horror, yet beautiful in its cinematic integrity.

Requiem for a Dream depicts twelve “street high” interruptions to the narrative flow of the film. These street highs include snorting and fixing heroin as well as smoking marijuana. The film also depicts the so-called licit highs of Sara Goldfarb from her addiction to diet pills, but this paper focuses on the street highs, the interruptions to life that move Harry, Tyrone, and Marion through metaphoric confrontations with their own demons, and that ultimately transform from interludes in life to the primary focus of their lives. By the end of the film, the three *Requiem* characters addicted to street highs will have transformed from active—walking, talking, loving, and scheming—beings to limp and vulnerable forms of flesh in fetal positions.

The first street high of the film occurs in chapter 3, entitled, “Dreams.” Shot in extreme close-up and hip-hop montage style, the sequence flows so quickly that the images and sounds are barely distinguishable one from another. Hip-hop montage encompasses a compilation of numerous jolting devices in filmmaking: quick motion stops, intrusions of disassociated sounds, fast edits, floating dolly shots, distorted lenses, and extreme close-ups (Bianco 388). Aronofsky’s hip-hop montages deliberately defy plot-driven narrative and offer instead a world outside of narrative progression. Scholar Paul Eisenstein explains:

If drug use [in *Requiem*] is rooted in repetition (captured formally by the hip-hop montage sequences used

to present its use), the dream of a more idyllic future at least carries the (seeming) promise of narrative and of progress. (7)

The hip-hop montage utilizes sharply edited, extremely close-up, images that when nestled next to one another cause the eye to create a visual narration. When hip-hop montage is utilized, the viewer is not passively receiving the narrative. Instead, the viewer is bombarded visually and has to keep track of sets of images in order to construct fragments of a story.

In *Requiem*, the interruptions to narrative begin with Harry's first high of the film. He issues a soft, short utterance, "ahhh," and then we quickly see a magnified image of liquefied heroin heating, flame from a lighter, bubbles gurgling, edges of a bottle-cap holding an expanding cushion of cotton, the syringe, a pupil pinpointing, and the same pupil dilating, all ending with the repeated breathtaking, "ahhh.." Aronofsky creates this sequence by a combination of visual and sound effects that can only occur in film. The images are striking and beautiful, unique in content to the tragedy of heroin use, unique in form to the art of filmmaking. Some scholars critique the interruptive street high images as having become stereotypes of addiction in film, complete with their own uniform "ritual" (Lensing 2). But such critiques discuss these images as mere aspects of plot that "participate to a greater or lesser degree in what Jonathan White has called 'the Addiction Narrative,' in

which the protagonist 'falls' into poverty and desperation as a result of addiction" (Lensing 2). Aronofsky, however, is up to something much more gripping with his up-close depictions of heroin use and his interruptive structure. Through the use of special cinematic effects that lay bare the technology inherent in movie-making such as extreme-close-ups of needles penetrating skin; invasive, dissonant, and pulsating music by the Kronos Quartet; and, hip-hop montage that choreographs images of heroin use, Aronofsky asks us to submit to and reconsider the use of heroin from the close-up viewpoint of the user. He asks us to get close to the drug-use ritual and to try to empathize with how a user may become seduced by this powerful drug. By doing so, he is luring viewers into an age-old aesthetic argument regarding the history and philosophy of whether ugliness or horror can be presented as beautiful in art.

To prepare for the creation of his film, Aronofsky and his director of photography, Mattie Libatique, viewed Goya's paintings from the 18th century, especially his huge early murals. They were both taken with the idea that the same man could paint joyous images of spring and summer and then later in life after his deafness, paint Saturn devouring his child. This artistic descent into unimaginable hell left an imagistic impression on Aronofsky that he wanted to relay in *Requiem*:

A big influence was Goya. Have you ever been to The Prado [Museum], in Madrid? It's a really amazing

experience, because you walk around upstairs and you see all of Goya's early paintings, these huge murals. And they're actually named after the seasons, which is kind of weird, too, just the way our film is. [Requiem is broken up into different "Acts": "Summer," "Fall," and "Winter."] Goya would have this huge mural, about the size of a conference room wall, called "Summer," and there'd be people playing in a field and on pogo sticks. And then he has "Fall," and then "Winter." And everyone's happy and it's just lovely. And then, when he went deaf in his later years, he lived alone and he made these paintings called the "Black Paintings" on these walls. And have you ever seen his painting of Saturn devouring his child? That was one of them. That sort of descent, of the experience of walking around the Prado, was a big influence for me and my director of photography. The way Goya's career evolved is how we wanted our film to evolve. (Marano 3)

In *Requiem*, the street high interruptions in the narrative of his film are deliberately both menacing and beautiful, much like the image of a magnificent fire that is both gorgeous and threatening as it devours a landscape. But the power of these dazzling interludes only serves to forge an empathic understanding in viewers regarding the seductive qualities of heroin and the way in which heroin casts ruin upon the lives of the characters in the film.

The sheer repetition of drug preparation events as the characters become more and more addicted to heroin assure that the unsettling and seductive images do not condone nor draw attention away from the ruin of these characters' lives. Viewers become habituated to the images, and they permit viewers to understand, empathize, and experience the powerlessness of those who succumb to heroin addiction. The images of heroin's all-encompassing control of the body at its foundational level do not glorify heroin's power in Aronofsky's film; these images serve rather as sequences of horrific beauty. In chapter 7's "Juice," we watch Marion viewing her partially naked body in the mirror. She is trying to "see" herself, to see through the beauty of her body to the junkie she is becoming. Marion sees what is beautiful about herself, but she also knows, as we do, that she is taking this body down a very ugly road. She lingers over the image as many viewers have lingered over the standardly beautiful images of the female form in art, and then suddenly we see the montage and hear the special sound effects: her ripping the bindle, the breathtaking "ahhh," striking piano keys, the face of President George Washington, a rolled up dollar bill, an eerie clown giggle, the line of heroin, the sound of snorting, pinpointing pupils, dilating pupils, and finally the last "ahhh." Once again, *Requiem* depicts images of beauty—female bodies and filmic special effects—as paradoxical revelations about the ugliness of heroin use. The beautifying aspects are those cinematic techniques described by

Jamie Skye Bianco in her essay “Techno Cinema:” aspects that “experiment with matter in *non-human* durations and extensions” (380). In *Requiem*, the heroin preparation occurs in dimensions that fill the screen; these dimensions are larger than the lives the heroin is about to affect; the viewer cannot even see the human figures due to the size of the drug preparation images. Time is not being kept in a recognized human dimension; time has switched to a narcotic-cinematic dimension. The drug is everything we can see; it is vast; it both interrupts and seems to exist outside of plot; it is horrifyingly indifferent to character. Heroin preparation becomes landscape, becomes all there is.

In his 2007 illustrative text, *On Ugliness*, scholar Umberto Eco delineates and depicts the historic tensions in art between the role of ugliness and compulsion toward representing only the beautiful. Eco reminds us that Thomas Aquinas thought beauty was the “result not only of due proportion, brightness or clarity but also of *integrity* – hence an object . . . must have all the characteristics that its *form* has imposed upon the material” (Eco 15). In *On Ugliness*, Eco also highlights the longstanding role that Aristotle has played in determining the beautiful in art; he writes, Aristotle “sanctioned a principle that was to remain universally accepted over the centuries, namely that it is possible to make beautiful imitations of ugly things” (Eco 30). Further on in the text, Eco draws attention to Schiller’s late 18th

century work, *On Tragic Art* (1792), in which Schiller observed that “it is a general phenomenon of our nature that sad, terrible, even horrific things are irresistibly attractive to us; and that scenes of suffering and terror repel and attract us with equal power” (Eco 282). In relationship to this history of the role of ugliness in art, *Requiem for a Dream*’s particular representations of ugliness as beauty are multifold.

In order to maintain the integrity suggested by Thomas Aquinas, Aronofsky has to forfeit the preservation of viewer innocence. His film is not polite with its special effects; it doesn’t fade to black when the characters push-off in order to preserve viewer naiveté about heroin rituals. Instead, Aronofsky intensifies the truth of the matter through the technical aspects of its hip-hop montage which delivers cinematic integrity to depiction of multiple forms of street drug use, particularly fixing, snorting, and toking. David Ng, a film reviewer, likens the film’s representation of addiction to an El Greco painting in which “. . . grotesque forms approach something close to sainthood” (Ng 10). In chapter 10, entitled “Dynamite,” we witness Harry smoking weed. Through extreme close-up and fast-paced montage, Harry rolls marijuana in papers, licks the papers with an extreme close-up of the tongue, and fades behind a final swirl of smoke. And yet again, when a another interruptive montage occurs in the same chapter, Aronofsky bombards the viewer with a split screen that flaunts dual sets of extreme close-ups, dual montages and

sound effects of both Harry and Tyrone fixing heroin: Two hands ripping bindles, two breathtaking “ahhhs,” two bottle caps holding heroin, a cigarette lighter, cottons, syringes, tying off, injecting, heroin entering, pinpointing pupils, dilating pupils, and a different finalizing “ahhh”—a sound of relief rather than the previous joy or expectation. The split screen amplifies the cinematic beauty of these scenes by creating a set of synchronized rituals flowing together in harmony. But, the culminating “ahhhs” of this joint high are not the same as the previous ones—these sound more like utterances of relief rather than the former utterances of awe. As the characters’ bodies grow more tolerant of the drug, the highs change; they are no longer dreamlike, but rather, they have become like dynamite, waiting to explode the lives of these three characters.

Like Aristotle, Darren Aronofsky believes that it is possible to make an ugly thing beautiful in its representation. Not only does *Requiem* show the preparation and initial impact of heroin on the body in formal detail, its use of extreme close-up eradicates viewer judgment of the overall act and serves to enlarge, clarify, and beautify each element of the preparation process. The images themselves—the flowing liquids, the expanding cottons, the glowing fires, the pinpointing and dilating eye pupils—become precise artifacts displayed on the screen as in a gallery of drug preparation paraphernalia, procedures, and effects. These artifacts meticulously unpack and chronicle the

exquisite fastidiousness of the heroin ritual, thereby delivering a curatorial majesty to its representation. In this film, Aronofsky designs a narcotic landscape replete with its own set of defining objects of art and its own particular form of representation.

In terms of Schiller’s 18th century understanding of horror, art, and beauty, as both seductive and tragic, *Requiem* is uncomfortable to watch and unforgettable for viewers precisely because its narrative portrays a set of tragic situations brought on by drug use and addiction. But the interruptive scenes are so powerfully depicted, and the actors portraying the characters being ravaged by drugs are so perfectly cast for their cinematic beauty (Jared Leto, Jennifer Connelly, and Marlon Wayans), that viewers cannot help but be lured into the monstrosity of the situations. *Requiem* deliberately encourages viewers to associate the beauty of these characters with the harrowing act of drug usage.

As the plot of *Requiem* begins to drive home the relationship among beauty, money, violence, and the junkie’s life, the street high rituals too change just a bit. In chapter 13, aptly entitled “\$,” fast-moving close-ups again capture Marion ripping open the bindle, stirring with pestle and mortar, the rolled dollar bill, and then as she sets out two straight lines of powdered heroin, the sounds of two gun shots accompany the laying-down of each line. We then see the lines hanging upside down from the table, and again, the images replay the

drug flowing through the bloodstream, a pinpointing pupil, and a dilating pupil. Clearly, a threat of the violence to come is now included in the ritual. Aronofsky wants tensions between the beautiful and the damned, seduction and repulsion, dignity and disgust to increase gradually and to mark the visual and aural landscape of his film.

Aronofsky's film suggests that the 21st century American social landscape is the product of a three-hundred year lie about the American Dream, particularly regarding who has access to it. *Requiem for a Dream* takes us far away from the original 1930 Motion Picture Production Code which ostensibly protected viewers from witnessing many of the horrors that might deter them from achieving their own American Dream. The Code clearly stated that "illegal drug traffic must never be presented," and in 1946 the revised provision read, ". . . illegal drug traffic must not be portrayed in such a way as to stimulate curiosity concerning the use of, or traffic in, such drugs; nor shall scenes be approved which show the use of illegal drugs, or their effects, in detail" (Simmons 47n). However, *Requiem for a Dream* decidedly begins the 21st century with a new code of ethics about drug depiction and a new definition of cinematic beauty. In chapter 15, "Sweet Alice," the sudden close-ups reveal Tyrone making a blunt. He tears open a cigar, removes the insides, stuffs the cigar skin with marijuana, licks the blunt closed, seals it, lights it with a lighter spark of fire, smokes it, and precisely closes the

baggie. Tyrone is a business partner in the sale of heroin, but he only succumbs to the drug once in the film; Tyrone's drug of choice is weed. His American Dream in *Requiem* is to beat the street lifestyle to which many of his African-American friends and associates have capitulated. He frequently thinks about his mother's wish for him to escape street life and to avoid prison, and he often ponders her photograph as a way of trying to turn his life around. But, Aronofsky decidedly presents Tyrone, Harry, and Marion as three different ordinary people for whom the American Dream seems so distant that the only possibility for achieving it is to engage in drug-trafficking and the selling of their own integrity to attain it. The impact--economically, psychologically, and emotionally-- of believing that the American Dream can be so attained—is a profound daily devastation that threatens to overtake ordinary people across generational lines, (Sara Goldfarb suffers from an addiction to diet pills that she believes will render her a young, beautiful, desirable American, once again) racial lines, and gender lines. The only beauty left in such a naïve and vulnerable landscape is the beauty of a poignant moment: the moment of love, the moment of the drug fix, or the moment of youth.

In chapter 16, "King's Neptune," the scene in which Harry suggests from the rocky point off Coney Island that he and Marion "push-off," Aronofsky again splits the screen, and a dual montage emerges; one side depicts Marion snorting heroin, and the other

depicts Harry fixing. In this scene, two bindles are opened; heroin is stirred on one side of the screen, while it is cooked on the other. She makes her lines, and he works his syringe, then his pupil pinpoints, her pupil pinpoints, his eye dilates, and her eye dilates, and heroin flows through the bloodstream. These images are striking, and, as viewers, we have become both used to their repetitiveness and intrigued by the display of unique images embedded in each ritual. The art and beauty of these devastating rituals is that they are not deadeningly the same; sometimes the order of the images is different, and sometimes new images or sounds occur in the ritual. Viewers begin to search out the newness in these routines as if this minimalist pursuit of something unique might actually resolve the horror of the characters' situations. Yet none of these moments of visual beauty is sustainable; they are mere narrative interruptions in Aronofsky's film, interruptions that horrifically alter the courses of three young lives.

Requiem for a Dream, like all horror films, revels in its special effects. Well-faceted portrayals of the horror film's monster serve both to reveal the details of its physical and psychological dreadfulness and to make familiar the actual vulnerabilities associated with the monster's plight. In *Requiem*, the demon, heroin, like all monsters, can't help being monstrous. Heroin manifests its most atrocious features when it is perversely handled by humans. In chapter 17, ironically entitled, "Hope," the typical breathtaking "ahhh" of the

previous rituals is much less apparent. As the addiction begins to overwhelm his body and his mind, Harry is less awestruck by the drug's initial rush through the bloodstream, than he is relieved to have supplied his need for the drug. He has become dependent on the monster. In chapter 18, "Fall Reprise," again Marion and Harry push off together. We view the split screen montages of her snorting routine and his fixing routine while dissonant and irritating strikes of violin strings accompany this particular high. The visual and aural intensity of the film has increased while Harry's and Marion's relationship to one another has become more and more disharmonic. Sadly, they are each more in need of the monster than they are of each other's love.

In order to attain more money for their drug habit, Harry asks Marion to have sex with her former therapist for money. At this moment, they both realize that their relationship has become something they are willing to barter and willing to traffic in order to attain heroin. The degraded narcotic space in which they exist supports only a connection to heroin, not a connection to each other's selves or dreams. While Marion is out of the apartment having sex with her therapist for money, Harry prepares a fix to soothe himself. Chapter 22, appropriately named "Apart," reveals a vivid tableau of images and sounds: the "ahhh," the cotton soaking up the liquid, the bottle cap, the belt tying off an arm, a syringe penetrating through cotton, heroin drawn up in a syringe, syringe shooting in, drawing out, shooting in, pupils pinpointing, pupils dilating. The

“technoscience” involved in designing these images delivers an extraordinary excess to the screen (Bianco 380), an excess that both imagistically describes the addictive nature of the drug and one that agitates and overwhelms the imagination of the viewer. This “techno-cinema” allows us to “*sense and feel drugged* in this explosion of intensive powers” (Bianco 388). Aronofsky uses these cinematic devices to delve into the repulsiveness of drug addiction in order to create the visual language of the film; this language draws viewers into the mind-numbing and distorted realities of the main characters.

To further our connections to the main characters, Aronofsky utilizes the Snorricam, a camera attached to the character which presents the world from the character’s point of view. The shots ironically present a steady, sturdy character as he/she moves through ever-shaking compositions, which leaves the impression that the character is not part of his or her environment (Marano 1). In chapter 26, “Winter Reprise,” Harry and Tyrone are in a car driving to Florida. Harry rolls up his sleeve to reveal a horrid injection site, a gangrenous, purple, and oozing abscess. Tyrone is repulsed and can’t believe that Harry is going to shoot into the sore. But Harry tells Tyrone that by inserting directly into the site, his pain will be relieved; thus, Harry religiously begins the ritual: we witness the tying off, the bottle cap, water, the lighter, fire, bubbles, syringe drawing, syringe injecting straight into the discolored pustule, red whirl of blood, pinpointing pupil, dilating pupil,

and at last, and a pained cry of “ahhh.” At this late stage of heroin use, Harry no longer uses to experience euphoria, he uses to relieve the overall physical and psychological pain that heroin use causes him. Aronofsky offers this montage as the most exquisitely honest evidence of the power that art possesses to depict dark human experiences.

The final street high of the film occurs in chapter 31, “The Requiem.” This high follows Marion’s return to her apartment from an excessively degrading trip to see her drug dealer. Completely separated now from Harry and Tyrone, she has to attain heroin on her own. For women, the economy of the street is distinctly sexual. Instead of money, she has to barter her beauty and her body for the drug. Thus, Marion agrees to perform group sex with women for a room full of cheering men. The debilitating memories of this event include a vulnerably naked and sweaty sexual performance with a dildo that connected her to another woman. Her payment for this performance is heroin. Once back in her apartment, she immediately snorts heroin, not to experience elation, but to erase the images of self-degradation that haunt her. This time, Aronofsky provides a shortened montage ritual: a dropped splat of powdered heroin, a line of the drug, and a rolled dollar bill. We know the ritual. Nothing special occurs during this routine; by now, it’s just an average high Marion can trust to suppress memories of an unspeakable and vile exchange. As Umberto Eco reminds us, “. . . art in various centuries

insistently portrayed ugliness. Marginal as the voice of art may be, it attempted to remind us that, despite the optimism of certain metaphysicians, there is something implacably and sadly malign about this world” (436). Sadly, the individual solitude and degradation of each character at the end of *Requiem for a Dream* depict the malignity brought about by heroin use.

Aronofsky’s beautiful junkies each abide alone in their own bleak and devastated piece of the plot; their journeys with heroin have transformed them physically, mentally, and socially. Harry’s arm has been literally amputated due to gangrene; Marion’s body and self-image have been desecrated by herself; and, Tyrone has become the incarcerated street bum his mother dreaded. These exquisitely-rendered causalities of heroin’s plunder and the unerringly-crafted drug montages provide clear evidence that images of degradation, when represented with integrity, do emerge as sadly beautiful in art.

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